

The Refugee Train

By

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The Refugee Train

Chapter One.

The last refugee train was drawn up at the down-country departure platform at Park Station, Johannesburg.

The scene upon the platform was one of indescribable hubbub and confusion. Passengers, representing all ages and sexes, vociferated in various tongues, and tumbled over piles of luggage, and swore, or snapped or whimpered according to sex or age. Some, belated, thanks to a final call at the refreshment bar, charged furiously through the clamourous crowd by main force, panic-stricken lest they should lose their seats. Seats? They were lucky to get any accommodation at all. Carriages and compartments, cattle vans and open trucks alike, were literally crammed. The enforced republicanism of the hour and the situation crowded all classes together indiscriminately; and the man of wealth and luxurious living was jostled and shouldered by the roughest mine hand, who in habits and ideas rose little, if at all, above the level of the savage. The densely packed compartments afforded scenes and sounds of wild weird Babel, being resonant with the squalling of children and the altercations of hustled and excited women, and in the open trucks men elbowed and cursed and fought for mere standing room. The while, jeering Zarps, (Note 1), posted about the platform by twos and threes, stood enjoying the fun. They felt no call to keep the peace on this occasion, to interfere in quarrels between the enemies of their land. Let these accursed Uitlanders settle their own differences. They would have plenty of time to do it in before they got clear of the country, decided the guardians of law and order with a certain grim satisfaction.

The train, which was of vast length, began to move slowly out of the station, and as it did so somebody, with more patriotism than sense of humour, conceived the idea of striking up "Rule, Britannia." It took, and the chorus rolled forth lustily from the fleeing crowd, mighty in volume, but varied—exceedingly—as to time and tune, causing the Zarps, who understood English, to break into boisterous and derisive laughter, and to call out after the singers that, whatever Britannia ruled, it was not the Transvaal, and if she thought otherwise she had better hurry up her rooi-baatjes (Redcoats) and try. Which comment, after all, was not without pertinence.

Upon others, however, the effect of the parting challenge was different. A group of armed burghers had been standing at the end of the platform, surveying, with glances of hatred and contempt, the swirling confusion of the crowd of refugees. Now, as they grasped the burden of the song, several were seen to slap cartridges into their rifles, with many a threatening scowl in the direction of the train. The latter, very fortunately, had

got sufficiently under way, for already several rifles were pointed at the receding trucks full of packed fugitives. The burghers were in an ugly mood, and racial feeling had reached its highest point of tension. Something of a massacre might easily at that moment have resulted from the display of rash and ill-timed defiance. The result of a volley poured into those closely crowded trucks would have been too ghastly for anything.

Few indeed were the Uitlanders who remained upon the platform as the train disappeared, and such as did wore a grave and anxious expression of countenance; and well they might, for the hour of retreat was past, and they had deliberately and of their own free will elected to stay in the Republic and face the horrors and risks of war, and that at the mercy of the enemies of their countrymen. Such being the case, it may be imagined that the seeing-off contingent attendant upon the departure of the last train was not large.

Conspicuous among it were two persons—a man and a girl. They were not together. They were not, apparently, acquainted, and they were unmistakably English. Yet they were looking at each other—and had been for some time—now furtively, now openly, now in a would-be casual fashion that deceived neither.

The man's attention was drawn to the girl because she was very pretty. The girl's attention might have been drawn to the man, because he represented the masculine equivalent of that form of attractiveness in her. He was of a good height, well set up, with clean-cut features and brown eyes, clear and searching, lighting up a healthy sun-browned face; a good-looking man beyond the ordinary, and one likely to attract the attention of the other sex.

But the expression of countenance worn by this member of the other sex seemed to convey more than the idea of a mere casual attraction, for it passed through varying phases. Now a puzzled frown knitted the brows, now the velvety-blue eyes dilated in a gaze of fixed scrutiny, then brightened into a gleam as of one who has solved a perplexing riddle, and has solved it to her complete satisfaction. Then she came right up to the other, putting forth her hand, as she said demurely:

“Well, this is a surprise! Why, whenever did you come up here?”

But the stranger responded with something of a stark. The expression of his face conveyed astonishment, plain and undiluted.

“Pardon me,” he said, slightly raising his hat. “I think there must be—er—some mistake.”

It was the girl's turn to exhibit amazement. Then her face flushed, hardening into a set look of sullen indignation.

"Some mistake?" she echoed. Then witheringly, "Yes, I think there must be. Pardon me, Mr Kershaw. I am very dense. I ought to have seen that you did not wish to know your friends in another country and under different circumstances."

"Yes, that is my name. But—er—really it is very remiss of me—but— Where did we meet?"

May Wenlock stared, as well she might.

"What part are you trying to act now?" she blazed forth indignantly. Then softening: "But only tell me, Colvin. Is it perhaps that you have reasons for not wanting them to know who you are?" with a quick anxious side glance around, as though fearful of being overheard.

"Pardon me again," was the reply. "But my name is not Colvin."

"Not Colvin?" was all poor May could gasp in her bewilderment. "Certainly not I was christened Kenneth."

"But—you said your name was Kershaw?"

"So it is. Kenneth Kershaw. Now you mention it, though, I have a relative named Colvin: er—a first cousin."

"First cousin? Why, you might be his twin brother," burst forth May impulsively. "Why, the voice—even your way of talking— No, I never saw such a wonderful likeness in my life." And then, catching a curious expression in the other's eyes, she suddenly remembered the position, and flushed hotly, realising how completely she must have given herself away. The man, looking at her, was thinking to himself, "What a pretty girl! What a devilish pretty girl! Lucky Colvin, wherever he may be! Lucky as usual." But aloud he said:

"Is that so? I believe we used to be considered rather alike, but we haven't seen each other for quite a number of years. Have you seen him lately, Miss—er—Miss—"

"Wenlock," supplemented May.

“Miss Wenlock—thanks. Now we know each other, and I cannot sufficiently appreciate the good fortune that drew me here this morning to see that trainload of fools off.”

Even then May could hardly believe her senses. The look, the voice, the easy and perfectly unembarrassed manner, every inflection of tone even, was simply Colvin reproduced. Could it really be himself, trying how completely he could take her in? Yet something told her it could not be. He was not addicted to practical jokes—indeed, rather disliked them.

“Why do you call it a trainload of fools, Mr Kershaw?” she said; “I am more inclined to think that is the word for some of us who are left behind.”

“Oh, they are. For instance, it is strange how sparsely distributed is a sense of humour and of the eternal fitness of things! As if race feeling is not at sufficiently high pressure already, those idiots must needs flourish the red rag in the Dutchmen’s faces. The patriotic song may be all right in its proper place, but it doesn’t come well from a crowd engaged in running away as fast as its legs—or, in this case its wheels—can carry it. For two pins those fellows over there,” designating the group of sullen, scowling burghers, “would have blazed into the whole mob.”

The group referred to comprised one unit to whom the speaker was clearly an object of very great interest indeed; not on account of the words just uttered, for they had been spoken in by no means a loud tone, and the distance was great enough to render them quite inaudible. This man had been among the first to level his rifle at the receding train, and the contemptuous hatred stamped upon the countenances of the group had in no instance been shown more plainly and uncompromisingly than upon that of this one. But from the moment he had caught sight of these two conversing at the other end of the platform, that sinister expression had perceptibly deepened. At the same time he had drawn back into the centre of his fellow-burghers, as though desirous of remaining unobserved, while continuing to watch, and that narrowly, the object of his rancour. The latter, serenely unconscious of being a disturbing factor in the equanimity of anybody, went on:

“I suppose you and my—er—cousin are pretty friendly—eh, Miss Wenlock?”

“Oh yes. We lived next door to each other down in the Colony, and so of course we saw a good deal of each other.” And then she coloured again, remembering how readily and naturally she had addressed this man by his supposed Christian name. What must he be thinking of her?

“I see,” he answered, tranquilly. “And so you took me for him. That isn’t so very strange either.”

Strange! Great Heavens! Even yet May was hardly quite sure the whole thing was not a make-believe. Strange? Why, even this man’s way of accepting the situation, passing over all detail, taking everything for granted, was Colvin’s way.

“Now that we have made each other’s acquaintance in this very unexpected manner, Miss Wenlock, perhaps you will allow me to see you, at any rate, a part of your way home. You might tell me a little about my relative. Where are you staying, by the way?”

“Just this side Doornfontein. Yes. I shall be delighted, if I am not taking you out of your way.”

“Who are you, kerel, and have you a permit to remain here?” interrupted, in Dutch, the peremptory voice of a Zarp.

Now “kerel”—meaning in this context “fellow”—is a pretty familiar, not to say impudent, form of address as proceeding from a common policeman. The tone, too, was open to objection on the same ground. But May, glancing at her new friend, noticed that he seemed in no wise ruffled thereby. He merely glanced at his interlocutor as though the latter had asked him for the time.

“I have applied for a permit and am awaiting it,” he answered, in the same language. “So, my good friend, don’t bother, but go and drink my health with your mates.”

The Zarp’s hand closed readily upon the image and superscription of Oom Paul, and Kenneth Kershaw and his companion passed out of the station.

“Oh, you are so like Col—er—your cousin,” was May’s comment on the above transaction. “That is exactly how he would have treated matters under the circumstances. Now, Frank would have wanted to go for the man at once, and then what a row there would have been! And I hate rows.”

“So do I. But—who’s Frank?”

“My brother. He is perfectly rabid ever since this trouble has begun. He says he never can look at a Dutchman now without wanting to fight him.”

“So? Well, now is his opportunity. Is he up here?”

“Oh no. Down in the Colony. I am staying up here with some relatives. I wanted to go back, but they wouldn’t let me. They have interest with the Government at Pretoria, and say that it is safer, if anything, here than down in the Colony.”

As they walked along, taking the road which runs parallel with the railway line in the direction of Doornfontein, something of the state of affairs was apparent in the utter stagnation that prevailed. A deserted look was upon everything. The tram service had ceased, and there was not a vehicle to be seen down the long vista of road. Houses shut up and abandoned, their blinds down, and in many cases with broken windows, spoke eloquently of the prevailing desolation, and save for a subdued-looking native or two the street was deserted; while, dominating all, the fort on Hospital Hill frowned down flat and threatening, ready to let loose its thunders of ruin and of death.

Turning a corner suddenly, a troop of armed burghers debouched into the road—hard, weather-beaten, bearded men, wearing wide hats and bandoliers full of cartridges and with rifle on thigh. They were riding in no particular order, and most of them were smoking pipes.

Many a head was turned, and shaggy brows were knit in sullen hatred, at the sight of the tall Englishman and his very attractive companion, as they rode by. For a moment their leader seemed disposed to halt and call the pedestrians to account, then appeared to think better of it. But that speculation was rife as to their identity was only too clear.

May Wenlock chatted brightly to her new acquaintance as they walked. She was naturally of a communicative disposition, and it was not long before she had put him into possession of the main facts and circumstances and surroundings of her life. Without the least consciousness of the fact on her part, without seemingly vivid interest on his, he had yet manoeuvred the conversation so that it was confined mainly to the time during which she had known Colvin, on the subject of whom, before she had uttered a dozen sentences, she had, to the practised eye and ear of her companion, completely given herself away. Where was Colvin now? Why, at home, she supposed, on his own place, close to theirs. No wonder she had been so startled at the extraordinary likeness. Anyhow, the mistake was very excusable. Was it not?

“It was a very fortunate mistake for me,” Kenneth replied. “I hope we may meet again,” he went on, for by this time they were at her own door. He could even read what was passing in her mind—how she was treading down an impulse to ask him in, remembering that, after all, their introduction had been startlingly unconventional.

“Yes, indeed, I hope we may,” she answered. “At any rate, you know where I’m staying. Good-bye. Thanks so much for bringing me back.”

Kenneth Kershaw turned away, and as he strolled along his thoughts were busy.

“By Jove, that is a pretty little girl,” he was saying to himself. “Not quite up to the mark in other ways perhaps, but pretty enough even to make up for that,” with a recollection of the bright smile, and the look in the sea-blue eyes, which had accompanied the farewell handclasp. “And Colvin? She let go a lot about him. Likely to turn up here, is he? Reputed to stand in too much with the Boers! Suspicion of entanglement with a Boer girl— She shut up like an oyster when she came to that part, though. Well, well. This day’s work may turn out not bad. Colvin on this side, the two peas likeness between us, that dear little girl in there whom I can simply twist round my finger, and turn to any account, and the war! Strange if my luck doesn’t take a sudden turn in the right direction. Colvin, the only obstacle, worth reckoning on, that is. Obstacles have to be removed sometimes. Yes, his luck has run too long. Hurrah for the war?”

Note 1. From the letters Z.A.R.P. (Zuid Afrikaansche Republieke Politie—South African Republic’s Police). The joke has passed into a recognised popular term.

Chapter Two.

A Transvaal Official.

Petrus Johannes Stephanus Gerhardus Du Plessis, commonly known to his kinsfolk and acquaintance and to the crowd at large as Piet Plessis, was a high official in not the least important department of the Transvaal Civil Service.

Born in the Free State, and educated—well educated—in Holland, he combined the slim qualities of the Boer with the shrewd, technical, worldly-wisdom of the Hollander. He was now of middle age and somewhat portly of person, and withal a jolly, genial Dutchman, whose ringing laugh and jovial manner conveyed the idea of open-hearted frankness to the last degree. Those who ran away with that impression had their education in character-studying to complete. For all his apparent open-heartedness, Piet Plessis was never known by word or wink to “give away” anything. And he could have given away some “things” of a very strange and startling nature had he so chosen.

Did a transport rider bringing up loads of Government goods from the Swaziland border succumb to the indiscretion of peeping into certain of the cases, and subsequently babble thereon in his cups, it was not strange that he should be murdered by his own Kafirs on the return journey, because that sort of thing does happen sometimes, though not often. Was the dead body of a mysterious foreigner found one morning in the Grand Stand on the racecourse at Johannesburg, the hand grasping a revolver pointed at the heart, through which was a neatly drilled bullet-hole, with no burn of powder about the clothing? This was not strange, for does not everybody know that the hand of a dead person will sometimes grasp an object tightly for hours after death—though not often? And doctors will sometimes disagree, though not often? Did a prominent member of the Upper Raad, who owned a chattering wife, make an over-protracted sojourn in the Cape Peninsula for the benefit of the lady’s health? That too was not strange, for it happens sometimes. And if Piet Plessis’ private office had very thick walls and double doors—padded—this was not strange either, for is not the climate of the Transvaal fairly bleak during quite half the year? On many an incident, strange, suspicious, or startling—or all three, had his acquaintance striven to pump Piet Plessis—in club, or bar, or society drawing-room; but they might as well have expected to dig sovereigns out of the billiard cues in the one or real ten-year-old out of the “special Scotch” bottles in the other, or the precise ages of any three ladies of a middle time of life in the third. Tact and readiness of resource are highly important official ingredients. Piet Plessis possessed both to a consummate degree, which may have had to do with the fact that he was now a very important official indeed.

Piet Plessis and Stephanus De la Rey were second cousins. It is significant of the wide ramifications through which relationship extends among the Dutch inhabitants of South Africa, that the high Transvaal official and the well-to-do Cape Colony Boer should be so near akin. They had hardly seen each other for some years, but intercourse between them had been renewed in the shape of a cordial invitation to Aletta to come up and spend some time in the Transvaal.

The girl was delighted. Her patriotic enthusiasm, though somewhat sobered down of late, yielding to more personal and individual considerations, was not dead by any means. To visit Pretoria under the auspices of one who knew all the secrets of the Government, opened out before her unbounded possibilities in the way of a vivid daily interest at that critical period. She pictured herself in the confidence of her kinsman, and he was in the confidence of the President. What would she not hear!—what would she not know! But, as a preliminary, she little knew her kinsman aforesaid.

But Piet while keeping his own secrets and those of the President to himself, gave her a welcome that left nothing to be desired. So, too, did his wife, a quiet woman, half-way through the thirties, rather good-looking, but retiring and domesticated—not at all the sort of wife for a public man, declared his acquaintance; wherein they were wrong, for Mrs Plessis made all the better hostess, in that she cared nothing for state affairs, desiring only to be left to look after her household in peace and quietness. Piet, himself, moreover had good reason to prefer her that way, inasmuch as he could seek the repose of his domestic circle without being harried by all sorts of questions he had no intention of answering.

He received the news of Aletta's engagement with a burst of genial laughter, evoked less by reason of the fact itself than by the particulars thereof.

"So, Aletta?" he said. "An Englishman! And that is the culmination of all your exuberant patriotism, is it? An Englishman? Well, it might be worse. You might have got taken by one of those rooi-baatje officers—so many of you girls down at the Cape seem to go mad on them. Bah, they are too often an impecunious lot, all debts and gold stripe"—(the reader must bear in mind that racial animus was at its highest tension, and that the speaker was a Transvaal official). "You should see them a few years later, as I have seen them, with very little half-pay and very large family, living cheap at some wretched Belgian town. Still—an Englishman!"

"But there are Englishmen and Englishmen, Cousin Piet," returned Aletta, laughing as one could afford to do who was supremely conscious that the laugh was all on her own side. "Wait till you see this one. He is not in the least like the rest."

“Oh no. Of course not. How could he be, if your choice has fallen upon him? Well, well. We thought we could have done much better for you up here, but you have taken the bit between your teeth so there’s an end of it. Is he coming up here, then?”

“Yes, in a day or two. He came with me as far as Bloemfontein—wouldn’t come all the way yet—thought I had better have a little while alone with you and Anna, so that we might get sort of acquainted. You see, we hardly know each other yet.”

“Why, I feel that we rather do already, Aletta,” replied her kinsman heartily, for he was charmed with her taking manner and general appearance. He had expected her to prove presentable, if a bit shy. But there was nothing of the latter about her. What an acquisition she would be to that unpretentious but pretty house of his just outside Pretoria!

And in it Aletta was destined to pass some very happy days. To begin with, the capital of the principal Dutch Republic stood to her as a kind of Mecca, viewed in the light of her former lofty ideals; to others, of course, it was just a pretty, leafy little town, nestling between its surrounding hills. Brother officials of Piet’s would often come to the house—men who hitherto had been but names to her; genial, highly cultured gentlemen, differing pole-wide from the black-browed conspiring Guy Fawkes—such as the Colonial papers had delighted in painting them. Uitlanders too, with a grievance of course, would frequently show up: jolly, jovial, well-to-do looking, grievance and all; and at first it fairly puzzled her to note on what excellent terms they appeared to stand with their theoretical tyrants and oppressors. Sometimes, too, she got more than a passing glimpse of the President himself. Here again she failed to identify the perfidious ogre she had so often seen portrayed, both in type and pencil, by the newspapers aforesaid. Nay, more, she was even heretical enough to wonder whether if that personality, with all its shrewd intelligence, had been on the English side, ample tribute would not have been paid even to the outward aspect of the man—so far only described to be held up to repulsion and ridicule—the strong face, the impassive reticence, wherein alone lay a world of diplomatic might—the long stern record of pioneer, voortrekker, leader of men; the opening up of wild uncivilised lands—bearing a man’s part in wresting the wilderness from the inheritance of savagery to render it the heritage of posterity, and the unwavering fixity of purpose wherewith he had devoted every energy to preserving it for his own people and their children’s children. If her sojourn in Cape Town had been a liberal education to Aletta, truly Pretoria constituted a worthy continuation of the same.

“Now look at that, Piet,” she said, a day or two after her arrival, exhibiting an excellent portrait of her fiancé. “Didn’t I tell you there were Englishmen and Englishmen. Now, this one is not like the rest. Is he?”

“No. I don’t know that he is,” replied Piet Plessis, scanning the likeness intently. But to himself he was saying, “So! I must have a few inquiries made. I have seen that worthy before. Oh yes, I have.” But to her, “So he has been a neighbour of yours the last year or so, Aletta?”

“Yes. He was already settled down on his own place some time before I came home.”

“Was he? Never went off it, I suppose?”

“No”—wonderingly. “He has been there since he came back from Rhodesia, he and Frank Wenlock together. At least, he was looking out for a farm at first, while he was staying with the Wenlocks. Then he got one and hasn’t been off it since.”

“Not?”

“No—except to go into Schalkburg now and then, or to come and see us.”

“Oh yes. To come and see you?” rejoined Piet, jocosely. “Hasn’t been up here at all of late, eh?”

“He has been up here before, but not lately, not within the last year. I think longer, because he served through the Matabele rising. But he was up in Rhodesia some little while after that.”

“Was he? Oh yes,” said the diplomatic Piet, in a tone as though by now only politely interested in the subject. But the while he was, to all outward appearances, turning the photograph round and round listlessly, but in reality scrutinising it keenly, now obliquely from the top corner, now sideways. “How long did you say you had been engaged, Aletta?”

“Just over two months,” answered the girl, her eyes brightening.

“Ach! he isn’t listening to you at all, Aletta,” struck in the partner of Piet’s joys and sorrows, looking up from her book. “He has forgotten all about Mr Kershaw by this time, and is thinking over the last political move. What did you say his name was—Mr Kershaw’s, I mean?”

“Colvin. It’s a family surname turned into a Christian name. Oh, and such a joke, Anna! You should have heard Tant’ Plessis on that very thing,” And she proceeded to narrate how that perverse old relative had insisted on saddling upon her fiancé a historic

Protestant Reformer of the sixteenth-century for grandfather. Piet fairly shouted with mirth.

“Old Tant’ Katrina! Ja, she was a kwaai vrouw!” he cried. “I have good reason to remember her. When we were young ones, at Rondavel, the other side Heilbron, she would come and stop there for any time. She was always saying we didn’t get enough strop and worrying the Ou’ Baas to give us more. He only laughed at her—and one day she wanted to give us some herself. But we wouldn’t take it. We snatched the strop from her and ran away. But we had to spend a week dodging her. She had got a broomstick then. She shied it at us one day, and hit my brother Sarel—the one that is in Bremersdorp now—over the leg. He couldn’t walk straight for about six months after. Then she and the Ou’ Baas had words, and she cleared out Ja, she was a kwaai vrouw. And now she is with Stephanus! Well, well. But Aletta, what did she say to your being engaged to an Englishman?”

“Oh, she consoled herself that his grandfather was the great Calvinus,” answered Aletta, breaking into a peal of laughter over the recollection. “Mynheer had said so: that was enough for her.”

A few days after this Colvin arrived in person, and then it seemed to Aletta that she had nothing left to wish for. But he would not allow her to give him all her time exclusively. She had certain social calls upon it, and, in justice to her entertainers, these must not be set aside. Piet Plessis had been the first to notice this, and was capable of appreciating it, for he himself was astonished at the brightening effect the presence of Aletta had shed within his home.

“Did I not tell you,” she would cry triumphantly, “that this Englishman was not like other Englishmen?”

And Piet would laughingly agree.

Colvin himself did not fail to note the pride and delight wherewith she would “produce” him—as he put it—to every fresh batch of people whose acquaintance he made. Once or twice he took her to task for it.

“You know, darling,” he would say, with a lurking amusement in his eyes, “it is not ‘up to date’ to show feeling. You ought, for instance, to appear just languidly tolerant of my presence at all—rather as if I were of no account in the world’s scheme except to fetch and carry.”

“Oh, ought I?” she would answer. “Well, when I see you want me to, I will try and begin.”

Those were happy days—for these two at any rate. For those outside the enchanted portal they were days of dark anxiety; yet on the surface little of this appeared. People came and went as usual. To judge from the ordinary manner of Piet Plessis, no one would have suspected the mind of that inscrutable official to be working and scheming to its utmost capacity. He was a good deal away from home, returning late, or not at all, and then with a cheerful breezy apology for the calls upon his time entailed by a confoundedly serious political outlook. But he had at once made Colvin free of the house, and the latter was grateful for the quiet uninterrupted retreat thus afforded from the turmoil of excitement and wild talk outside; and not the least happy hours were those he spent in the cool, bosky garden, while Aletta sat at her work, and talked to him, and they grew to know each other more and more, and every day served but to deepen their mutual understanding, and love, and appreciation. So the days wore on, and then from the bright, halcyon blue, now constituting the lives of the twain, the bolt fell, and the name thereof was written in but three letters—lurid letters traced in blood—

War!

Yes, the storm had burst at last. The preliminary clouding over, the flashes and mutterings, distant but drawing nearer, had culminated in a great and terrible outburst, in the thunder roar of cannon along nearly a thousand miles of border. The historical “ultimatum” had been delivered. The land which but few years ago, comparatively speaking, had been inhabited, and that not too thickly, by a population of primitive farmers, had thrown down the gauntlet in the face of the valour and wealth and boundless resource of the Empire on which the sun never sets. And the challenge had been met in the only possible way, and once more two Christian and civilised races were shedding each other’s blood like water, while countless swarms of dark-skinned and savage heathen stood by and looked on.

Chapter Three.

His Honour the President.

“We shall have to turn you into a prisoner of war, Colvin,” said Piet Plessis a week or so after the breaking out of hostilities. “And, as I feel sort of responsible for your safe custody, my orders to you as your custodian are to go over to the Grand, now, at once, and pack up your traps and bring them here. I’d have suggested it before, but everything was so uit-makaar, and I didn’t know whether you might not have been wanting to go down-country again.”

Whereby it is manifest that the inquiries we heard Piet promise to set afloat had turned out satisfactory, albeit their burden and the result he had characteristically kept to himself.

“No. I don’t feel that way inclined, Piet,” answered Colvin. “I am a sort of cosmopolitan rover, without ties—except such as are here,” he added significantly. “Besides, it’s more interesting watching the row from behind your lines than from behind those of the other side. By the way, we are quite alone, just the two of us. What show do you think your crowd has got?”

“What show?” said the other, after an instinctive glance on either side. “Look here, Colvin. You’re one of us now. If anybody who wasn’t had asked me that question I should have said: ‘It is all in the hands of Providence, and our cause is just.’ Now I say: ‘It is all within the potentialities of politics, and the potentialities of politics spell Uncertainty.’ What show? Every show. We shall see. But if you really are wanting to go down-country any time later, I dare say I could always get you through the lines.”

“Oh, we’ll think of that later. I might feel inclined to go and see some of the fighting—”

“What’s that? What might you feel inclined to do?” interrupted the voice of Aletta, who with Mrs Plessis had just come out on the back stoep, where the above conversation was taking place. “Colvin, I am astonished at you! See some of the fighting indeed! Do you think I shall let you?”

She had locked her hands together round his arm, just resting her head against his shoulder, and stood facing the other two, with the prettiest air of possession. Piet Plessis spluttered:

“Ho, ho! Colvin! A sort of cosmopolitan rover without ties; isn’t that what you were saying just now? Without ties? Ho, ho, ho!” And the jolly Dutchman shouted himself into a big fit of coughing.

“He is one of us now, is he not, Piet?” went on the girl, a tender pride shining from her eyes. “Yet he talks about going to fight against us. Yes, you were saying that, Colvin. I heard you when we came out.”

“Little termagant!” he rejoined lovingly, drawing one of the hands which was linked round his arm into his. “I wasn’t talking about fighting against anybody. I said I might go and see some of the fighting. You may go and see a bull-fight, you know, but you needn’t necessarily be taking part in it. In fact, the performers on both sides would object, and that in the most practical manner, to your doing so. Now, I meant to go as a non-combatant. Sort of war-correspondent business.”

“Well, we are not going to let you do anything of the sort,” answered Aletta decisively. “Are we, Piet? Why don’t you make a prisoner of war of him, then he can’t do as he pleases?”

“‘He is one of us now,’” quoted Colvin, innocently. “I believe those were the words. How can ‘one of us’ be a prisoner of war?”

Piet laughed at this deft turning of the tables.

“Go away and get your traps, man,” he said, “then you’ll be all snug and fixed up here by lunch-time. Here’s the buggy,” as the sound of wheels came through from the front of the house. “I must get back to office. So long?”

Every day some fresh news from the seat of war came flowing in—beginning with the capture of the armoured train at Kraaipan, historical as the first overt act of hostility, the investment of Kimberley and Mafeking, the reverse at Elandslaagte, and the death of the British general, and, later on, the arrival of a good many British prisoners. And over and above authenticated news, of course wild rumour was busy, magnifying this or that skirmish into a Boer victory, diminishing losses, and playing general skittles with most of the facts of the particular event reported, as is invariably the case on either side of the contested field. But what struck Colvin Kershaw after the first week of excitement was the calm, matter-of-fact way in which it was received by the crowd at large. News which would have thrown Cape Town or Durban into a perfect delirium, was treated in Pretoria as so much matter of course, and only to be expected.

Day after day, he would watch the muster of burghers or the entraining of the guns, great and small, of the Staats Artillerie, and here again the sober, almost phlegmatic demeanour of the combatants was remarkable. Rough, weather-beaten, somewhat melancholy-looking men were these mounted burghers—many of them large and powerful of stature. They bestrode wiry, undersized nags—which bore besides their riders the frugal ration of biltong and biscuit, with which the Boer can get along for days. Slung round with well-filled bandolier, rifle on thigh, and mostly wearing weather-worn broad-brimmed hats—though some of the older ones were crowned with the white chimney-pot—they would muster in front of the Dutch Reformed church, and pace forth, singing perhaps a Dutch hymn or a snatch of the “Volkslied”—most of them smoking their pipes, tranquil, phlegmatic, as though they were all going home again. The hooraying and handshaking and handkerchief-waving and flag-wagging which would have accompanied a British combatant force under like circumstances, would be conspicuous by its absence.

While watching such a muster, a man, who was standing among the spectators, turned at her voice and, lifting his hat, shook hands with Aletta. He was a tall gentlemanly-looking man, with a fair beard and moustache worn after the Vandyke cut, and was a Hollander with a Portuguese name. He, too, had been a high Government official.

“I haven’t seen you for a long time, Dr Da Costa,” said Aletta. “I thought you had gone to the front.”

“No. I am going very soon, though.” Then, following the direction of his glance, she introduced him to Colvin.

“What do you think of our main line of defence?” he went on, speaking English with hardly an accent. “Those men have the most perfect faith in themselves and their cause.”

“Yes, they look business-like,” replied Colvin, critically scanning the long string of mounted burghers as they filed past, most of them smoking their pipes, and chatting to each other in a placid undertone. “We had some of their kind in Matabeleland during the rising in ’96, and they were right good men.”

“Ah! So you were out in the Matabele rebellion?” said Da Costa, looking at the other with newly-awakened interest.

“Yes, had to be.”

“I see. And are you, may I ask, likely to be out in this campaign?”

“Not in the least, unless as a spectator. Here I am not needed—there I was:—which makes all the difference.”

“If you are, I hope we may meet in the field. I shall be pleased to show you all you may be wishing to see to the best advantage.”

“Now, Dr Da Costa, you are not to encourage him,” struck in Aletta. “Mr Kershaw is not going to be shot at at all. He is not needed, as he says, and—you are not to encourage him.”

The other, who had heard of Piet Plessis’ attractive kinswoman and her English fiancé, smiled good-naturedly. Then, to change the conversation, he went on:

“Did you make a long stay at Johannesburg, Mr Kershaw?”

“At Johannesburg?” echoed Colvin.

“Yes. Didn’t I see you in the Rand Club about a fortnight ago? And again on Pritchard Street. Someone told me it was a Mr Kershaw.”

“Someone told you all wrong then, doctor, for I came right through Johannesburg. I never even got out of the train there.”

“That’s odd,” said Da Costa, with a momentary twinkle in his eye, as though he didn’t believe a word of this statement. “It must have been only a likeness,” he added tactfully.

“But the name,” went on Aletta, opening her eyes. “It’s strange they should have got hold of the name.”

“Very, because, as I said, I didn’t so much as get out of the train, let alone take a stroll as far as Pritchard Street, let alone the Rand Club, which is farther,” said Colvin. “Well, we most of us have a ‘double’ somewhere.”

Which was precisely the remark made by the jovial Piet, when the occurrence was narrated to him on their return home. But for once his official instinct of reticence, even in trifling matters, was misplaced, had he but known it. Had he imparted the results of those enquiries he had caused to be made, what a deal of sorrow, and mistrust, and heart-wringing might have been thereafter saved!

“Is that man we met to-day going out with the ambulance department?” asked Colvin.

“Who, Da Costa? Ambulance department?” echoed Piet, wonderingly. “Oh, I see,” with a shout of laughter. “No fear. He’s not a medico. He’s a lawyer—running hard for a judgeship. But I say, Colvin, would you like to go up and see the President this afternoon? I think we could get at the old man to-day.”

“Just what I would like.”

“And, Colvin,” struck in Aletta, “you are not to look upon Oom Paul as an old bear, as most English do. Remember, I have a great admiration for him.”

Colvin promised to keep this fact in mind when forming his opinion, and in due course they arrived at the unpretentious-looking bungalow which was the private residence of one of the most famed personalities of modern times. As they went up between the stone lions which guarded, as it were, the entrance, they passed a German officer coming down the steps, a straight martial figure, with upward-pointing moustaches à la Kaiser Wilhelm, and wearing the uniform of the Staats Artillerie. He exchanged a salute with Piet, and the latter halted and took him aside for a minute’s conversation.

“That’s all right, Colvin,” he said, rejoining him, while with a parting salute the German strode on. “He has just come out. Says the old man is in a pretty good-humour.”

The President was seated in a substantial armchair as they were shown in. He was likewise smoking a substantial pipe. This looked homely. As Piet introduced Colvin, His Honour did not rise, but merely extended a massive hand, uttering a single monosyllabic word of greeting.

“Daag!”

“Daag, Oom,” responded Colvin, as he shook the Presidential dexter, right heartily. His Honour, however, subsided into silence, during which Piet Plessis entertained him with a running comment on the lighter aspect of day-to-day events, ignoring the situation of the hour.

“Who is the Englishman?” said the old man at last, designating Colvin with a wave of his pipe-stem.

Piet explained that he was engaged to be married to a near kinswoman of his who was staying with him. The Presidential features displayed some faint show of interest.

“Your kinswoman!” he said. “Whose daughter is she?”

“Stephanus De la Reys, Mynheer. He lives in the Cape Colony.”

“De la Rey! Ja, that is a good name, De la Rey,” replied the President, nodding approvingly. “But—an Englishman!” Then, turning to Colvin, he said, still speaking in Dutch.

“Can you talk our language?”

“Ja, Oom,” came the hearty response. During the conversational nothings fired off so volubly by Piet Plessis, he had been studying this wonderful old man before him, and in the strong massive face could read the extraordinary and iron will-power which had made its owner the prominent figure in history that he was. Something of Aletta’s thoughts came into his mind, and he too was wondering whether, had this born leader of men thrown in his gigantic influence on the British side, he would not have met with greater appreciation, nay would not his very defects be held to be rugged virtues? Being thus immersed, he failed to observe a grim tightening of the mouth, as he uttered that hearty and, as he thought, deferential reply.

“Have you been here before?” repeated his catechiser.

“Ja, Oom,” replied Colvin. And then there was no mistaking the change which came over His Honour’s countenance. He flushed, and a heavy frown darkened his brows, as removing his pipe from his mouth, he rolled out in deep, chest notes, like the bark of an angry mastiff.

“Is nie jou Oom nie. Ik is die President!”

(“I am not your uncle. I am the President.”)

The tone went up on an ascending scale, ending loud and staccato. Colvin, for a moment dumfounded, hastened to apologise, then with the utmost suavity of assurance proceeded to explain that he himself owned an uncle whom he deeply revered, and who bore a most extraordinary resemblance to “Mynheer President.” Then, he deftly went on to inquire about His Honour’s earlier experiences in the old Voortrekker days, expressing boundless admiration for those wonderful pioneers, and as he was really well up in their history, the old man, quite mollified, was soon descanting with unusual volubility on the subject of his early doings. Mean while coffee was brought in, and, as soon after as he could, astute Piet Plessis, seeing the conversation was taking a turn likely to excite His Honour, took the opportunity of terminating the visit.

“Look after him, Piet,” said the old man as he gave them his hand, and there was the nearest approach to a smile lurking about his mouth. “Look after him. He is an Englishman, but he is going to marry your cousin. See that he does not get into any mischief.”

“Say, Piet?” said Colvin when they were well out in the street again, “I believe I put my foot in it some.”

“Oh, rather!” answered the other, who could hardly speak for spluttering. “You’re not the only one, though, if the truth were known. You see it was all very well twenty years ago and all that to call him Oom Paul. But now the old man is rather sick of it. Only think, every dirty little Jew ‘winkler’ calling him ‘Oom.’ Besides, he’s a much bigger man now and likes to be treated with a certain amount of state.”

But not until he got safely home could Piet give full vent to his mirth, and then he literally laughed till he cried.

“You should have seen him, Anna,” he spluttered between his tears. “Oh, Aletta, you should have heard him. Telling the Ou’ Baas, so sweetly too, that he reminded him of an uncle of his whom he deeply revered. Oh, oh, you should have been there! I simply didn’t dare look up. I should have disgraced myself for ever if I had.”

“Well, it had its effect,” protested Colvin, who was laughing over the recollection almost as hard as Piet. “It smoothed his feathers at once.”

“Really? No, really did it?” cried Aletta, who for her part had gone off into rippling peals.

“Rather, it did,” confirmed Piet. “Oh, oh, oh! ‘Is nie jou Oom nie. Ik is die President!’ Oh, oh, oh! I shall choke directly.”

And he very nearly did.

Chapter Four.

That other Kershaw.

Since that strange chance meeting on the platform at Park Station, life seemed much brighter for May Wenlock.

She had come up there in a fit of the dolefullest dumps, as she herself put it, and in fact those with whom she sojourned hardly recognised her for the blithe, light-hearted girl she had been the year before. They even tentatively rallied her, but she brusquely disclaimed any reason other than that she was utterly and entirely sick of the farm, that its eternal monotony got upon her nerves, and a very little more of it would have driven her crazy. Yet she might about as well have stayed where she was, for the erewhile great whirling gold town was now as a city of the dead. All who could do so had cleared out—tumbling over each other's heels in their eagerness to get away—as we have seen.

Of all the war-talk and excitement she was heartily sick. There was nothing to take her out of herself, no fun, no gaiety, no life; the streets, lines upon lines of abandoned houses and shuttered-up shops. It was as a city ravaged by pestilence from end to end.

James Dixon, her relative's husband, was a broker, and had been a contractor. He had been regarded of late with somewhat of a suspicious eye—by his own countrymen that is—and dark hints were not wanting to the effect that he stood in too well with the Government, as against British interests. In what particular way he did so was never formulated, but it was sufficient in those days to hint. Anyway he remained on, serene and untroubled, what time others had fled. This, of course, to the minds of the hinters, confirmed every suspicion.

May had never been particularly fond of these people, although she had got on with them well enough. But then there had been plenty of outside life and diversion. Now that she was thrown upon them almost entirely, she wondered how she could ever have found Mary Dixon other than the tiresome woman she was—without an idea outside her brood, the four units composing which were always noisy and quarrelsome, never too clean, and generally and all-round ill behaved. She had come up to Johannesburg just before the crisis had reached a climax—and now, there she was and there she must stay.

Of course there was that beneath her ennui and restlessness which she did not impart to her relatives. In her hours of solitude—and these were too many for one of her age and temperament and abundant attractions—there always arose in her mind a vivid recollection of what she had felt on hearing of Colvin Kershaw's engagement. It was not so entirely unexpected, for her jealous misgivings had been gnawing into and corroding

her mind for some time past. Yet, when it came, the shock had been hardly the less acute. He had treated her shamefully—she declared to herself—yes, wickedly, cruelly, abominably. Why had he made her care for him, only to—do as he had done? If only she could make him suffer for it—but—how could she? Wild, revengeful plans scorched through her brain—among them that of revealing everything to Aletta. Then the ugly Dutch girl could have the reversion of his kisses and soft words. But the only consideration that kept her from this was a conviction that such a course would not weigh with Aletta, would defeat its own object, and turn herself into a laughing stock. It certainly would if Aletta loved him as she herself had done—and how could Aletta do otherwise? thought poor May to herself with a sob, and a filling of the eyes like a rain shower breaking upon a stormy sunset. She hated him now, she told herself again and again. But—did she? That sob would often repeat itself to give the lie to the illusion.

She had not seen him since hearing the—to her—baleful news; but this, to do him justice, was not his fault. He had come over to Spring Holt to bid them good-bye before leaving for the Transvaal, but she had not appeared—pleading a headache which was not all pretence—the fact being that she dared not trust herself. But of late an intense longing had been upon her to behold him once more, and when her glance had lighted upon him at the railway station among the crowd, she forgot everything in the joy of the moment. And—it was not he after all.

Even then somehow her disappointment was less keen than she could have thought possible. Could it be that the other was so exactly his counterpart that at times, even subsequent to their first acquaintance, she could hardly believe it was not Colvin himself, for some motive of his own, playing a part?

For their first acquaintance had grown and ripened. Kenneth Kershaw had lost no time in calling, in fact he had a slight acquaintance with Jim Dixon already, and as time went on his visits became more and more frequent till they were almost daily. Whereupon Jim Dixon began to rally his very attractive young kinswoman.

This, at first, annoyed the latter. He was not a refined man, and his jests were on his own level. More than once he fired them off on the object of them personally, and Kenneth had looked much as Colvin would have looked under the circumstances. Then May had affected to take them in good part, with an eye to information. Who was this Mr Kershaw, she asked, and what was he doing up there? But Jim Dixon's reply was vague. He had been there some two years, he believed, but he must have been longer in the country, because he could talk Dutch quite well. What was his business? Nobody knew. He was one of those customers who didn't give themselves away. Like a good many more up there he had got along sort of "scratch"; but it was said he had made a tidyish bit in the boom, end of last year. But he was a tip-top swell, any one could see

that. "Nothing like capturing one of these English swells, May," concluded Jim, with a knowing wink. "Make hay while the sun shines." And we dare not swear that the aspirate in that fragrant foodstuff for the equine race was over distinctly sounded.

Kenneth, for his part, was genuinely attracted by the girl. Her relatives he at once set down in his own mind as unmitigated outsiders, but there was the making of something good about May herself. Times, too, were desperately dull. He hardly knew why he had elected to remain in the Transvaal, except on the principle of "sitting on the fence." It was by no means certain that Oom Paul would not remain cock of the walk, in which eventuality he thought he saw the road to some valuable pickings. And now this girl had come into his way to brighten it. And she did brighten it.

She was so natural, so transparent. He could turn her mind inside out any moment he chose. He had very quickly, and with hardly a question, discovered the *raison d'être* of her partiality for himself, the pleasure she had seemed to take in being with him. She had talked about Colvin, then, when designedly, he had led the conversation to some other subject, she had always brought it back to Colvin, in a lingering wistful way that told its own tale over and over again. But this, too, had ceased, and she gradually talked less and less of Colvin, and seemed to listen with increased interest to Colvin's facsimile.

"There's where I score," said Kenneth to himself, "and I am going to work the circumstance for all it is worth."

This working of the circumstance was to be a means to an end, and that end was that he meant to marry May Wenlock.

Why did he? She was not quite of his class. He had seen her surroundings, as represented immediately, at any rate, and they had revolted him. Well, he could raise her above her surroundings, besides the very fact of her coming of the stock she did was not without its advantages. She would be all the more fitted to bear her part in the adventure he was planning: would have no superfine scruples or misgivings as to accepting the splendid—the really dazzling destiny he had mapped out for her—to share with him. She, in a measure, had supplied the key to the opening of that golden possibility of the future, had brought it within really tangible reach, therefore she should share it. And this possibility, this adventure, was worth staking all for—even life itself. It needed boldness, judgment, utter unscrupulousness, and he possessed all three. It was vast—it was magnificent.

And then the beauty of the girl appealed powerfully to his physical nature. Those sea-blue velvety eyes, those waves of hair in rippling heavy gold, those full red lips, the smooth skin, a mixture of sun-kiss and the healthy flush of blood underneath, the firm

rounded figure—that should all be his, he would think when alone with his own reflections in a perfect whirl of passion, after one of those long interviews or walks with May that had now become so frequent, and to himself so amazingly sweet. Yet towards her he was ever careful to veil any indication of feeling. Colvin himself could hardly have been more utterly indifferent so far as all outward manifestations were concerned.

One day, however, he slipped. They had been out together and May had been more than ordinarily sweet and winning. It was dusk, and he was bidding her farewell within her temporary home. They had the house to themselves, moreover, save for the native boy in the kitchen. The others were out somewhere. It seemed to him that in the face looking up into his the lips were raised temptingly. His blood was in a whirl. In a moment she was in his embrace, and he kissed them full and passionately.

He was hardly prepared for what followed. She wrenched herself from him with a sinuous strength for which he would scarcely have given her credit.

“Why did you do that?” she blazed forth, and he could see that her face grew white and quivering as she confronted him in the dusk. “Why did you? Heavens! are all men alike that they think a girl is only made to be their plaything? I hate them. Yes, I hate them all.”

The fierce bitterness of her tone was so incisive, so genuine, that most men under the circumstances would have felt extremely foolish, and looked correspondingly abject. Into Kenneth Kershaw’s very heart her words seemed to cut like so many whip lashes. By a mighty effort he restrained himself from pleading provocation, feeling, any mitigation whatever; which would have been the worst line he could possibly have taken. Instead he adopted a kind of quietly resigned tone, with just a touch of the dignified; apologetic, yet without a trace of abjectness—which was the best.

“May, dear, forgive me,” he said. “I was not thinking, I suppose. Have I offended you beyond recall? Well, I must pay the penalty; for of course you are going to tell me you never want to set eyes on me again.”

He knew how to play his cards. Even then his words seemed to open a dreadful blank before her mind’s eye. Not to set eyes on him again? He seemed to mean it, too. That air of sad self-composure with which he had spoken them disarmed her, and her anger melted.

“No, no, I don’t mean that,” she answered, slowly, in a dazed kind of manner. “But why did you do it? We were such friends before.”

“And are we not to be again?” is the reply that would have arisen to most men’s lips. But this one knew when to let well alone.

“Forget it, May,” he said. “Believe me, I never wanted to offend you. And don’t think hard things of me when I am away, will you? Good-bye.”

“No, no. But you had better go now. Good-bye.”

Her tone was flurried, with an admixture of distress. It was just the time not to answer. He went out, and as he walked away from the house, he felt not ill-satisfied with himself and his doings in spite of his very decided repulse. As touching this last some men might have felt rather small. Not so this one. A subtle, unerring instinct told him that he had come out with all the honours of war.

“It is only the first step,” he said to himself. “You were frightened at first, my darling, but the time will come, and that sooner than you think, when you shall kiss me back again, and that with all the sweet ardour and passion wherewith I shall kiss you.”

Then a very blank thought took hold upon his mind. What if all the sympathy he had created in her was reflex—if whatever feeling she had for him or would come to have was due solely to his complete likeness to that other? Why the mere sight of Colvin, a chance glimpse in some public place such as when they two had first met, might shatter his own carefully calculated chances. It was a horrid thought—that at any moment that unpalatable relative of his might appear and spoil everything.

Not everything, at any rate. The greater scheme, apart from the incidental one of love, would always remain untouched. Colvin, he had already discovered, was in Pretoria. So far he was within the toils, or at any rate within appreciable distance of so being.

“It will make the working out of it so much the easier,” he said to himself. “Great God alive! why should Colvin have all the good things of earth? And the ungrateful dog isn’t capable of appreciating them either. Well, well, thanks to this benevolent war, his luck is now on the turn, while mine— Oh, damn!”

The last aloud. A big powerful native, armed with a heavy stick, swinging along the sidewalk at a run, utterly regardless of the bye-law which rendered him liable to the gaoler’s lash for being on the sidewalk at all, had cannoned right against him. Quick as thought, and yielding to the natural ire of the moment, Kenneth shot out his right fist, landing the native well on the ear with a force that sent him staggering. Recovering his balance, however, the fellow turned and attacked him savagely. At the same time, two

others who seemed to spring out of nowhere—also armed with sticks—came at him from the other side, uttering a ferocious hiss through the closed teeth.

Save for a walking-stick Kenneth was unarmed. In the existing state of affairs the road was utterly lonely, and the odds against him were three to one, three wiry desperate savages, armed with clubs, which they well understood how to use. Instinctively once more he let out, and landed another, this time between wind and water, doubling him up in the road, a squirming kicking shape. The remaining pair sprang back a step or two with knobsticks raised, ready to rush him both at once, when—suddenly both took to their heels.

The cause of this welcome diversion took the form of a horseman. He was armed with rifle and revolver, and had a full bandolier of cartridges over his shoulder. As he stepped out to meet him, Kenneth could see he was young, and well-looking. His first words showed that he was a Dutchman.

“Wie’s jij?” he asked, sharply, as his horse started, and backed from the approaching figure. Then peering down, and catching sight of the face, he cried, in would-be jovial tones:

“Maagtig, Colvin. You, is it? Ah, ah, I know where you have just come from. Ah, ah! You are slim!”

Chapter Five.

Something of a Plot.

Kenneth Kershaw narrowly scanned the face of this very opportune new arrival, and decided that he didn't know him from Adam. The other looked at him no less fixedly, and it was clear that he did not know him from Colvin.

Colvin, again? What the deuce was the game now? But he decided to play up to the rôle. He might get at something.

"So you know where I have just come from, eh, ou' maat?" he said. "Now where is that?"

"Ah! ah! Miss Wenlock is a pretty girl, isn't she?" rejoined the other meaningly. "Ja, Colvin, you are a slim kerel. Prettier girl than Aletta, isn't she?"

Aletta? That must be the Boer girl Colvin was supposed to be entangled with, decided Kenneth quickly. But what was her other name, and who the devil was this good-looking young Dutchman who talked English so well? Aletta's brother possibly. He just replied "H'm," which might have meant anything, and waited for the other to continue.

"What will Aletta say when she knows?" went on the Boer, and his bantering tone, through which the smouldering glow of malice underlying it could not entirely be kept from showing, gave Kenneth his cue.

"Say? Oh, but she need not know," he answered with just a touch of well-simulated alarm.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the other. "Need not know? I think, friend Colvin, I have got you on toast, as you English say, for I shall take very good care she does know. The fact is I have been watching you for some time—from the time you met Miss Wenlock at Park Station right up till now, and I fancy Aletta won't have very much more to say to you when she hears about it all."

"Oh, but look here," went on Kenneth, still affecting alarm. "You're not going to give the show away, old sportsman. Dash it all, it isn't cricket!"

"Not, eh? You just wait and see," jeered the other. "Aha, you seem a bit scared out of your high and mighty English 'side' now. You chose to come between me and Aletta. We grew up together, and I always looked upon her as mine! She would have been but for you. Curse you! I could shoot you now as you stand there," growled the Dutchman,

fingering the breech of his rifle. "But I won't, because I want to see Aletta turn away from you in scorn, as she will, directly. That will be a far greater punishment for you—a far better revenge for me."

"By Jove!" said Kenneth to himself. "There's sultry weather sticking out for Colvin, anyhow." This young Boer was evidently a discomfited rival—his own words let that be understood. Then, with lightning swiftness, two aspects of the situation flashed through his scheming brain. He could let the delusion which the other was under as to his identity continue, in which case Colvin would probably appeal to May herself to disprove his alleged visits. But then the two would be brought together again, and that was just what he did not want. Or he could frankly offer his aid to this Dutchman, who would certainly jump at any method, however unscrupulous, by which to discomfit his rival. Colvin would assuredly try reprisals, and in that case the probabilities were he would be shot by the Boers, which was just what he did want. It would end matters comfortably for all concerned. So he decided upon the latter plan.

"See here, my friend," he said, coolly. "All this time you have been holding on hard to the wrong end of the stick. My name is not Colvin."

"Not—not Colvin Kershaw?" ejaculated the Boer, open-mouthed.

"No. Devil a bit is it!"

"Now you are lying. There is only one Colvin Kershaw. There cannot be two!"

"Quite right. But I am not that one. There may be other Kershaws, though. Eh! Try again."

"Are you his brother?" said the Boer, suspiciously.

"Well, I am—er—a relative of his. Nor are you the only person who has taken me for him. The fact is, we are as like as two peas. I don't wonder you have been obligingly giving me all your plans. No, don't be afraid. I have no wish to upset them. On the contrary, I am going to offer you my help towards carrying them out."

It was time to make some such declaration. The Boer's hand had been stealing towards his revolver holster, and his face was fell with a deadly meaning. It was almost dark, and the road lonely and deserted. Dead men tell no tales, and a dead Englishman found there in the morning would cause no concern whatever to the authorities.

“What help can you give me, and why should you wish to?” he said dubiously, his ingrained suspicion forbidding him to trust the other overmuch.

“It can bring about the very thing that would have happened had I been the real Colvin. For my motive—well, that is my business. I may or may not tell it you later, but somehow I think not.”

“Do you hate him, then?” said the Dutchman, still suspiciously.

“Not in the least. I am perfectly indifferent to him. But he stands in my way, and must get out of it. That is all.”

“He must get out of my way, too,” said the other, with a dark scowl.

“Quite so. And if I help you to get him out of your way, you will help me to get him out of mine?”

“Can I trust you?”

“Well, you’ve got to,” answered Kenneth cheerfully, for he saw that the other was nibbling around the bait. “Don’t be afraid, though. You won’t regret it; and now, excuse me, but I’ll be hanged if I know exactly who you are.”

“My name is Adrian De la Rey,” replied the other. “And yours?”

“Kenneth Kershaw. And now we know each other, there’s no need to stand talking out here where we may be overheard, so come along to my diggings, and we’ll find something to drink, and have the show to ourselves for weaving a plan of campaign. Say though, it was a fortunate thing you happened up when you did. Those niggers were one too many for me.”

Kenneth’s quarters were not very much further on, and were situated in the abode of a Polish Jew who had retired to the back premises. At sound of the voices and horse hoofs, this worthy put out his head, then at sight of the armed and mounted burgher, scurried back like a frightened rabbit into its burrow.

“It’s all right, Svinsky,” called out Kenneth. “Roll up, man. Nobody’s going to eat you or commandeer you.”

Thus reassured, the child of Israel came forth, bowing and cringing.

“Goot evening, sairs. Let dot I shall take de Police chentleman’s ’orse. I haf a shtable und still some forage.”

“Right,” said Kenneth. “After that, Svinsky, we want the house to ourselves. See that we are not interrupted.”

“Ja, Mishter Kershaw. Dot shall be done.”

Having thus disposed of his Hebraic landlord, Kenneth led the way inside and lit up. Then he got out the materials for a rough-and-ready cold supper, and some excellent “square-face,” with the apology that it was only “war-fare,” the point of which joke was lost on the Dutchman. The latter, however, after a couple of glasses began to grow more genial and less suspicious.

“Maagtig!” he burst forth, eyeing his host. “I never thought one world could contain two people so exactly alike. Here in the light, the likeness is even more wonderful.”

“Take a good look at me, De la Rey, and make sure. Now, is there nothing, no mark or anything, that distinguishes me from my—er—relative?”

“Ja, now I do see something. You have a scar, a very slight one—still I see it—just in front of the parting of your hair. Colvin has not got that. But the colouring, the voice—everything. Maagtig! it is wonderful.”

Over the meal they began to arrange their plans. Then they lit their pipes and talked on, far into the night, arranging details.

“You know the young lady, Adrian, and I don’t,” said Kenneth at last. “If she believes your statement, we needn’t go any further. If she doesn’t, or doesn’t want to, we must give her the most convincing evidence of all—ocular evidence. There will be no going behind that, I fancy.”

“Ja, that is a fine idea of yours, Kenneth”—under the influence of ‘square-face’ and a mutual plot these two had become quite fraternal. “A really fine idea. Aletta will never doubt the evidence of her own eye sight.”

Just then, however, Aletta had something to think about on her own account, and a few days after the concocting of this delectable plot saw her seated in the back garden of Piet Plessis’ house, engaged in a serious discussion with her fiancé. For the latter had made up his mind to proceed to the seat of war, and had just been announcing the fact.

Those long weeks spent at Pretoria had been very happy, very sweet. But the sheer restfulness of them had become a trifle enervating. News had kept coming in: news of the stirring events along the border. The flame had spread, and was still spreading. Kimberley was invested, so too was Mafeking, and Vryburg had fallen. Ladysmith was cut off from the outside world, and the burghers of the Republics had successfully carried their arms well into the Cape Colony. He could not sit still, through it all. He must, at any rate, see something of what was going on, and to that end had obtained special permission to join Cronje's force as a non-combatant spectator.

Not easily had this been obtained though. It had taken all Piet Plessis' influence, backed up by that of Andries Botma, with whom Colvin had renewed acquaintance during his stay in the Transvaal. Further, he had to give the most solemn undertaking not to use his position in any way whatever for the benefit of his own countrymen.

"Don't you remember that first evening we met, Aletta?" he was saying. "You promised yourself to make a convert of me? Well, now I am interested in your side, I want to see how it fights."

"No, no, dearest I can't spare you," she replied, stroking the brown hand which lay in one of her long white ones, with the other. "Oh, and—what if I were to lose you?"

"Leave me alone to take care of that. Life is too well worth having just now," he rejoined. "And, as a non-combatant, the risk will be infinitesimal."

They were alone together. Piet and his wife were both out, and even if anybody called, here in this bosky garden retreat they would remain undisturbed.

Would they, though? Even then both started, and looked up, as the tread of heavy footsteps coming down the garden path arrested their attention.

"Oh, there you are, Aletta," said a man's voice. "The boy said he thought you were out here. How are you, Colvin?"

"Why, it is Adrian!" she cried, colouring somewhat as she remembered under what circumstances he had last seen her alone. She was surprised and delighted, too, to notice that he spoke with all his old cordiality of tone, and was shaking hands with Colvin quite as he used to do at Ratels Hoek. He had got over it, then? That was sensible and manly of him, and, the interruption notwithstanding, she showed herself quite pleased at his visit.

He sat down and chatted away freely enough, telling them about himself and his moves, also the latest news from the Wildschutsberg and Ratels Hoek; how all the Boers in that neighbourhood had risen, and under the leadership of Swaart Jan Grobbelaar had marched into Schalkburg and having made a prisoner of Mr Jelf had seized the Court-house over which now waved the Free State flag, and had set up a Free State man as Landdrost. Oom Stephanus? Well no, he had not joined openly, but his sympathies were all with them. He preferred to sit quietly at home attending to his farm.

Her “patriotism” notwithstanding, Aletta could not but secretly rejoice at this intelligence: If things should go wrong for their side, her father at any rate would be safe. Then Adrian remarked carelessly:

“By the way, Colvin, is Miss Wenlock staying at Johannesburg long?”

“Didn’t even know she was there at all, Adrian.”

“Didn’t even know! Why, man, you were having quite a long talk with her at Park Station the other day. Take care you don’t make Aletta jealous,” he added, with a genial laugh.

“That’s very odd, considering I haven’t set eyes on her since I left the Wildschutsberg,” answered Colvin.

“I must have a double somewhere, for another Johnnie declared he saw me in Johannesburg too. You remember, Aletta? That man Da Costa? But is May Wenlock staying in Johannesburg?”

“Well, rather”—with a whimsical expression of countenance. “Now, look here, Colvin. I suppose you were not walking down Commissioner Street with her one day last week? She saw me, and bowed, but you didn’t see me. Well, you were better employed. But don’t make Aletta jealous.”

The tone was so good-humouredly chaffing that it was impossible to take offence. Yet Colvin did not like it. As a matter of fact, he had been over at Johannesburg at the time just named. But he only replied:

“I’ve never been in Commissioner Street, or in any other street in Johannesburg with May Wenlock in my life, Adrian, nor did I know she was even there. You must have seen double, man.”

“Oh yes, I suppose I must,” answered Adrian in the same bantering tone, which, however, he contrived to make convey that he supposed nothing of the sort. And then they talked of other matters.

The thing was perfectly clear. Colvin had simply scouted the other’s statement as impossible. Yet why should Aletta somehow feel a vague misgiving, as though the air had turned chill and the sun were not shining quite so brightly? Dr Da Costa’s remark, too, came back to her. Perish the thought! It was unworthy of her, and an affront to Colvin. Yet somehow the tiny verjuice drop had been instilled. And as Adrian talked on, apparently in high good-humour, she thought that after all his visit had not been quite a success.

Did Adrian himself think so? We wonder.

Chapter Six.

In the Roar of the Battle.

It was beginning to get rather exciting. The big gun, just below, had roared forth its message, and the spectators on the kopje had their field-glasses glued to their eyes, as they watched the progress of the great projectile. Splash! there it was. A cloud of dust flew up from the red-brown veldt, away in the distance, but harmlessly. Then, hard by where it had fallen, a British gun barked, and, immediately, a huge mass of the earth's surface, bitten into, leaped in mid-air on the further side of the river, falling back in great chunks—clods and stones—and gyrations of dust. Further along the line, another gun spoke, then another and another, as though passing the word along the vast length, until the farthest voices, miles away, sounded quite faintly. Then ever and again would arise the crackling roll of rifle-fire.

The sun was now well up over the eastern horizon, sweeping his joyous morning rays in golden warmth over this warring drama of blood and of wounds and of death. Cleaving the great expanse of red-brown veldt the river bed, bush-fringed, with high muddy banks, yawned; and away further down, the clustering buildings of the little township, and the straight thread of the railway line tailing away on either side. Beyond the said banks, lines of trenches, where lay the Boer riflemen, grim and earnest, awaiting their turn, which would soon come.

Again the big gun below loosed off, with a tremendous reverberation. Those on the kopje, watching the missile, descried a certain amount of confusion where it struck, a scurrying or scattering behind its redoubt. Heads went up eagerly from behind the Boer earthworks to watch the result, but little or no remark escaped the lips of the stolid burghers. Then the English battery barked in return, and the vast thud of the lyddite shell striking one end of the earthwork, blowing up the same great cloud of dust and fragments, reached the spectators with something like the tremor of an earthquake. At the same time the latter could see that, where it had fallen, several forms were lying, while others bending over them were trying to draw them out of the dust and débris.

Colvin Kershaw's hand shook slightly as he lowered his glasses, and his face wore the look of one who has gazed upon a peculiarly horrifying sight. And well might it, for the projectile had done its work with fell and awful completeness, and the powerful lens afforded him a view of every detail, of writhings and agony and terrible mutilation.

"Guess you're not used to it, Kershaw," said a voice at his side. "Made me look sick, too, first time I saw it. You ever see a fight before?"

The speaker was an American war-correspondent “doing” the battle from within the Boer lines.

“Yes, I served in Matabeleland,” answered Colvin. “But with niggers it’s different. Then, you see, we hated the brutes so because they’d butchered a lot of women and children at the outbreak of the rebellion. Even with them, though, you didn’t see such a wholesale bust-up as that. Faugh!”

“Well, there’s worse to come yet. Here, you take a draw at this”—tendering him a large field flask. Colvin accepted, and the nip of excellent Boer brandy just steadied his nerves, which had been momentarily shaken.

“You try a little, Commandant,” went on the owner of the flask.

But Commandant Andries Botma declined. He seldom touched stimulants, he said, and now, if he did so at the beginning of a fight, would it not be said that he required a dose of what the English call “Dutch courage”—with a whimsical look at Colvin, at whom he was poking sly fun?

The quondam emissary to the Colonial Boers, among whom we first made his acquaintance, was no mere frothy stump orator. The name by which he was deferentially known among these—“The Patriot”—he had subsequently done everything to justify. He was not the man to preach others into peril he dare not face himself, and when his crusade had culminated in an appeal to arms, he had always been among the foremost where hard knocks were given or received. Now he was in command of an important wing of General Cronje’s force.

A mighty engine of destruction or defence this—its lines extending for miles and miles—waiting there grim, dogged, resolute, to give battle to the richest, most resourceful, and determined Power in the world. A terrible force to reckon with; its impelling factor, a calm fanaticism born of an unswerving conviction of the justice of the cause and the sure and certain alliance of Heaven.

In the simplicity of his veldt attire, with little or nothing to mark him out from those whom he commanded, Andries Botma looked even more a born leader of men than when last we saw him, swaying his countrymen with all the force of his fiery oratory. His strong rugged face, eager, yet impassive, was bent upon the scene of battle, as though not to lose a detail, not to miss a chance. He was surrounded by a little knot of middle-aged and elderly Boers, most of them holding subordinate commands under himself.

“Whirr!” The screech of a shrapnel sailing over the foremost lines. It falls into the river, throwing up the mud with a tremendous splash. Another and another. This last, better aimed, strikes among the rear lines—result as before: agony, wounds, death. At the same time another hits the kopje not many yards below, exploding in all directions with appalling effect.

The splinters fly from an ironstone boulder not two yards distant, but Andries Botma does not move a muscle. One Boer in the group utters a mild ejaculation, and then is seen to be winding a bit of oiled rag, kept for gun-sponging purposes, around his middle finger. Through this rude bandage the blood slowly oozes, but nobody seems to think the circumstance worthy of remark. Colvin is conscious of a creeping sensation in the region of the spine, as the jagged iron explodes around him with vicious metallic hiss. And the voices of the long-range duel undergo no diminution, the deep-mouthed boom of the heavy guns, and the sharp, snapping bark of the smaller ones.

Things, however, are not destined to continue that way. As the hours wear on the advance of the attacking force is made out. From this part of the field the latter can be seen in skirmishing order, drawing nearer and nearer; those khaki-clad dots on the great brown expanse affording but an insignificant mark. And then there begins the sound of rifle-shooting, literally as “the crackling of thorns under a pot.” Down and along the lines it sweeps, in waves of sharp staccato sounds, and the spludges of dust, before and behind those khaki lines of advancing skirmishers, but mostly before, are like the dropping of water on red-hot iron. Now, too, it is near enough to mark the effect of those deadly volleys. That inexorable advance continues, but as it does it leaves behind lines of dead and dying and grievously wounded. Not all on one side, though, is the red slaughter. Here among the patriot trenches men are falling, and falling fast. Shell after shell, too, drops into the little township, and the crash of shattered brickwork, and the shrill clangour of battered-in corrugated iron, mingles with the gradating roar of projectiles, as they leave each grim nozzle sentinelling miles and miles of that sullen river front.

Those on the kopje are now well within the line of fire. More than frequently a shrill vicious “whigge” as the Lee-Metford bullets clip the air, or shatter to a flattened lead mushroom against a stone, causes an involuntary duck. The American is taking plentiful notes in shorthand. Colvin, who is without this resource, also devoid of the natural excitement of the combatant of firing at the enemy as well as being fired at by him, takes longer to get used to the hum of bullets and the bursting of shrapnel than would otherwise have been the case, for he is totally unarmed, a precaution taken against the eventuality of capture by his own countrymen. And the effect of this precaution is strange. He feels out of it. Needless to say he has no desire to draw trigger on his said countrymen, yet the consciousness that he is being shot at—no matter whom by—

without the power of replying, is strange and novel. But his nerves at last become attuned to the hum of missiles, and he watches the whole arena of the battle with a vivid and increasing interest.

Higher and higher mounts the sun, more blistering and scorching his rays, giving forth from the ironstone of the kopje as though reflected from an oven. A strange mirage, watery, crystallised, hangs over the brown expanse of veldt, going off into limpid blue on the far horizon, where the distant flat-topped hills seem to be suspended in mid-air. Whether it is that this lake-like liquid tranquillity emphasises the torrid heat or not, those on the kopje feel what the burning of thirst means. They have water-bottles from which they refresh, but sparingly. Those in the trenches feel it too, but their attention is on the dire, stern business of the day. No time have they to dwell upon mere corporeal cravings.

Whigge! Crash! Shell after shell is breaking within their lines. Men writhe, shattered, screaming, where the hideous dismemberment of the human frame is beyond all human endurance, however willing the spirit, the dogged, stern, manly, patriotic spirit—proof against mere ordinary pain—agony even. One of the group round Andries Botma sinks to the earth as a Nordenfelt missile, crashing and splintering among the stones which form his cover, buries a great fragment of jagged iron deep in his thigh. All run to him, foremost among them the Commandant, reckless of the perfect hailstorm of bullets which already, although at long-range, is beginning to spray the kopje, while some signal wildly to the ambulance waggons away and below in the rear. But Field-cornet Theunis Van Wyk has got his death-blow, and his wife and children—he has three sons fighting below in the trenches—and grandchildren will see him at home smoking the pipe of peace no more. The flow of blood is already rendering him faint, and with a hasty jerked-out message delivered to his old friend and Commandant to carry to them, and a quavering attempt at singing a Dutch hymn upon his lips, he passes out like a brave man, without complaint or rancour, as many and many a one has done and will do before this day of striving and of carnage is over.

And as the advancing host draws nearer, now in quick intrepid rushes over open ground where the leaden hail sweeps in its remorseless shower, now prone and in skirmishing formation, the roar of battle waxes louder and louder. On both sides the crackling din of volleys is well-nigh incessant—as the rifles speak from trench or temporary cover, with dire effect. But there is very little smoke, although the plain on either side is simply spurting puffs of dust where each bullet finds its mark—save where such mark is not mother earth. In the background the ambulances hover, their heroic attendants darting in now and again, and rescuing the maimed victims under the leaden shower itself. And above the ceaseless crackle of small arms, the heavier boom of artillery rolls out more continuous, more unbroken than ever.

Colvin has got over his first shrinking of nerves. He hears the humming of missiles overhead and around with something of equanimity, he sees the splash of lead against rock—or the dust-cloud leaping out of the ground as the bursting iron of shell tears up the surface. Two more of those upon the kopje fall, one stone dead, the other dying. It may be his turn next. And then, as even the excitement of the day-long battle begins to wane and go flat, his thoughts refer to that last parting with Aletta. What a parting that had been—as though he had been going to his death, to his execution! He realises the burden of it now, as he looks on the sad havoc of human life below and around him—the swift sudden fate leaping out of nowhere—the mangled, the mutilated, moaning for the boon of death—of being put out of their sufferings; the lifeless—a moment ago rejoicing in their youth and strength with all their years before them. Ah yes—and this is war—glorious war!— and at this very moment there are tens of thousands in the vigour of their youth and strength now panting and longing for the opportunity to become such as these.

“Oh, Kershaw. Guess the British’ll bust our centre right now. They’re coming right through the river.”

It was the voice of the American. Chewing a cigar in the corner of his mouth, he was calmly and unconcernedly taking his notes, while keenly watching each new development of the day. Colvin, following his glance, could make out a crowd of forms in the river bed some distance down. Then the rattle of rifle-fire became one long deafening roll, as all the energies of the Republican forces, anywhere within reasonable range, became concentrated on this new attempt. But the result he could not determine. The whole thing had more than begun to bewilder him. His ears were deafened by the unintermittent roll and crackle, his eyes dim and dizzy with watching, or trying to watch, the movements of both lines of striving combatants. He heard Andries Botma give orders, and then saw a great mass of mounted Boers, stealthily keeping cover as far as possible, dash forth and pour volley after volley into the waggons and trek-animals of the opposing force; hanging on the outskirts of the latter, with the result of throwing it for the while into hideous confusion. He saw frightful sights of dying men, mangled and shell-ripped; but by then his susceptibilities were blunted, the whole world seemed changed into a hell. The voice of his American friend again aroused him.

“Mind me, Kershaw. Next time you come to view this sample of scrimmage, you get something to do. You got nothing to report for, and of course you can’t shoot at other English, so it’s bound to get on your nerves.”

“There’s something in what you say, Acton,” replied Colvin. “There’s a sort of passive helpless feeling about it all to me. I seem to realise what the ambulance people’s work is like; but even they have work. Now I have nothing but to sit and look on.”

“Pity,” said the other. “But we haven’t got the best ground. Too much near the end of the line. Well, it’s no great matter. I’ll make it all read beautiful,” glancing with pride down his columns of notes. “You have a cigar?”

“Thanks,” lighting up the weed. “But— what’s on now?”

They were, as the American had said, near the end of the line. Now they could see, confusedly, and in the distance, that the British were in and through the river, forcing the centre of the opposing line. And the wild cheers of the soldiers reached them through the incessant din and roar of fire. At the same time those in the trenches on the further side of the river had abandoned their position and retired across.

The sun was sinking now. It was hard to realise that a whole day had been passed in the turmoil of this unending rattle and noise. Yet to Colvin the effect was almost as though he had spent his whole life in it. His mind represented but a confused notion of what he had witnessed, of what he had been through; and when at nightfall the word was silently passed to retire, to evacuate the position, and take up another, some miles in the rear, where everything was more favourable to meet and again withstand a sorely tried but valorous and persistent foe, he seemed to regard it as no more of an out-of-the-way circumstance than the order to inspan a waggon or two. Yet he had spent that day witnessing one of the fiercest and most stubbornly contested battles in which his country’s arms had been engaged within the current century.

Chapter Seven.

Ocular Evidence.

Not until Colvin had gone did Aletta actually realise all that that parting meant.

Why had she let him go? she asked herself, a score of times a day. She could have restrained him had she put forth all her influence. Why were men so restless? Why could not this one have sat still and made the most of the happiness that was his—that was theirs? Ah, and now those happy times—and they had been happy times—were in the past. Never to come again, perhaps—her heart added with a sinking chill.

If the English would but make peace; and then she remembered, with sad amusement, her patriotic enthusiasms in the old days at Ratels Hoek, and how condescendingly she had been willing that her countrymen should allow a few English to remain, during her discussions with Adrian—yes, and even with Colvin himself. What now was the patriotic cause to her? She was only conscious of an empty, aching, and utterly desolate heart.

“Aletta is fretting, Piet,” said the latter’s consort one day—the subject of the remark not being present. “She is fretting terribly. I can see it, although she is very brave, and tries not to show it. I did not think she had it in her to allow herself to be so entirely wrapped up in one man, and that an Englishman. What can we do to cheer her up?”

“Get the ‘one man’ back, I suppose,” rejoined the practical official. “Maagtig, Anna—if ever any man had reason to sit still and be thankful, that man was Colvin. But, no. Off he must go, not because he’s wanted for fighting purposes, but just to see the fun—as he calls it. Well, he’ll see a great deal that he won’t find fun at all. But these English are all alike, fussy, restless—must have a finger in everything that goes on—in a fight most of all.”

Yes, Aletta was fretting, if a pale and careworn look upon her face was any index to the mind within. Now, with a rush, all came back—all that this man was to her. She recalled the hours they had spent together—every tone and every look—all that he had ever said, and how time had fled like a streak of sunbeam when she was in his presence—how, too, her first thought on awaking to another day, again and again, had been one of half-incredulous, blissful gratitude that in this way she was to go through life. And now he was gone, and at any moment, for all she knew, he might be lying dead and still for ever upon the veldt. Oh, it would not bear thinking on! She had not known what love was before, she told herself. She knew now, and when he returned to her he should know too. This separation had taught her. Surely, too, it had taught him.

Among those who frequently visited at Piet Plessis' to try to cheer her up was, somewhat to her surprise, her cousin Adrian; remembering how badly he had taken her refusal in the first instance, and the dire threats he had used towards whosoever should usurp what he chose to imagine was his place. Then she reflected that, after all, he had justified the good opinion she had always held of him, in that he had accepted the inevitable in a sensible and manly way. True, once or twice it occurred to her uneasily that he might be taking the opportunity of ingratiating himself once more in view of possible accidents; but she put the thought from her. Another source of surprise was the way in which she found herself talking to Adrian about the absent one. At first she had shrunk from so doing, deeming the topic an unpalatable one to him. But he had not seemed to regard it as such, and she soon lost her constraint on that head. Then Adrian's visits became of daily occurrence, and Piet and his wife, seeing they seemed to brighten Aletta up, encouraged them.

One day she asked him how it was he still remained in Pretoria. Now that the war was an accomplished fact, his place, she should have thought, would be at the front. News kept coming in—together with more prisoners—news of brilliant engagements, and successful stands made against the foes of the Republic—yet Adrian, who had always been so energetic in his advocacy of an appeal to arms, dallied here, instead of marching with those who were fighting for the patriot cause. To this he had replied that there was time enough before him. The struggle was young yet; long before it reached its culminating point, he would be in the midst of it—yes, and would have made his mark too. Thus he told her.

The while, however, he was playing his own game, and that necessitated more than one trip over to Johannesburg, more than one conference with that other Kershaw. The plot concocted by these worthies was nearly mature.

The time had now come for playing a new card. When Aletta waxed eloquent over her absent lover, Adrian, hitherto kindly and considerately responsive, now preserved silence; indeed he lapsed into silence with just sufficient markedness as to move her to notice it. This he did some few times, until one day she asked him the reason, point-blank.

"Oh, it's nothing, Aletta," he answered. And then he abruptly took his leave.

But at the very next of his visits she returned to the subject, as he knew she would, and intended she should.

Why had he become so markedly constrained? she asked, a sudden deadly fear blanching her face. Had he heard anything—any bad news?

“From the front, you mean? No, no; nothing of that sort,” quailing involuntarily before the set, stony look of anguish, and half wavering in his plan. Then, recovering himself, “Well then, Aletta, it’s of no use keeping it to oneself any longer; besides, you ought to know. Are you sure there is anyone at the front in whom you have any interest at all?”

“Why, of course! Why, what do you mean, Adrian? Is not Colvin at the front?” she said, bringing out her words with a kind of gasp.

“At the front? Well, I don’t think he is, considering I saw him only this morning at Johannesburg.”

“Oh, then, he is on his way back,” cried Aletta, her face lighting up with such a radiancy of joy as confirmed the other more than ever in his purpose.

“I think not,” he said; “for to-day is not the only time I have seen him there. I saw him the day before yesterday, and one day last week.”

“Adrian, think what you are saying. It is impossible.” But as she stood looking him in the face as though her gaze would pierce and lay bare every secret of his brain, a cold and terrible misgiving smote her. She remembered the positive assertion made by Adrian before on this head, and in Colvin’s own presence. Dr Da Costa’s remark, too, she remembered; likewise her own misgiving, which act of distrust she had since lamented to herself with bitter and remorseful tears. What if this thing should be too true?

“But I have letters from him,” she went on. “I have heard from him twice—from Bloemfontein before he joined Commandant Botma. You must have seen that extraordinary ‘double’ of his, Adrian.”

But Adrian was armed at this point too.

“See you now, Aletta?” he said. “It is very easy to get anything posted in Bloemfontein. Plenty of people travel down there from Johannesburg. As for that ‘double’ idea, I thought at the time that the story was too weak altogether. But now, I ask, does his ‘double’ also know Miss Wenlock? Anyhow, she seemed to be bidding him a very lingering farewell on the stoep of a house.”

This seemed improbable. Still, grasping at the chance, Aletta flatly refused to believe the statement. And then she rounded upon her cousin, and for a space that estimable youth had a very bad time indeed. He had invented this scandalous falsehood, she declared, had invented it out of malice. She remembered his threats that day at Ratels Hoek; but

such, at any rate, had pointed to a more manly course than this traducing of the absent. No, she did not and would not believe one word of the story. Adrian could get away out of her sight and never look upon her face again.

But she did believe it partly, and Adrian knew she did. He felt quite secure now.

“Very well, Aletta,” he answered, with a quiet dignity, “I will do as you wish, and you need not be troubled with me any more. That is the treatment I might have expected for opening your eyes to the—well, trick that has been played upon you. Yet I don’t see why you should think me a liar; so it is only fair to give me the chance of proving my words.”

“But how are you going to prove them?” she asked, speaking quickly.

“In the best possible way. Will the evidence of your own eyes satisfy you, Aletta?”

“I cannot refuse to believe my own eyes,” she answered slowly. “That is, in broad daylight,” she added.

“Yes, of course. If you will go over to Johannesburg with me to-morrow you shall be amply convinced. Will you come?”

“Yes. And mind this, Adrian. If you fail to prove this lie—I mean this charge of yours—by the evidence of my own eyes, you shall never receive a word from me again—from any of us, indeed. Never.”

“Oh, I am not uneasy about that. And now I must go. So long. To-morrow, mind.”

The road in which stood Jim Dixon’s abode was well-nigh as deserted at midday as in the dusk of the evening when Adrian had first come into contact with Kenneth Kershaw. Now as he walked slowly along, with Aletta beside him, he could hardly answer her save at random. What if the plan failed? A miscalculation of time on the part of one or both confederates and such might easily be the case. His first idea, which indeed would have been a safer one, was to take up a position in, or concealed by, one of the deserted houses opposite, of which there was a whole row, and watch; but even if he could have got Aletta to consent to this plan, one very important move in the game—the most checkmating move of all, as we shall see—must of necessity be omitted.

The girl was looking pale and worn, for she had had but little sleep. Her determination and spirit, the very vitality of the matter at stake, had kept her up. There were times, too, when she said to herself that this thing could not be, that she was about to discover what

a mistake Adrian had made; and in the gladness of the thought she was going to be forgiving to Adrian in that event, not, however, until she had most severely lectured him.

He for his part had affected a demeanour that was gravely compassionate. If he seemed now and then ill at ease, why that struck Aletta as natural—having regard to the delicate nature of the errand on which they were bound. And he had some reason for his uneasiness, for they would soon be right opposite Dixon's house, and he did not desire to be seen by, at any rate, one of its inmates. What was that cursed fool about, he said to himself, not to show? It was past the time, and they could not patrol up and down for ever.

"Look now, Aletta!" he said, suddenly. "Look! Was I mistaken?"

The front door of a house about a hundred yards further down on the other side of the road had opened, and two figures came out on to the stoep. Aletta recognised them instantly. One was that of May Wenlock, but the other—

No. There was no mistaking it. There he stood, and he was looking down into May's eyes as he talked to her, was holding her hand in his for a considerably longer time than was necessary for the purpose of bidding farewell. There he stood, her perfidious lover—he who had left her with such words of sworn affection upon his lips, that would be with her until her dying day—he, the thought of whom, hourly, momentarily, it might be in peril of death on the battle field, had filled her mind waking and sleeping—while all the while here he was in quiet safety, carrying on his intrigue with this girl. There he stood; there could not be two Colvin Kershaws in the world, that ingenious story of the "double" notwithstanding. This was the "double" then? Yet it was wearing exactly the same clothes, exactly the same hat, even, as when taking that last farewell of herself—that farewell whose memory had thrilled her heart ever since.

"Courage, Aletta! Courage!" she heard Adrian say, but his voice sounded as from another world. "Keep up a little longer. Now we will make certain. Look!"

The man had parted from his companion now, and as he came down to the front gate, his head was half turned, as with a last loving look towards May, who was still on the stoep. Then he came out into the road, and the door of the house closed.

He walked slowly along at first, not looking up. Then suddenly he did look up, and caught the eyes of the two on the opposite side. The effect was magical. With a bewildered start he half stopped as though irresolute, then, averting his eyes, he trebled his pace and walked rapidly away. But during that swift second his glance had met that of Aletta straight and full; and if ever a human countenance showed dismay,

consternation, guilt, utter confusion, assuredly all these emotions were stamped upon this man's countenance in that brief moment.

"Well now, was I mistaken?" said Adrian again, his voice sounding even farther away this time. "Can you believe your own eyes now, Aletta? You have seen?"

"Oh yes," she gasped. "I must believe my own eyes. Yes—yes, I have seen."

The girl's face was colourless, her lips livid and shaking. Her steps even seemed unsteady. Adrian feared that she would faint. But she did not.

Chapter Seven.

Very like a Prisoner.

Colvin was beginning to have enough of it.

He had spent some weeks with Cronje's force, and into that short space about half a lifetime of strange and stirring experience seemed to have crowded itself. Besides the Modder River battle, he had witnessed the British repulse at Magersfontein, and had seen several desultory skirmishes. More than one narrow escape had he known, and had been slightly cut about the hand by the splinter of a spent shell. But he had become inured to the rush and whirr of missiles, and now paid no heed whatever to them. He had likewise adopted the American's suggestion, and started in to take notes on his own account. He might make some use of them after the war, he declared, and, at any rate, as Acton had said, the taking of them gave him something to do. By this time, too, he had become indurated to the ghastly and horrifying sights which had so got upon his nerves at first. Yet he had had quite enough of it, and thought longingly that he would gladly be back at Pretoria. And what stimulated this longing was the fact that during all the time he had been away he had received neither line nor word from Aletta.

At first he had thought but little of this, attributing it to a natural delay consequent on the hurry and bustle of the times. But as days became weeks he began to think it strange and to feel uneasy. Several of the burghers had received letters from their people, and plenty of messages and despatches reached the various field commandants from headquarters. Surely the influence of Piet Plessis would suffice to command means of sending through the communication for which he now began so ardently to long.

Even then no idea approaching suspicion of the real state of affairs crossed his mind. Some technical difficulty might be standing in the way—Piet might not be able to use his official position for such purposes. No, that did not seem to account for it either. Colvin began to feel anxious—he hardly knew why. He had wanted to see the fighting, and he had seen a great deal of it—enough, he thought, to last him for life. The fierce glare of summer midday, with its dust-clouds and chronic and tormenting thirst—the bitter chill of night on the high veldt—lying out under the stars, while every now and then the searchlight in the beleaguered town away in the distance swept round its fan-like ray, now and then drawing the muffled boom of a shot—of all this he had had enough. He made up his mind to obtain Commandant Botma's permission to return to Pretoria.

Hardly had he done so than a letter was put into his hand. Ah, the longed-for communication at last! and the thrill of delight that went through him almost made up

for the long, wearing anxiety. But this was nipped in the bud by a second glance at the envelope. It was not directed in Aletta's handwriting.

He tore it open. A glance at the end of the sheet showed that the handwriting was that of Piet Plessis' wife. At the same time an enclosure fell out. This at any rate was from Aletta. Eagerly he picked it up—then, as he mastered the contents, a look of the blindest dismay and bewilderment came over his features. For the contents were very brief, and they ran thus:

"I am going home at once. No explanations are needed, are they? For, remember—I saw.

"Good-bye, Aletta."

He stared at the sheet of paper, and his look of bewilderment grew blanker and blanker. What did it mean? What on earth could it mean? No explanations needed? But they very much were needed, he thought. And what on earth mystery lay covered by those words, so significantly underlined—"I saw?" What did the writer see? The thing passed comprehension. He turned to the other letter with some wild hope of finding enlightenment there.

It did not afford him much. Aletta had asked her to enclose this note to him, wrote Mrs Plessis, and was going back home to Ratels Hoek at once. "I hope there is nothing wrong," she went on, "but the child has been very strange during the last two or three days. I don't know what to make of it. She will not give me her confidence, and made me promise faithfully not so much as to hint to Piet that anything had upset her. She leaves us to-morrow, and travels back home in charge of Adrian. But I trust there is nothing really the matter."

In charge of Adrian! Ah, now he began to see light. Adrian was behind whatever had happened. Why, of course. His every motive made that way. All that cordiality of his had not altogether gone down with Colvin. There was a suggestion of malice underlying it, which should have put him more on his guard. Adrian had played him some dirty trick in his absence, though what it might be he could as yet form no idea.

He glanced at the letter, also at the note. Both bore a date some ten days old. Why, Aletta would have been home now for days. Well, his mind was made up. Instead of returning to Pretoria, he would proceed straight to Ratels Hoek. No explanation needed! It struck him that that very thing was most urgently needed.

He applied to Andries Botma for facilities, which, being English, he would need to prosecute his journey and to ensure his safe passage through any of the Republican

forces he might fall in with. These were readily granted, and the Commandant bade him a kind and cordial farewell.

“I need not remind you, Mynheer Kershaw,” he said, in Dutch, for “The Patriot” never spoke English, although perfectly able to do so, unless positively obliged—“I need not remind you that you have pledged your solemn word of honour to divulge nothing that you may have seen or heard during the time you have been with us. But it is not entirely the other side I distrust, and therefore I would impress upon you the necessity of using the greatest caution in conversing with those who, by nationality, are our own people. But many of them (with shame I say it) are not really our own people—that is, they are not heart and soul with us. They will not strike a blow for the sacred cause—at least not yet. They are waiting to see which will prove the victorious side—as if there could be any doubt. These are the people I would warn you against, when you are back once more across the river. But you are one of us now, for I hear you are to marry Stephanus De la Rey’s daughter. In that receive my most cordial wishes—and carry my compliments to Stephanus and all our good friends in the Wildschutsberg. And if hereafter I can be of service to you at any time—why, it will be to me an agreeable duty. Farewell.”

Colvin shook hands warmly with the kindly Dutch Commandant, and, armed with his credentials, went forth. At the moment he little thought of the weight of that last promise, still less what it might or might not be destined to mean for him in the not distant future. He thought more on the subject of the other’s congratulations, for they stirred up a very real and desolating misgiving. What if events should already have rendered them devoid of meaning?

His journey to the border seemed to him intolerably long and depressing, but its monotony was varied more than once by meeting with a party of burghers patrolling the country or on their way to join Cronje’s force. These would scan his credentials narrowly and suspiciously, but the name of Andries Botma was as a very talisman, and they allowed him to proceed. At the passage of the Orange River, some delay occurred. This, however, was at last surmounted, but it was towards the close of the third day that he found himself—riding a very tired horse—entering the Wildschutsberg range, just beyond which lay his own home, and, yet nearer, Ratels Hoek.

Straight to the latter he intended to proceed, and now, as he drew so near, for the hundredth time he was cudgelling his brains over the mystery of Aletta’s strange behaviour, and for the hundredth time was forced to own himself no nearer finding a clue to it than before—except that he still connected it in some way with the evil influence or trickery of Adrian. Well, two or three hours more would clear it up, for he and Aletta would talk face to face, and in her own home.

Ah, but would they? With a dire chill the thought struck him—what if she were no longer there? had left home, perhaps, and gone away to Cape Town, as she had done before? Well, even thither he would follow her, if necessary, and claim an explanation.

What was this which had come between them? Had their times been too bright, too unclouded, rendering some such trial needful? They certainly had been that Day by day, so far from stagnating, from turning into the easy matter-of-fact groove, their love had grown—had intensified—right up to the moment of parting, so ardently mutual had it been. It had seemed that nothing could add to it—that no margin was left for any further extension of it. Yet as he rode along now, saddened, heart-desolate, almost bereaved, Colvin thought to himself that this ordeal had seemed needed to prove that there was.

As he entered the mountains, the roll as of an approaching storm had boomed sombrely away on his left. Now, in the opposite direction, beyond the range, came faint and far, other deep thunder voices. This was not thunder though. It was a sound he had become tolerably familiar with of late, the distant roll of guns. A battle was in progress in that direction. Well, it did not concern him. He was nearly at home again.

He looked up. The shadows of evening were already lowering. In the dusk something white attracted his glance. A white stone—and then, with a rush, the familiarity of the surroundings swept in upon his mind. He had reason to know that white stone, for it was while passing that very object he had been fired at on the night he had first seen Aletta. The track he had been following here struck the main road, just where it forked, in the direction of his own home, and in that of Ratels Hoek. Well, he would soon be at the latter place now, and then—and then— Ah, how that other evening came back!

This stage of his meditations received a shock, being, in fact, disturbed by a loud, harsh voice calling upon him in Dutch, and very peremptorily, to halt. It proceeded from in front and above. Looking up, Colvin became alive to the startling discovery that some twenty rifles were levelled straight at him, at a distance of about that number of yards. There was no disputing such a summons.

“Dismount!” repeated the voice.

Again there was no alternative but to comply, and, as he did so, several Boers, still keeping him covered, arose from their concealment, and came towards him. Some two or three were men from the surrounding district, whom he knew by sight, but most of them were strangers.

“Who are you?” asked the leader crisply, in Dutch. “And where are you from?”

Colvin told him. The news that he had come straight from Cronje's force in the field, and had witnessed several engagements, impressed them somewhat. They began to look at him with considerable interest and increased respect.

"Daag, Gideon," he exclaimed, suddenly becoming aware of the presence of Gideon Roux among the party. The Boer came forward and greeted him as though nothing had happened. They chatted a minute or two together as to the local news and so forth. Then Colvin said:

"Well now, friends, I must bid you good-night. I am going on to Stephanus De la Rey's."

"You cannot go on to Stephanus De la Rey's to-night," rejoined the leader promptly.

"Why not?"

"Because you have to go with us—to Commandant Schoeman's camp at Krantz Kop."

This was a terrible facer, but Colvin was forced to accept the situation with what grace he could. At first he tried expostulation, urging every reason he could think of for being suffered to pursue his way. In vain. Even the magic name of The Patriot seemed to fail in its power here. The burghers got their concealed horses from behind the rocks and they started.

It was quite dark when they reached the camp, which had been pitched around Gideon Roux' farmstead. How well Colvin remembered the last time he had visited this place—the discovery of the concealed arms, the squalid household and his doubtful reception, Hans Vermaak's warning and its ample justification. Now, as he saw the place again, under circumstances suspiciously like being made a prisoner of, a great despondency came upon him. He had beguiled the journey chatting with his escort, or captors, or whatever they were, and learned that for the past day or two fighting had been going on with the British forces out beyond Schalkburg, and that a few prisoners had been taken, most of whom would be forwarded to Bloemfontein. There was one, however, who was exceedingly obstreperous. If he was not careful he would very likely be shot.

They were challenged by vedettes as they reached the outskirts of the camp, but allowed to pass through. In the darkness Colvin could make out a few waggons and several tents pitched without any particular regard to order. In one or two of these some men were singing Dutch hymns in a slow, droning tone—but, early as it was, most of the burghers had turned in for the night. Once, as he passed the farmhouse, he thought to detect an English voice, proceeding from the stable, cursing and swearing, its owner the while kicking vigorously against the door, and supposed this must be the obstreperous

prisoner they had been telling him about. He was shown to a tent, which he found he had to share with three other men, who were already asleep.

The Commandant? Oh, he could not be disturbed that night. He was asleep. So there was nothing for it but to put the best face on things. And yet it was not with pleasant foreshadowings that Colvin Kershaw at last closed his tired yet sleepless eyes in the burgher camp, realising that he was something very like a prisoner.

Chapter Nine.

Commandant Schoeman's Camp.

"Who on earth is making all that row?" was Colvin's first remark on awakening from sleep the following morning to the well-worn strains of "Ta-ra-Boomdeay" bellowed in stentorian tones, yet somewhat muffled as though by distance and obstruction.

"It must be the Englishman—one of the prisoners," yawned another occupant of the tent, sitting up and rubbing his eyes sleepily. "He is very violent and noisy, so they have shut him up in Gideon Roux' stable away from the others."

"Is he mad?"

"No. Only violent. Wants to fight everybody with his fists."

"Nouwja. I would cure that 'madness' with a sjambok if I were the Commandant," growled another, sitting up and listening. "He gives all the trouble he can."

The hour was that of sunrise, and although midsummer, the air at that altitude was raw and chilly when Colvin turned out, shivering, to look after his horse, which had been picketed among the steeds of the burghers. As he did so the sun, mounting above the surrounding heights into the fresh clear air, seemed to shed around a new hope, to light up a new exhilaration in his mind. His own atmosphere would clear, even as the dewy mists of night had done before the great flaming luminary. He would now seek out the Commandant, explain matters, and resume his way. And having so decided, he was straightway confronted by a couple of burghers summoning him to the presence of that official without delay.

Commandant Schoeman was an elderly man with a hard, wooden-faced expression. He wore a straight lank beard, a chimney-pot hat, once white, and weather-beaten moleskin clothes, which looked as if they had not been off him for a month, which indeed was very near the truth. He was a Boer of the most unprogressive type, and as entirely dissimilar to one of the stamp of Stephanus De la Rey as could possibly be imagined. He was lacking in the good qualities of Andries Botma, who, however fiery and perfervid as a patriotic orator, was a kindly and courteous gentleman beneath. This man was brusque and uncouth, and cordially hated everything English, both in season and out of season.

He was seated in his tent as Colvin came up. The flaps were folded back so that those surrounding him who could not find room inside could still assist at what was going on in the way of official business. These consisted almost entirely of Boers holding

subordinate commands under him. They wore their bandoliers, and their rifles lay on the ground beside them.

“Daag, Mynheer Commandant,” said Colvin, mindful of the way in which a greater than this had received a less formal mode of address.

“Daag,” replied Schoeman curtly, tendering a cold lifeless paw, and just touching the other’s outstretched hand.

The same ceremony was gone through with the others. Two old acquaintances Colvin recognised—Swaart Jan Grobbelaar and old Sarel Van der Vyver. These responded to his greeting characteristically—the first showing his tusks with a sort of oily, half-satirical grin, the other infusing a heartiness into his reply, and then drawing back as though half-frightened. There was a third present, however, whom he recognised—recognised, moreover, with some astonishment—Morkel, the Civil Commissioner’s clerk.

“Hallo, Morkel!” he exclaimed in English. “I never expected to see you. Why, what on earth are you doing here?”

“I am acting as secretary for the Commandant,” answered Morkel, making believe to be wondrously busy with some papers on the rough wooden table in front of him. His momentary embarrassment was not lost upon Colvin, nor a look he fancied he detected, warning him not to ask questions.

“I do not know why we need talk English here,” said the Commandant curtly. “Sit.”

Colvin obeyed, and subsided on to the floor of the tent by Swaart Jan, who made room for him, at the same time offering his tobacco bag, for they were all smoking. The great man and his “secretary” were the only ones who occupied seats, and these consisted of inverted packing-cases. The rest squatted primitively on mother earth.

Then turning to Colvin, the Commandant began to put him through a pretty close cross-examination, causing Morkel to take down the answers, partly with a view to impressing the others with his magisterial dignity, partly from a genuine motive, for he was an illiterate man, and had all the suspiciousness which characterises such. He questioned Colvin with regard to all as to which he had been an eye-witness when with Cronje’s force, and with regard to a great deal as to which he had not, the others listening with vivid interest.

And here Colvin began to feel himself in somewhat of a quandary, remembering the parting injunctions and warnings of Andries Botma. The latter had especially cautioned

him against revealing matters even to the burghers on this side of the Orange River, and now the warning rose clear in his mind. Who could say that there might not be spies among those here present, or, at any rate, but lukewarm adherents of the Republican cause? And the result of such misgiving was that his answers were somewhat constrained, and to the distrustful ears of the Boer Commandant more than suspicious.

“Be careful, Englishman,” said the latter bluntly. “You are telling us the truth, are you? You had better tell the truth—oh, much better.”

The rudeness of the other’s words and manner angered Colvin, but he yielded to the expediency of restraining too great a manifestation of resentment.

“Look, Mynheer Commandant,” he said. “I have been courteously received by His Honour the President, I can call Andries Botma my friend and Piet Plessis”—and he named half a dozen other prominent Transvaal officers—“but it has remained to me to return here to be called a liar by a man of whom I never heard before.”

“All Englishmen are liars,” interpolated a grim old burgher on the opposite side of the tent, spitting on the ground. Schoeman, however, received the reply with a wooden-faced silence. But Colvin did not miss a look of dismay and warning darted at him by Morkel, and at the same time, with anything but satisfaction, he realised that he had probably made a deadly enemy of the Commandant.

“Well then,” he continued, “the whole square truth of the matter is that Andries Botma particularly urged upon me not to talk of what I had seen with Cronje’s force, not even on this side of the river. Does that satisfy all here?” And he looked around the circle.

“Ja, ja,” assented most of them, Swaart Jan adding:

“It is true, Commandant Colvin is a true man. I know him. He is a friend of ‘The Patriot’. Besides, he is one of us now. He is going to marry Stephanus De la Rey’s daughter.”

“Quite right, Oom Jan,” said Colvin, with alacrity. Then, judging that this was exactly the moment for preferring his request, he represented to the Commandant that it was while on his way to Ratels Hoek that he had been detained and brought here. Might he not now proceed thither?

This request was backed up by most of the assembled Boers. Schoeman, beginning to think it would save trouble, was inclined to yield, when a contretemps occurred, one of those freaks of fate which have an impish and arbitrary way of skipping forward just at the right moment to divert and ruin the course of human affairs when such course is

beginning to run smoothly. A considerable hubbub had arisen outside; curses and threats in Dutch and English, with the sound of scuffling, and, over and above all, a voice lifted in song, bellowing stentoriously, if somewhat jerkily:

“Ta-ra-ra-ra Boomdeay!
Oom Paul op een vark gerij,
Af hij val en rier gekrij,
Toen klim op en weg gerij.”

The concluding words were hurled, so to say, right into the tent, for a group of burghers had appeared, and in their midst was the singer. The latter was receiving somewhat rough usage—though, truth to tell, he was bringing it upon himself. His arms were tightly pinioned to his sides with a long coil of reim, and he was being hustled forward with varying degrees of roughness. But the more they hustled and cursed him the more defiantly he shouted his idiotic and, under the circumstances, insulting doggerel. Colvin, with dismay and consternation, had recognised the stuff and had recognised the singer, and, even before the latter had been dragged into sight, knew that it could be no other than Frank Wenlock. So this was the obstreperous prisoner? Well, Frank Wenlock could be pretty obstreperous, as he knew by experience.

“Still, man, still!” growled one of his escort, shaking him violently. Here again was an old acquaintance, in the shape of Hermanus Delport. But the big Dutchman’s face was considerably damaged, one eye being totally closed. Frank had been using his fists to some purpose. Now he let off a volley of perfectly unprintable expletives.

“You’d dare lay a finger on me but for this reim, wouldn’t you?” he yelled. “I’d plug up your other eye for two pins, and every man’s blanked eyes in this camp.” And more to the same effect.

“Still, man, do you hear?” repeated Hermanus, administering another shake. “The Commandant is speaking to you. Do you hear?”

“Is he? Well, then, I don’t care a little damn for Mr bally Commandant or the whole lot of infernal rebels and traitors in that tent. Aha, Swaart Jan! you may well look sick, you old liar; there’s a nice rope waiting for you. Old Sarel, too? What a hanging of rebels and traitors there’ll be by-and-by! And Morkel? Ja, you will dangle, too.” Then becoming alive to the presence of Colvin, he burst into a very roar of derisive hatred. “Good-day, Mister Kershaw—or should I say Commandant Kershaw?—the biggest blanked traitor of the lot. You’ll be blown from a gun, I should think.”

These ravings, uttered half in English, half in Dutch, were not without effect upon most of those within the tent. They had about concluded that the violence and insolence of this prisoner had reached limits.

“Let him taste the sjambok” growled the old burgher who had expressed the opinion antagonistic to British veracity. But Commandant Schoeman gave no sign of perturbation. Save for a stern and ominous look in his cold, snaky eye, he might not have heard.

“Frank—Frank! Do be quiet, man,” said Colvin earnestly. “Don’t make a silly ass of yourself. You are doing yourself no good.”

“Not, eh? I’d do you some good though if I could get at you; I’d give you the jolliest hammering you ever had. Look at Mani Delport’s mug there. That’s nothing to what yours would be, you infernal traitor.”

“It might not be so easy, Frank. But do be reasonable. How can you expect decent treatment if you will persist in behaving like a lunatic?”

“Would you be reasonable if you had seen your home sacked and gutted by a lot of rebels and traitors, and your mother turned out homeless, Mister Dutchman Kruger Kershaw?” snarled Frank. “No fear though. Your place wasn’t interfered with. You’re one of them, you know.”

Colvin was not disposed to deny this in the faces of those present, intending to use that very argument in favour of being allowed to proceed on his way. But he was deeply concerned on behalf of Frank. The fool was simply committing suicide. Yet—how prevent him? He had seen Frank very uproarious more than once, in his cups, but here that motive power was lacking. The silly chap seemed to have gone half off his head with racial antagonism. But his own endeavours to persuade the Boer authorities to that effect drew forth a renewed outburst from the man he was striving to befriend. The Dutch Commandant lost patience.

“Be still, Englishman,” he said, very sharply and sternly. “I am going to speak, and if you open your mouth again until I have finished, you will have that thrust into it which will quiet you. Well, then, you were treated no worse than others in your position until you brought rough treatment upon yourself. You have been as violent; as a drunken Bastard Hottentot, without his excuse. You have assaulted and struck our burghers, and you have only opened your mouth to shout out insults to His Honour the President and horrid blasphemies to Almighty God. There can be no place for such a man as you among our God-fearing burghers, and we are not going to release you while so many of

our brave comrades are rotting on your English prison ships. It may be that you have not many hours left in this world, and I advise you to think over and ask pardon of Heaven for all your blasphemous words." Then to the guards, "Take him back whence he came while we deliberate."

"That for your cant, you cursed, whining old snuffle-nose," yelled Frank, spitting in the direction of the Commandant. "You can shoot me if you like, but you'll all hang—every man jack of you—infernal rebels and traitors. Hurrah! God save the Queen!" And thus vociferating, he was hustled away.

"Do not hold him responsible for what he says or does, Mynheer Commandant," said Colvin earnestly. "I think his misfortunes have turned his brain. He was always excitable. We cannot hold a man responsible when he is off his head, can we?"

To this plea Commandant Schoeman made no reply. He turned a cold, fishy eye upon the pleader, then remarked to the others:

"Toen, Heeren. We had better discuss, under the guidance of Heaven, what our best course will be with regard to this violent and blasphemous prisoner. For yourself, Mynheer"—to Colvin—"you would doubtless prefer the rest and quiet of your tent—or to see if some of your friends are in our camp."

Colvin promptly acted upon this more than hint. But with all his anxiety to reach Ratels Hoek, a kind of instinct on Frank Wenlock's account reconciled him to a further sojourn in Schoeman's camp. He suspected that Frank stood in grave peril of his life; and if so he must exert all and whatever influence he himself possessed on behalf of his friend and former comrade.

His instinct proved an accurate one, and his worst fears were justified. Not until near evening, however, did he learn that Frank Wenlock had been sentenced to be shot, and would meet his death at daybreak.

Chapter Ten.

The Net draws in.

It was Morkel who brought the news. Their deliberations on Frank's fate had lasted for some hours, being interspersed with a sort of impromptu prayer-meeting or two—and in the result he had been brought before the Commandant again, and being asked if he had any thing to say in excuse for having repeatedly insulted the President, blasphemed Almighty God, and taken up arms against the Republic, part of whose territory this had now been proclaimed by annexation, replied simply by a savage renewal of all the abuse he had already been foolish enough to heap upon those in whose power he was. So he was condemned to be shot at daybreak on the following morning.

Not all had been in favour of that extreme measure, said Morkel. Swaart Jan Grobbelaar for one, and old Sarel Van der Vyver for another, had spoken on the side of mercy; possibly with an uneasy eye to eventualities. But Commandant Schoeman, who was a Free State Boer, and whose own position as a mere belligerent was secure in any event, had overruled them, and by that time to-morrow poor Frank Wenlock would no longer exist. "What can be done, Morkel?" said Colvin, very much moved. "Do you think they really intend to do it?"

"Dead certain," was the gloomy reply. "You know the poor devil simply brought it upon himself. You saw how he behaved this morning, Kershaw. Why he was simply committing suicide."

"Would it be any use if I were to try and talk over Schoeman? Might persuade him to let the chap off with a bit of a fright. I am in with some of the big bugs up at Pretoria, you know."

"Not an atom of use," said Morkel decidedly. "You are in fairly bad odour yourself, you see, Kershaw."

"It's ghastly. I can't believe they really intend to shoot the poor chap. But, by-the-by, Morkel, how is it you are up here among them? I thought you were so rigidly—er—Imperialist?"

Morkel looked embarrassed.

"So I am—er—was, I mean," he answered, speaking low. "But it's all Jelf's fault. He took on a fad to collect the state of feeling among the farmers, and was always wanting me to go round and find it out. I went once too often; for when Olivier and Schoeman crossed

from the Free State, and the whole of the Wildschutsberg and the Rooi-Ruggensberg rose as one man, why they simply commandeered me.”

“But as a Government servant—”

“Ja—a fat lot they cared about the Government servant part of it. A man of my name could not be on the English side, they said. So they just gave me my choice—to join them or be shot as a spy. I was a spy, of course, they swore. They knew I had been sent out by the Civil Commissioner to find out things. So there it was.”

“But it’ll come rather awkward for you when all this is over, Morkel?”

“I’ll have to chance that. It, at any rate, is a chance, but the other was a dead cert. Maagtig! Kershaw, when you see half a dozen fellows with rifles step out, all ready to let daylight through you in ten minutes’ time, why you prefer the chances of the remote future to the certainty of the immediate present. If you don’t think so—why, you just find yourself in my shoes, and see.”

This was undeniable—and then the ci-devant Civil Commissioner’s clerk went on to explain that he was by no means certain that things were going to turn out so favourably for the English as had at first seemed probable. The Republics might get the better of it practically, in which event he would likely drop in for something worth having—anyway, he couldn’t help himself. Besides, it would have happened in any case, for the burghers had jumped Schalkburg and commandeered every man there who bore a Dutch name, as well as all the stores. But with regard to the De la Rey household Morkel could give no reliable information. He had heard that Stephanus and his wife were away in the Free State, but even that he did not know for certain, nor whether the girls were at home or not.

“But how did Frank manage to get captured, Morkel? Was he fighting?”

“No. They went to his place, and started in to commandeer all his stuff. You know what a violent beggar he is when his monkey is up—and he started punching heads by the half-dozen. What could he do against a crowd? The wonder to me is they didn’t shoot him then and there. But they broke up everything in the house, and turned the old lady out of doors and locked her own doors on her. Good job that pretty sister of his was away from home, for they were the lowest down type of Boer—of the Mani Delpont sample.”

Both men puffed gloomily at their pipes for some minutes in silence. Then Colvin said:

“Look here, Morkel. I am going to have another try at old Schoeman. You must persuade him to see me. So cut along, old chap, and do so. By the way, if the worst comes to the worst, he must let me see Frank.”

“I’ll try, Kershaw,” said Morkel. “I’ll try my darnedest, but I’m not over sanguine.”

Nor was Colvin, and his despondency was fully justified when, after nearly an hour, Morkel returned. Commandant Schoeman flatly refused to see him that night, nor would he authorise him to hold an interview with the prisoner, or any communication whatever, on peril of the utmost penalty.

“The infernal old brute!” was the only comment Colvin could make.

“Yes, he is,” rejoined Morkel gloomily. “And now I must clear out—for he has a lot of ‘secretarial’ work for me to-night, he says. Well, we have done all we could, and if we can’t help the poor chap we can’t. It’s the fortune of war. Good-night.”

Left to himself Colvin sat for a while thinking hard, and as he did so his despondency deepened. Poor Frank! Was there no way out of it? His memory went back over the period of their acquaintance—over the old days when they had campaigned together as comrades—over the times they had spent together since, under more peaceful auspices—by what a mere chance it had come about that they were not much more nearly related. With all his weaknesses, Frank was far too good a fellow to come to such pitiable grief as this. What could be done? And still the inexorable answer—Nothing.

Rising in the sheer restlessness of desperation, he went outside the tent. It was nearly dark now, and the cooking fires of the camp were ablaze in all directions, and the deep-toned voices of the burghers buzzed forth on all sides. As he stepped outside, a figure looming out of the dusk barred his way.

“Stand! Go no further.”

“What is the meaning of this? You hardly seem to know me,” said Colvin.

“I know you, Mynheer Kershaw,” was the reply. “But the Commandant’s orders are that you do not wander about the camp to-night.”

“The Commandant’s orders?”

“Ja, the Commandant’s orders,” repeated the Boer. “Go in again, if you please.”

There was nothing for it but compliance. As he re-entered the tent, Colvin realised that he was indeed a prisoner, and guarded by an armed sentry. What did it mean? Why, simply that for any power he might have to help Frank Wenlock that night—by fair means or foul—he might as well have been in Patagonia or Pekin. More, a very uneasy feeling had come over him that he might ere long stand sorely in need of aid himself.

These precautions seemed to point that way too. Here he was as much a prisoner as the man to whom death would come with the morning light. It struck him in a passing way as singular that the men who shared this tent with him were not here to-night, and he was alone. Hour after hour wore on, and still he racked his brains. Once before he had saved Frank Wenlock's life in the heat and excitement of warfare. He could not save it now. That wily old fox Schoeman had seen to that.

Colvin was very tired. The strain of the previous day had told upon him—the strain of those long night hours too. He could not have told approximately at what hour his eyes had closed, and a whirling round of confused dreams were chasing each other through his slumbering brain. Now he was back again in peace and quietness at Piet Plessis' with Aletta, radiant and happy. Now he was at Ratels Hoek, but Aletta was not there. A cold blank void seemed to take her place, and then into it floated the form of May Wenlock, her face turned from him in horror and loathing, as though requiring her brother's blood at his hands. Then he awoke with a cold start, wondering confusedly whether all that had happened the day before were but a dream—awoke to the light of another day, with the beams of a newly risen sun pouring into the tent—awoke to behold three armed burghers standing over him. Even then he noticed that the expression of their faces was grim and ominous, and that they replied to his morning salutation as curtly as possible.

"So! You are awake at last," said one. "We were about to awaken you. You must come before the Commandant at once."

"Before the Commandant?" echoed Colvin, still hardly awake. "By the way—the prisoner? What about the prisoner? The Commandant has pardoned him, has he?"

The men exchanged a very strange look with each other at the words.

"It is about the prisoner that the Commandant needs you, Mynheer," said the spokesman. And Colvin's heart sank. He was wanted to receive the doomed man's last wishes, he supposed, being the latter's fellow-countryman. Poor Frank—poor Frank!

"I am ready," he said, springing up. "But—tell me. Are they really going to shoot him after all? Surely—surely not!"

The men looked more strangely than ever.

“You ought to know best whether that can now be done or not, Mynheer,” was the enigmatical reply. “Come!”

Colvin went forth with his guards—one of whom walked on each side of him, and the third behind. This was being under arrest with a vengeance, he thought. As they passed through the camp he noticed that the burghers were gathered in groups, conversing in very subdued tones, which at sight of him would become suddenly hushed. There was something solemn and cold-blooded about these preliminaries to the execution he was about to witness that got upon his nerves. As we have pointed out, he had witnessed many a ghastly and horrifying sight during the last few weeks. But this, he felt, was going to be more trying than any.

Commandant Schoeman was seated in his tent, surrounded by his handful of subordinate officers, exactly the same as on the day before. To-day, however, in addition, a few burghers were grouped outside the tent, the butts of their rifles grounded, as they watched the proceedings. But where was the prisoner? Where was Frank Wenlock?

A dire sinking gripped Colvin’s mind. Had they done it already? Surely the volley would have awakened him, or had he slept too soundly? Involuntarily he gazed from side to side.

“Stand there,” said his guard, halting him in front of the Commandant’s table.

The latter looked up at Colvin’s greeting, barely returning it; then he said:

“What have you to say?” Colvin looked fairly puzzled.

“To say?” he echoed. “I do not understand, Mynheer Commandant.”

“The prisoner Wenlock has escaped.”

Colvin started, and his whole face lit up with satisfaction.

“Escaped, has he? Well then, Mynheer, all I can say is, I think you are well rid of him. Frank is a good fellow ordinarily, but he can make himself most infernally objectionable at times—as yesterday, for instance.”

He thought it politic to make no allusion to the death sentence. But at heart he was overjoyed.

“You it was who helped him to escape,” said Schoeman, and the tone, and the look of fell menace on his face, suddenly revealed to Colvin that he was standing on the brink of a yawning abyss. It behoved him to keep his head.

“Look now, Mynheer,” he said, “I would ask how I could have helped him to escape when I never left my tent the whole night.”

“That we shall see,” rejoined Schoeman.

“But how could I have left it, when I was kept in it by an armed guard placed there by your own orders?” retorted Colvin.

“I know nothing of such a guard, and I gave no such orders. It is now time for prayers, also for breakfast. There are those here who are ready to prove that you helped the prisoner to escape. In an hour’s time I shall require you here again. I warn you, Mynheer, that unless you can disprove the statements of these, things will be very serious for you. Retire now to your tent.”

Escorted, as before, Colvin went; and as he went he reflected. The extreme gravity of his position became plain in all its peril. It occurred to him that somebody or other desired to be rid of him. Yet, why? He had no enemies in the camp that he knew of. True, he had somewhat wounded the Commandant’s self-esteem at first, but surely Schoeman’s vindictiveness would not be carried to such a length. Well, there was no telling. Either Frank Wenlock had been allowed to escape, in order that the charge of aiding and abetting might be fastened upon himself, or he had been quietly made away with—always with the same object. And looking at it in this light, Colvin realised the trap he was in, and that his own life was in very considerable danger.

Chapter Eleven.

To take his Place.

It was a curious court-martial this before which he was now convened, thought Colvin, the ridiculous side of things striking him, as an hour later he stood once more before the Commandant's tent, having washed and got some breakfast in the interim. This old Dutch farmer, clad in greasy moleskins, and crowned with a weather-worn, once white chimney-pot hat, was his judge, with absolute power of life and death, and looked moreover as solemn as though he thoroughly realised it. Those others too, squatting on the ground, smoking pipes, and very frequently spitting: on their good word depended to a very great extent his own life.

"Do you confess to having assisted the prisoner to escape?" asked the Commandant. "It will save trouble and lighten the guilt upon your soul if you do."

"Certainly I do not, Mynheer," returned Colvin. "How can I have assisted any prisoner to escape when I was a prisoner myself?"

"Maagtig! Said I not that all Englishmen were liars?" grunted the old burgher, for the benefit of those within the tent.

Morkel, too, Colvin had not failed to observe occupying the same seat as yesterday. But Morkel had turned on a wooden expression of countenance, and avoided catching his eye. Clearly Morkel believed in the maxim anent self-preservation. He had a wholesome fear of drawing suspicion upon himself.

"We will first hear the testimony of Adrian De la Rey," said the Commandant.

Colvin managed to repress the astonishment he felt as Adrian came forward. The latter differed in outward trappings from the other burghers only in the fact that his get-up was smarter. He, too, avoided Colvin's glance.

"Tell your story," said the Commandant shortly. But before the other had said half a dozen words, Colvin interposed:

"Excuse me, Mynheer Commandant. But in taking evidence it is usual and indispensable to take it on oath—to swear the witness to tell the truth. Now this has not yet been done."

It was just possible some advantage might be gained by this formula being observed, but Colvin did not reckon it would amount to much. Morkel, however, put in a word in favour of the suggestion, and accordingly Adrian was sworn after the usual Dutch method, with his right hand held up. Then he proceeded to tell his story.

As one of the field-captains of the burgher force it had been his duty to go the round of the sentries. Two mounted guard over the place wherein Frank Wenlock was confined, namely, the stable at the back of Gideon Roux' house. The door was locked with a strong padlock, and there was one window, which was iron barred, and fairly strong. One sentry was stationed beneath this, and the other before the door. When he arrived at the stable he was surprised that the sentries gave him no recognition, but, on examining further into the matter, he found they were both asleep. Moreover, he could hardly wake them, and when he did, they excused themselves by saying that the Englishman in the camp—not the prisoner, but the other Englishman—had given them a soepje out of his flask. His first thought being for the security of the prisoner—the witness had ordered the door to be opened. But the key could not be found. It had been in the first sentry's keeping. Then having called several times to the prisoner inside, and receiving no answer, the witness had caused the door to be broken open. The prisoner had vanished.

This had happened at about twelve o'clock. But half an hour earlier he had met Colvin Kershaw wandering through the camp, and they had stood chatting for a while. Kershaw had told him he had been at Gideon Roux' house, and was returning to his tent. After his discovery of the escape he, Adrian, had thought of arresting the accused, but had placed his tent under guard until the morning.

"The accused man says it was under guard all night," said the Commandant. "Do you know anything of such a guard?"

"Nothing whatever, Mynheer."

Now, indeed, the whole mystery was clearing up, decided Colvin, but clearing in such wise as would be disastrous, if not fatal, for himself, Adrian De la Rey was the prime mover then in this matter. Adrian had every motive for destroying him, and now Adrian had concocted this plot for his destruction. He saw through it now, and his heart sank within him. Schoeman and his crew would be willing accomplices. He had no friends here in this camp, and he knew, all too well, that no chance would be allowed him of communicating with those he had elsewhere. Now he claimed his right of cross-examining witnesses. At first the "court" was not inclined to allow this. Of what use was it? It savoured of the blasphemous. God-fearing burghers, who had sworn to tell the truth, and had called God to witness, could not lie. But he pressed his point and, being supported by Morkel, carried it.

Not much good did it do him, however, with this witness. Not all his cross-examination could shake this tissue of amazing lies which Adrian reeled off with a glibness which imposed on his hearers up to the hilt. Everything he had said he stuck to; doing it, too, with a sorrowful and against-the-grain air. This Englishman with all his lawyer tricks could not shake that honest and simple testimony, decided these unsophisticated burghers, and all his efforts at doing so only served to deepen the adverse feeling.

The two sentries were then called, and their testimony exactly corresponded with that of Adrian! They were somewhat heavy-looking young men—brothers, named Hattingh. Asked what the drink consisted of, they thought it was whisky. It was not square-face or dop? No; they were sure it was whisky. All Englishmen drank whisky; therefore, decided the hearers, the man who gave them the drink must have been this Englishman.

Both brothers had the same tale to tell, and they told it so glibly, so naturally, as to puzzle even the accused himself. They were of the type that do not make good liars—that is, in the sense of ability to sustain a series of consistent and circumstantial lies; indeed, had he been an impartial auditor of their testimony, instead of one vitally concerned therewith, he was forced to own to himself that he would have believed it. Such being the case, it was hardly to be wondered at if those who heard it believed every word.

These witnesses knew this Englishman, but not very well. They had seen him sometimes about the camp, and when he came up and chatted to them, and offered them something to drink, they were only too glad, for the nights up here in the Wildschutsberg were chilly, and a drop of something warmed a man.

And here we will digress briefly to explain that what would have been a very serious offence for all concerned, in the British regular, or even irregular forces, constituted just no offence at all in a Boer commando. For a Boer commando represents a chronic state of “marching-at-ease,” and the fact of a couple of sentries having a chat with a comrade and a “nip” out of his flask was nothing.

Both these men Colvin cross-questioned, not at any length, and in a conciliatory tone, and his main points were as to how they could be sure of his identity in the dark, especially as they had owned to being personally unacquainted with him. But the questions seemed genuinely to surprise them. For one thing, it was not so dark. The stars were shining very brightly. A Boer was not an Englishman that he could not see out of doors by starlight.

Then followed Gideon Roux, who testified that Colvin had spent at least two hours at his house the evening before. He would have left about the time named by Adrian De la Rey, but he could not say for certain within half an hour or so.

What had the accused to go upon? One after another of these men came forward unhesitatingly to swear away his life, for that is what he fully realised this mock trial to have for its object. The net was winding itself more fatally about him, and by nothing short of a miracle now could he be extricated from its entangling meshes. In Gideon Roux' malignant face a gleam of devilish exultation seemed to lurk, as though he recognised that this was a safer, surer method of disposing of an obnoxious and inconvenient person than shooting at him in the dusk from behind a rock. Those around listened in solemn and impressive silence. The groups of bystanders had been steadily augmenting, and now nearly the whole camp stood crowded around, in a strangely picturesque armed assembly.

After Gideon Roux followed that worthy's vrouw, looking quite as slatternly and rather more frightened than on that occasion when Colvin had partaken of her somewhat grudging hospitality. She emphatically confirmed all that her husband had said. The course the accused took with her was to remind her as impressively as he was able of the oath she had taken, and to suggest that she had better think well over her testimony lest she should have been mistaken. Sheer waste of words.

Colvin realised that he was doomed, and that every man in that camp believed every word that had been stated with regard to him. So when Hermanus Delpont, and one or two others, came forward to corroborate that he had spent the evening at Gideon Roux' house, he simply refused to waste time or trouble asking any more questions. What he would ask, however, was that the man who had mounted guard over him should be put forward the man who had kept him a prisoner all night—that was, from just after sundown—by the Commandant's orders.

“I gave no such orders, as I have said before,” said Commandant Schoeman. “Were any such orders given, Heeren, by any of yourselves?” turning towards the other occupants of the tent.

“Nee—nee,” came forth the reply, universal and emphatic. “We know of no guard being placed over the accused during the first part of the night.”

Colvin had thought they had now got more than ample testimony—false testimony—to afford them all the pretext they wanted. But he reckoned without Commandant Schoeman. Said the latter:

“Mynheer Morkel. Will you kindly stand where the others have stood, and tell what you know of this matter?”

Morkel fairly started, a great look of dismayed consternation overspreading his features.

“But I know nothing about it, Mynheer Commandant,” he protested. “I have not seen or spoken to Kershaw since I begged you to grant him an interview last night.”

“Just so, Mynheer Morkel. But we want to know what passed between you and the accused man before that. Stand up. The exigencies of the Republics imperatively require it.”

This was a command there was no disobeying, so Morkel stood up, and was duly sworn. He would willingly have perjured himself up to the scalp in such a cause, but he knew it would be useless. There might have been spies overhearing all that had passed between him and Kershaw relative to Frank’s condemnation, or even if not there would be no difficulty in putting forward sufficient witnesses to swear that they had overheard it, giving of course their own version.

Bidden by the Commandant to state exactly what passed between himself and the accused with regard to Frank Wenlock, Morkel said that he himself had brought Kershaw the news that the other was condemned to death. How had the accused received it? He had been very much shocked and distressed naturally, the other having been a great friend of his—Morkel left out “fellow-countryman” just in time. But even with all his Court experience he made the mistake of expatiating on what had led to that friendship, realising with dire dismay, when too late, that he had furnished an additional motive for Colvin to act as was alleged.

“Did he not ask what could be done for the condemned man?” inquired Schoeman.

“He did, Mynheer Commandant. But—”

“He asked that question more than once?” interrupted the remorseless voice.

“Naturally, Mynheer. That was why he so urgently wished for an interview with yourself—to plead the cause of his friend.”

“And when he found that he could not obtain that interview, what then?”

“He was disappointed, naturally. But he said it would all come right. He could not believe that brave men—burghers fighting for their liberties and independence, civilised

Christian men, could take the life of a man, especially a young man, by nature hot-headed and foolish, simply because he had made some rude and insulting remarks,” added Morkel, somewhat mendaciously, and indeed he seemed to have scored a strong point, for a murmur, not unsympathetic, went up from the audience. “The behaviour of Frank Wenlock was insulting and offensive, the accused had said, but surely not a crime worthy of death,” went on Morkel, waxing eloquent.

“That will do, Mynheer Morkel. You can now take your place again,” said the Commandant. Then to Colvin, “What have you to say? Now we have heard all the witnesses, what have you to say?”

“Very little, Mynheer. This is a plot. Adrian De la Rey has a grudge—a bitter grudge—against me, the reason of which does not matter. I believe he has manufactured the whole of this accusation. I believe he himself let Wenlock escape so as to fasten it on to me. Gideon Roux owes me money, and therefore would naturally turn against me. His vrouw looked frightened enough to satisfy even you that she was talking under compulsion. Hermanus Delport is a friend of and related to Gideon Roux. As for the two men who were on guard over Frank Wenlock, I believe they are under some extraordinary delusion and were speaking the truth as far as they knew. Morkel has stated the burden of our conversation quite correctly. But there is one witness we have not heard, and that is the man who turned me back into my tent last night.”

“There is no such man,” retorted Schoeman shortly. “It is all a fabrication. Well, then, that is enough. You came into our camp, and enjoyed our hospitality.”

“No, I was brought here by force,” interrupted Colvin.

“Still, still! Do not interrupt. You then took advantage of your position here to commit a hostile act—an act of hostility against the Republics, which have sheltered and shielded you—by aiding and abetting the escape of a prisoner.”

“That is not true,” retorted Colvin. “Before God, in whose presence we stand, I know no more of Frank Wenlock’s escape, have had no more to do with it, than the President himself.”

“Do not add lying and blasphemy to your offence,” said Schoeman unctuously. “For the crime of which ample testimony has convicted you, you will take the escaped prisoner’s place. You will be shot at sundown.”

A gasp went up from the listeners. The proceedings had impressed them deeply.

“Not yet,” said Colvin, in a loud firm voice. “I appeal to the President. In the presence of you all I appeal for justice to His Honour the President of the Transvaal Republic.”

Schoeman smiled coldly. “His Honour is not our President—not yet. We are not of the Transvaal Republic. Do you wish to converse with a minister of the Gospel to prepare you to meet your Creator?” he added, still unctuously.

“Yes,” answered Colvin, unwilling to let slip any potential loophole, however minute. “Mynheer Albertyn, of Schalkburg, is a good man. Can he be fetched?”

The Commandant looked surprised, then conferred in a low tone with his subordinate commanders.

“He can be fetched,” he answered. “And as you have shown a proper frame of mind, instead of blaspheming God—as your fellow-countryman did—more time for preparation shall be allowed you. Instead of at sundown, you must be ready for death an hour after sunrise to-morrow. That will allow you some hours to pray with the predikant.”

“I am grateful for that, Mynheer Commandant. But now, hear me. Standing here, on the threshold of death, I proclaim Adrian De la Rey a liar and perjurer—a perjurer who has taken the name of the great God to witness his falsehood. Out there,” waving his hand in the direction of the far-off British entrenchments, “is possible death for any man—glorious for the patriot, but for the liar and perjurer what—? I see you, Adrian. Do not try and skulk out of sight among honester men than yourself. Well, then, look me in the face, liar! So sure as I stand here will death find you. Within three days death will find you out. Now, liar and coward, well may you grow pale.”

Adrian, white as a sheet, was trying to meet his denouncer’s gaze, but for the life of him could not at that moment. Muttering something, he slipped away. And Colvin Kershaw followed his guards to his final prison, well knowing that his hours were numbered.

Chapter Twelve.

Gert Bondelzwart's News.

The town of Schalkburg was still in possession of the enemy. The Free State flag waved above the Court-house, and the "patriot" burghers, whether of the Free State commando or rebel colonial Boers, had things all their own way, and a great time generally, for they proceeded to "commandeer" all the necessities of life, and a good many of its luxuries, from the temporarily conquered people, and to make themselves very much at home among them, mostly at the expense of the latter. For these the only thing to do, however, was to accept the situation, and make the best of it.

There was one to whom this course recommended itself, and that was Mr Jelf. He would laugh ruefully over his enforced suspension—ruefully because he was sure the Colonial Office would hold him responsible, since for what is a long suffering Civil Commissioner not responsible—and play whist with his superseder, a Free State attorney, who had been set up by the burghers to administer the law as Landdrost. But there was practically no law to administer in Schalkburg, for now every man did what was right in his own eyes, unless some misguided and commandeered native shirked or strove to abscond. In such cases the newly fledged Landdrost did administer the law, resulting in vehement contact between raw hide and the aboriginal cuticle.

Jelf was not a little anxious on the score of his absent subordinate, who had been away on one of those semi-official investigations what time the town was captured. He hoped Morkel had not come to grief with those fiery English aspirations of his; and then he would smile to himself as he reflected that such sentiments were patient of sudden metamorphosis under stress of circumstances. No, Morkel would turn up again sooner or later, he supposed.

He had felt very disgusted at the behaviour of Jan Grobbelaar. This was the ultra-loyal Field-cornet then! Stephanus De la Rey, at any rate, had been an honest man, but Swaart Jan was a snake in the grass, and he, Jelf, had not hesitated to tell him so when he had ridden up beside Commandant Schoeman to demand the keys of the offices. But the little man had merely shown his tusks in a deprecating grin. "What would Mynheer have?" he said. "A man must march with his own countrymen. But Mynheer and he need be none the less friends for all that."

As a matter of fact, Jelf had no reason to complain of his treatment under the circumstances. He was a good-natured man and not unpopular among the Dutch farmers of his district, and now these showed him respect and consideration.

Schalkburg just then comprised another inmate, and that a personage not the least important in the unfolding of our narrative, namely, Aletta De la Rey. She was staying with some relatives, an old couple who had retired from farming, to settle in the township on their own erf; and she had been obliged to seek shelter with them because on reaching home she had found that all the family were away in the Free State—a fact which had not been known to her, partly owing to her sudden and unexpected homeward move, partly that, thanks to the war, communication was frequently interrupted and always uncertain. But, as it happened, she welcomed the discovery with a feeling of intense relief. She had shrunk in anticipation from the questionings of her own family, now she would be spared these for a while longer. The Van Heerdens, her relatives, were a very old couple with hardly an idea outside their own erf and the covers of the family Bible. They were not likely to bother her with inconvenient questions.

Poor Aletta! She had indeed gone through the fire since the day of that horrible discovery. What a bright Paradise had she been living in—and now? Her ideal vanished—her idol fallen and shattered—what more did life hold out for her! Ah, to think of it, this man who had been to her as a very god—who was not as other men—who had come into her life to take possession of it, and to whom she had surrendered, a willing, happy captive—for him to deceive her, to make her the victim of such a commonplace, petty form of deception! Surely that discovery had killed her love.

Why had he done it? It was so needless, so commonplace, so cruel! Why had he left her to endure the agony of apprehension on his account for days, for weeks—the while he was safe and sound within a few hours of her, carrying on this intrigue? She would rather—ininitely rather—that that agony had met with its worst and fatal fulfilment, that he had been brought back to her dead. To think that he, her god, could stoop so low, could place himself in such a contemptible, pitiable light before her. That look in his face as he met her glance—the startled shame and consternation at being found out—that would haunt her to her dying day.

Why had he ever professed love for herself? And having done so, why—if he had found such profession premature—did he not say so openly? It would have been a cruel insult; still she thought she could have borne it better. She had never grudged May Wenlock her bright physical attractions; indeed, she had recognised them openly and to the full. She remembered how often they had laughed over old Tant' Plessis' favourite saying as to May being the only English girl, and now she concluded that the old lady was not such a fool as they had supposed. Possibly nationality did count in the long run, though, where love was the consideration, Aletta, for her part, could not understand how nationality should make a hairsbreadth of difference. And, again, she thought, she herself was not even decent-looking—well she remembered how that statement had been received by him to whom it was addressed—whereas this English girl was bounteously dowered by

Nature with outward attractiveness, and, after all, she supposed this was what weighed with men. Well, she must get this man out of her mind. With time and determination she supposed it could be done. She must grow to regard him as one who had passed out of her life, as one who was as completely dead to her as though actually so to this world, and must contemplate the fact with equanimity, with utter indifference. Oh yes, that would come—in time.

Would it? This was a very changed Aletta now, and the merry, happy, spontaneous peal of laughter was never now heard—even the faint and ghostly semblance of it but seldom. The sweet, bright, radiant spirits seemed to have found a grave. Yes, on the whole, perhaps it was as well that these relatives of hers were too old, and other people too preoccupied with the movement of events around, to notice the difference.

“Missis, I have something to say,” exclaimed a voice in Dutch. Looking up, Aletta saw a tall, ragged, travel-worn looking yellow man. His hands were trembling as he fumbled with the catch of the garden gate. She came quickly down the garden path to meet him, realising as she did so, that her walk was somewhat unsteady. For in the man who had thus suddenly broken in upon her meditations she recognised Colvin’s Griqua servant, Gert Bondelzwart.

“I have dreadful news for you, Missis,” jerked forth the latter, his voice shaking with excitement. “They are—going to shoot him!”

Aletta could feel her cheeks grow pale and icy.

“Who is going to shoot whom?” her bloodless lips managed to gasp forth.

“Baas Colvin. Die Boeren mensche,” he answered. “Ja, they have sent in now for the predikant to come out to the Baas. He is to be shot to-morrow morning.”

“Oh, good God!”—No, she must not faint, she must act. “Where, Gert?” she went on. “Where?”

“At Krantz Kop, Missis. Gideon Roux’ place—Schoeman’s commando.”

“Has Mynheer started yet? Quick! Say.”

“Nee, Missis, not yet. Four burghers came to escort him out, and they have off-saddled while the predikant is inspanning. Oh, mijn lieve Baas—mijn lieve Baas! What can be done, Missis? What can be done?”

The fellow was actually weeping. Even in the agony of the moment the thought flashed through Aletta's mind that this man could command such devoted attachment from even a Hottentot.

"What can be done!" she repeated. "This is what you have to do, Gert. Saddle up the rooi-schimmel there in the stable. Put a man's saddle on him, for you will have to ride him, and come round with me to the predikants house—now at once."

"Ja, Missis." And Gert departed with willing alacrity. Aletta ran quickly to her room. A couple of minutes sufficed for her to get into such travelling attire as she deemed necessary. But one article of her outfit where with she provided herself would have struck with wild amazement and misgiving anyone who should have seen her. She felt devoutly thankful that the old couple had toddled off to exchange gossip with a neighbour, for not only had she the house to herself, but was spared the vexation and delay of explaining her movements.

Mynheer Lukas Albertus Albertyn, V.D.M. resident minister of the Dutch Reformed Church at Schalkburg, was a fair type of the average country predikant, which is to say that he performed all the duties of his office with ordinary conscientiousness, had a keen eye to the customary emoluments of the said office, both in currency and in kind, and was regarded with veneration by the female side of his flock, and the older and less progressive of the male. His political sympathies were all with his own countrymen and the cause of the Republics, and his outward appearance we know, for we have already made his acquaintance during the opening event of this narrative—at the political meeting gathered to hear the fervid oratory of Andries Botma, to wit.

Mynheer was seated in his dining-room snatching a hasty lunch prior to setting forth upon his errand of mercy. Truth to tell, he was rather a puzzled predikant at that moment. What on earth did they want to shoot this Englishman for? He was well known to many of them, was in sympathy with them, too, and moreover was engaged to the daughter of one of their most prominent burghers. Again, it was odd that an English man should send for him at such a time. Englishmen of Colvin Kershaw's class, when they did not hanker after Popery, scoffed at all religion, was Mynheer's experience. There was an English predikant at Schalkburg, too—one who set up candles and brazen idols, and called those of the Reformed creed ugly names—why did this Englishman not send for him?

Perhaps because of the candles and idols. And at this point Mynheer's reflections were suddenly and somewhat unceremoniously interrupted, for a quick knock sounded on the

door-panel, followed by the entrance of its perpetrator almost before he had time to call out "Come in!"

"Why, Aletta!" he exclaimed. And then the words of welcome died in his throat. This girl was engaged to the Englishman who was to be shot on the following morning!

"I am going out to Krantz Kop with you, Mynheer," she began. "I know you will not refuse me a seat in your trap—remembering"—and her voice was caught back by a sob, which, however, she manfully suppressed.

"But, Aletta, my child, only think. You can be of no use, I fear. Had you not better resign yourself to the will of the Almighty and remain at home and pray—while there is yet time?"

Hollow sounding as this commonplace was—claptrap even—it had asserted itself as a mere veil to mask the speaker's own feelings. Anti-English or not, he was a good-hearted man, this predikant, and then, too, Aletta had been one of the most brilliant and satisfactory of his confirmees. He had a great partiality for her.

"Nee, Mynheer," she answered, "the time for mere praying has not yet come. And even if it had, I must see him once more. Don't you understand? But if you refuse me, I can still go by myself. I have a horse here, and I will ride all the way, even if I kill the animal."

Her quick, eager decisiveness, the utter misery depicted in her face, showed him that here was no mere weak girl to be reasoned with and advised, but a resourceful, determined woman. Here was a side to Aletta De la Rey's character which was a revelation to the worthy predikant.

"Well, well, of course you must go with me, my child," he answered very kindly. "They are nearly ready for us."

"I have just time to write a line to my father," said Aletta, moving to a writing table without ceremony. This was no time for trivial observances she felt. She dashed off a few hasty lines, hasty but emphatic, and thoroughly lucid and to the point. Her father was not very far from the Free State border. By an effort he might arrive in time, and his influence was great.

The predikant's Cape cart was already inspanned, and the attendant burghers, who were seated in their saddles, stolidly waiting, saluted her as she appeared. Gert Bondelzwart, too, was all ready.

“Gert,” she said in a low tone, “you know your shortest, straightest way. Do not lose a minute, even if you kill the horse. A minute may mean a life remember. No one will attempt to stop you, for I have put that upon the letter which will open a way for you anywhere.”

“Ja, Missis,” said Gert, and away he went. Then she got into the cart beside Mynheer, and they, too, started.

Chapter Thirteen.

At the Price of herself.

Up till now Aletta had asked no questions. She had accepted Gert's assurance, of which the man's obvious distress was sufficient confirmation. Her quick-witted, practical nature had asserted itself. That was no time for questions. She must act, and that promptly. Now, however, that they were well on their way, and covering the ground at the best pace the predikants excellent horses could put on, she reckoned the time had come to know more. Why was Colvin Kershaw to be murdered—for it was murder she declared? What had he done?

But Mynheer could not tell her much beyond the bare facts of the case as he knew them, for the burghers who had come to fetch him had been extremely reticent.

"Helping a prisoner to escape. But that is not a thing to shoot a man for," she said. "Oh, I will plead with the Commandant, and you will, too, will you not, Mynheer? Ah, if only father were here, they would not dare do it then. But—who was the prisoner, and did he escape?"

"He escaped—yes. It was Frank Wenlock, and he was to be shot for insulting the President and the patriot cause, and assaulting one of the burghers. He was very violent, and very blasphemous—Ja, that I can quite believe, for did not he and some of the worst characters in Schalkburg disturb our service one evening at Nachtmaal time, by ringing the bell which hangs outside, and running away? And he gets drunk and rowdy when he comes into the town. No, he is a bad character. Kershaw ought not to have exchanged his life for the life of such a man as that."

They conversed in English so that Mynheer's native groom might not understand. The burgher escort, too, were mostly close to the vehicle.

So it was for Frank Wenlock's sake that Colvin was throwing away his life, thought Aletta. Mynheer had spoken truly indeed, as to the vast disparity of such an exchange. But—he was May's brother. That explained it all. How Colvin must have loved that other girl, to make the greatest sacrifice that human being can make—for her sake! And the thought had a kind of hardening effect upon Aletta, for she was but a woman after all, not an angel. Why should she continue to pour out her love upon one who had proved so faithless? Only an hour or two ago she had been telling herself that he was practically dead to her. Yet the moment she had heard that he was soon likely to be actually so, here she was moving Heaven and earth to save him, or, at any rate, to see him once more.

Well, she would still do all she could to save him, but she would not see him again, in any event. No, from that resolve she would not swerve.

“But how did he get to Krantz Kop, Mynheer?” she said, in continuation of her thoughts. “He was at Pret— Johannesburg when I saw him last.”

“They say he had come from Cronje’s force, and had seen a lot of the fighting near Kimberley. I don’t know this Schoeman, but Jan Grobbelaar and the others ought to be able to do something for him between them.”

“He had been with Cronje’s force, then?” echoed Aletta, as though a new idea had come to her. But it was quickly dashed. He had had plenty of time to have gone there afterwards, after that day when she with her own eyes had seen him making love to May Wenlock. With her own eyes! There was no getting round that fact.

And the hours wore on, bringing these two nearer and nearer to their sad and mournful goal.

Night had fallen upon the burgher camp at Krantz Kop, and most of its inmates, habituated to rising with the sun and retiring with the going down of the same, or not long after it, were in the land of dreams. They were under no fear of surprise, for besides the fact of their sentries being well posted there was a strong commando, with artillery, entrenched below on the outer slope of the mountains, and between them and the far British lines. So the camp slumbered in peace and security.

In one tent, however, a light was still burning, throwing the shadows of men—huge, distorted, grotesque, out upon the canvas. Adrian De la Rey and his two now boon companions—Gideon Roux and Hermanus Delport—sat within. A bottle of dop, the contents of which had nearly reached vanishing point, stood on a waggon box in the centre.

“Toen, Adrian!” the last of these was saying. “All is going well now. The Englishman will be out of your way to-morrow for ever—out of all our ways, hey, Gideon? We will come to your wedding soon, ou’ maat—when we have shot a few more of these cursed English. Do you think Oom Stephanus will be glad to see us?”

“Finish up, and go away and sleep,” growled Adrian, pushing the bottle towards him, “or you’ll be too shaky for anything in the morning, both of you. You’ll miss him at ten paces, like you did before at two hundred.”

“Nee, kerel, nee. But that was in the dark,” replied Hermanus, grabbing the bottle and his tin pannikin, which rattled against the glass neck in the drunken shakiness of his big hand.

“Maagtig! leave some for me, Mani,” cried Gideon Roux, striving to wrest the bottle from the other. By the time he had succeeded there was precious little in it, and then this noble pair went forth, rejoicing in anticipation of the act of butchery which was to fall to their lot on the morrow.

Left to himself Adrian let fly an ejaculation of mingled thankfulness and disgust. He had indeed fallen, to have become the boon companion of such as these. They were of the very lowest type—hardly removed from the *bijwoner* class—drunken, coarse brutes at that; but now they were his accomplices in his act of murderous villainy—his tools. His tools? Yes, but they would soon become his masters.

No, that they should not—he told himself. Let to-morrow’s deed be done and over, and they would soon see that he was not a man to be trifled with. Reveal the conspiracy? Would they? And if so, who was going to take the word of two such shady characters as they? No, indeed. But after to-morrow he would turn over a new leaf—would make a fresh start.

A fresh start? What sort of a fresh start could be made with murder for its foundation? Yes—murder! Alone there in the silent night, alone with his evil conscience, the words of his victim uttered that morning—uttered, too, with the semblance of a prophecy—came back to him: “So sure as I stand here death will find you. Within three days death will find you out.” He shivered. Men on the brink of the grave were, he had heard tell, at times gifted with supernatural foresight. And then in letters of fire upon the darkness of his thoughts seemed to blaze forth those other words: “They who take the sword shall perish by the sword.” For “sword” read “bullet” Colvin Kershaw was to die in the morning, with several bullets through him. He, Adrian, had murdered him—by means of a fiendish plot, and abundance of false testimony. The next few weeks—months even—would bring with them a series of hard-fought battles, and then should he escape?

“Bah!” he exclaimed, pulling himself together. “These are all old women’s tales. I must take my chance, and I dare say it is as good as any other’s. What is the use of a college education if I get the funks over old exploded superstitions only good enough for those two pigs who have just gone out? I wish they had left me something in this bottle all the same,” holding it up, as though still vainly hoping, and then pitching it outside the tent. “Wheels!” listening a moment. “The predikant must be arriving. Well, much good may he do.”

He could hear the trap draw up at Gideon Roux' house over the way and the sound of voices, could see a light or two, as the people were outspanning. Then he re-entered his tent, and again his thoughts reverted to the doomed man. "Within three days death will find you out," the latter had said, and again Adrian's heart failed him as he remembered how likely of fulfilment this prophecy was. Out yonder in the low country the British were advancing, and now their own forces were lying massed ready to give battle. "Within three days!"

A voice outside, drawing nearer, broke in upon his reverie.

"That is his tent," it was saying. "We will see if he is there. Adrian!" and with the call the flap of the tent was parted and a bearded face appeared. "I have brought you a visitor, Adrian."

The man made way for a second person, a tall, female figure wearing a long cloak.

"Aletta!" cried Adrian in amazement, as a throwing back of the hood revealed the features. "Well, and what brings you up here?" he went on in a hard tone, trying to hide the mortification, the jealous rage he was feeling.

"I am here to save you from blood-guilt—to save you from heaping a black and cruel murder on your soul," answered the girl, her eyes shining bright and steadfast upon his face as she stood confronting him.

"No, no. You have come to save this faithless hound—this lover of yours. But you can't. We are taking too good care of him for that," sneered Adrian, stung by jealousy and hatred. No conscience qualms inconvenienced him now.

"But I must say, Aletta," he went on, "that I see you here with very great surprise. After what you saw—saw with your own eyes mind—at Johannesburg I wonder you can give this fellow a further thought."

"I will not have him murdered. Listen, Adrian. You let Frank Wenlock escape in order to fix the blame upon Colvin and so compass his death. Yes, you ought to be in this place."

For the life of him the other could not repress the amazement, dismay, guilt, which leaped into his face. Aletta spoke with such confidence, such knowledge. How could she know? he thought. Had Roux or Delport been bragging in their cups? As a matter of fact, however, she was merely shooting a random bolt.

“I think you must have taken leave of your senses, Aletta,” he answered. Then changing his tone, as the sight of her standing before him stirred up all the old jealous rage against this English interloper, he went on: “And what if I did? What if I did? He will be shot anyhow.”

“Adrian, I never thought to have to name you a cowardly murderer—one who kills not openly, but by lies and plots.”

“I don’t mind that. What about this valiant Englishman who sneaks in between you and me, and steals away your love from me, only to make a plaything of it? Yes, for it would have been mine, I know it would. And we should have been happy—ah yes, happy. This English dog! What name have you for such as he? And have you forgotten, Aletta, that little talk we had one day in the garden at Ratels Hoek? I told you then that the man who should come between you and me had better look after himself, whoever he might be. I told you that, did I not? Well, this man has come between you and me, and in less than twelve hours he will be dead!—Dead—do you hear?”

His voice had taken on a sort of growl, and his face was hard and set with hate and passion.

“No, he will not be,” she answered. “For I will save him. Yes—I. This very night I will go and plead with the Commandant. He will listen to me for my father’s sake. If the worst comes to the worst, I will denounce you as the real offender. For I can convince him that you are.”

“No—no. I think not,” replied Adrian jeeringly. “Schoeman is as hard as iron, and you might plead with him until the Day of Judgment for all you would effect. The fact of your being your father’s child would not move him an inch. He would be more likely to say it was a shameful and scandalous thing for a girl to thrust herself forward in such a matter. But if you want to make perfectly sure, come with me and I will take you to his tent now. All the same, by going there you will be destroying any slender chance Colvin might have.”

His words, his confident manner, had their weight with Aletta. It was exceedingly probable she might fail to move the Commandant. She had another card in her hand—a better trump she thought—and she decided to throw it.

“Oh, Adrian, I fear you are right,” she said softly, still talking in English, as they had been doing all the time, by way of precaution against prying ears. “But do not let us quarrel and say hard things to each other. I thought you would help me if anybody would.” Her eyes filled, and she hardly seemed able to go on. The sight softened Adrian!

who was as madly, passionately in love with her as ever. “Do help me, Adrian. You are able if anybody is. I want to save his life for the sake of what he has been to me. Listen. I never want to see or speak with him again—only to save his life. Oh, it is horrible—horrible that such things should be done! Help me, Adrian! It is only to save his life, and you from murder.”

Ah, she had come down now from her judgment seat. She was the pleader now. Adrian, whose sombre eyes had never left her face throughout this appeal, was conscious of the wave of a new hope surging through his being.

“You only want to save his life? Never to see or speak with him again?” he repeated.

“Yes—yet no. I must just see him to satisfy myself that he is really alive and safe—but not to speak to him.”

For fully a minute they stood there gazing into each other’s face in the dull light of the tent lantern. Then Adrian said:

“You are right, Aletta. I can help you. I can save his life. But”—and his words were slow and deliberate, and full of meaning—“if I do what is to be my reward?”

She understood, but she did not flinch.

“If you do—if you save his life, if you let him escape, I will marry you, Adrian! That is what you wish, I suppose?”

“Great God, it is!” he answered fervently, his dark face flushing with intense joy. “You will soon forget this Englishman, my darling—you, whom I have loved ever since we were children. But—swear that you will keep this compact, Aletta.”

“I swear it,” she answered, hardly recognising her own voice.

“I will keep my side. I will show you this Englishman alive and free, and then you will marry me?”

“But how—how will you do it?”

“That is my affair—leave that to me. Kiss me, Aletta, to seal our compact.”

“No—no. Not here, not now,” holding up a warning hand. “Do you not see? The light throws our shadows on the tent. I am going now. Remember, I trust to you. No—do not come with me. I prefer to be alone.”

It was only a hundred yards across to Gideon Roux’ house, where Aletta was to sleep. She had sacrificed herself to save the life of the man who had faithlessly made a plaything of her love, and her heart was cold and heavy within her, for she had bought that life at a great price—even the price of herself.

Adrian from his tent door watched her retreating form, and his triumph and delight were unbounded. He had won all along the line; and Aletta had immolated herself all to no purpose. For he had no intention of fulfilling his side of the compact. Even though he won her, his peace and happiness in her possession would never be secure while Colvin Kershaw lived; therefore, Colvin should die at dawn, and in a few days he would satisfy Aletta that he had fulfilled his bargain by showing her that other Kershaw whose likeness had deceived her before, but under circumstances which would preclude speech—even as upon that other occasion.

Chapter Fourteen.

In the Shadow of Doom.

“Curious sort of ‘condemned cell’ this,” whimsically thought Colvin Kershaw to himself, as he gazed around the place wherein he was confined, and whence Frank Wenlock had escaped. For Commandant Schoeman’s promise that he should take the late prisoner’s place had been carried out to the letter, and here he was, shut up within Gideon Roux’ stable, only to leave it to go forth and meet his death.

He had pleaded to be allowed the use of the tent he had hitherto occupied—at any rate, until nightfall. Not many more hours of God’s air and sunshine would be his, he had urged. But a decided refusal had been returned—a refusal tinged with characteristic sanctimoniousness. He would be better in confinement. There he would find nothing to distract his thoughts in his preparation for the great and solemn change, he was told, as would be the case if he were where he could see and hear everyday sights and sounds, and others moving about him. So here he was, under a strong guard, locked up within a not very clean or sweet-smelling stable for the few remaining hours of his life.

He looked around. Even then he could hardly realise it. More than once he had been in here before, seeing to his horse, on such occasions as he visited Gideon Roux. The worm-eaten and much bitten crib, the pile of old forage ends, and stamped-in grains of stale mealies underneath it, and a curry-comb and brush, and an old headstall or two hanging from a peg—the forage cutter had been taken away—all looked so home-like and everyday. It seemed incredible, incongruous, even absurd to try and realise that this place was for him as truly a condemned cell as the massive walls and stone floor of the preliminary living tomb in old Newgate or Holloway.

He could hear the sounds of the camp—the hum of harsh voices, and now and then the tramp of a horse. Sounds, too, redolent of peaceful and everyday life—the clucking of poultry, the bleat of a goat, the fretful yelp of a child, and the now monotonous, now querulous voices of women, for the house was but a few score yards away. Yes, it was hard to realise that these four brick walls constituted but the ante-room to the far narrower walls of earth, which by that time to-morrow would have closed round his bloody and lifeless remains.

Was there no prospect of escape? Again and again, while pacing up and down his strange prison, had he calculated his chances. Frank Wenlock had escaped, but only through aid from without. Who would aid him, and if any would, how could they? As for any efforts of his own, of what avail? The window was strongly barred, and two guards, armed with magazine rifles, were posted immediately beneath, as he was reminded by

the frequent appearance of a face at the said bars. Two more were before the door, and as for drilling an aperture in the wall, why he had nothing to do it with. The possibility, too, of tunnelling under the foundation of the further wall occurred to him, and here his eye once more rested on the old curry-comb. But the floor of the place was stone paved, and the noise inevitable to the undertaking would betray him twenty times over, even at night. Moreover, he was only too well aware that in view of the former escape the vigilance of his custodians would be more than doubled.

He remembered Andries Botma's final offer of assistance, and his first appeal had been that the judgment upon himself should be postponed until he had communicated with the man for whom these here professed such profound veneration. But this proposal Schoeman had curtly negatived, nor would he permit any communication whatever with the outside world. Such farewell words as the prisoner had to leave for relatives or friends he might remit to the predikant, but even these must be written in the presence of Mynheer himself.

Once the thought of sending for Adrian De la Rey crossed his mind. An appeal to Adrian's superstitions and a solemn warning to him to withdraw from this deliberate act of murder might be effectual. But the idea was scouted as soon as conceived. Adrian had everything to gain by his destruction—and was he likely to throw away the crowning triumph of his plot at the very moment of grasping it? Not in the very least likely, and besides, the barrier of pride rose up against any such course.

And what of Aletta? Never now would he get at the mystery which had dictated that enigmatical message, never now ascertain what had caused her great love to fail and waver in distrust and doubt. That Adrian was behind this, too, he was equally certain. He had not been mistaken in Aletta. Her nature was no ordinary one to be disturbed and shaken by a mere ordinary motive for doubt, however craftily suggested. Yet what was the secret of that doubt? Try, rack his brains as he would, he got no nearer to it than before. Her words were always in his mind: 'Remember, I saw,' but never suggesting even the feeblest glimmer of explanation. What had she seen—when, where, and how? Nothing that regarded him. On that point his conscience was perfectly clear. Since they had exchanged their mutual love vows his conscience, as towards her, was as clear as the sky above them at that moment. Yes, looking back now upon those long and happy months, he realised that the latter end of his life, at any rate, had contained for him all that was worth living for. And now that he had touched its outer edge, a strange philosophical feeling of satisfaction that she, at any rate, would not have her life spoiled by his memory, if she had already learned to distrust him, came over him—a satisfaction that well-nigh quenched the bitterness and disillusioning that she had done so. Almost, but not quite—for, after all, he was but human.

The hours wore on. His guards thrust food and drink—of the coarsest description—into his prison, and retired without a word, carefully relocking the door. It was evident that they were under very special orders, and would answer no questions. He was left once more to his own thoughts.

Colvin stood in no greater fear of death than most other men who have more than once seen it very near; yet that helpless sense of being shut up, to meet it in cold blood at a given time, was a trifle creepy and unnerving. More than once, in his dreams, he had been under sentence of death, had even come to the steps of the scaffold, and each time had seemed every bit as realistic as the last, or, if possible, more so. Was this, too, a dream? Should he wake up directly and find himself back again at Pretoria, or at Ratels Hoek, or his own farm? He looked around. Was he really awake—or was this, too, only another nightmare? Ah no. It was very real.

About his worldly affairs he felt but scant anxiety. They were all in order. He was a fairly methodical man, and before leaving for the theatre of battle and hourly risk he had seen to all that. After all, some would be the gainers by his end—some perhaps who needed to be, very sorely—some who would even in consequence remember him with a little kindness and gratitude. Yet there was but little of the last in this world, he reflected, tolerantly cynical.

The sun dropped, and the shadows of evening darkened his place of confinement, and then with the deepening gloom a feeling of great desolation came over the man, a feeling of forsakenness, and that never again would his ears receive a word of sympathy or friendship, let alone love. He hungered for such then. It was the bitterest moment he had known yet. Seated there on an old wheelbarrow in the close, fusty smelling stable, with the long night before him, he well-nigh regretted that he had been allowed the extension of time. It would all have been over by now. He would have sunk to rest with the evening's sun. Then upon the black gloom of his mind came the consciousness of approaching voices—then the rattle and rasping of the padlock, and the door was opened. One of the guards entered, ushering in three men. He was bearing, moreover, a lantern and a chair, which having set down, he retired.

By the somewhat dingy light of the lantern Colvin recognised his visitors: Schoeman, Jan Grobbelaar, and the predikant. He greeted the last-named, with whom he was already acquainted. Then a thrill of hope went through his heart. Had they thought better of it and were here to offer him deliverance?

“We have given your case every consideration, nephew,” began the Commandant in his dry, emotionless, wooden tones. “You have professed yourself one of us, and by way of

proving yourself to be so have committed the act of a traitor, in that you have set one of our enemies at large.”

“Pardon me, Mynheer Commandant,” interrupted Colvin. “I have done no such thing. I deny it here on the brink of the grave. I will be candid enough to say that I might have done so had it been in my power. But you know perfectly well it was not.”

“You have committed the act of a traitor,” went on Schoeman, ignoring the protest as completely as though the other had not spoken, “and therefore you have been adjudged to meet a traitor’s doom. But our good brother Mynheer Grobbelaar here and others have pleaded for you, and so we have decided to remit that judgment upon you, subject to one condition. You are to have a chance of proving your good faith. You are to undertake to serve in arms with the Republican forces where and whenever required, until it shall please the good God to bring this cruel and unrighteous war to an end and give victory unto those who serve Him. And to this end you will sign this declaration.”

Colvin took the paper, and by the light of the lantern closely scanned it—not without eagerness. It was written in Dutch and contained an oath of submission to the South African Republics and an undertaking to bear arms on their behalf even as Schoeman had set forward.

“And if I sign this your sentence is not to be carried out, Mynheer Commandant?” he said quickly.

“In a word, this is the price of my life?”

“That is so,” said Schoeman.

“Then I refuse the conditions. I will not sign it. I refuse to draw trigger on my own countrymen!”

“Toen, Colvin. Sign it, man. Sign it!” broke in Swaart Jan eagerly. “We don’t want you to be shot, kerel.”

“Thanks, Oom Jan. I don’t believe you do. But I can subscribe to no such declaration, be the consequences what they may.”

Then Jan Grobbelaar, who was really well disposed towards the prisoner, became voluble. Why would he persist in throwing away his life in that foolish manner? He was one with them now, why not throw in his lot with them openly? It did not matter in the

long run. The Republics were bound to win, since God and justice were on their side—and so on, and so on. All in vain.

“It is of no use, Oom Jan. I’m grateful to you all the same. But under no circumstances whatever can I consent to fire on my own countrymen.”

The little man was really distressed, and was pouring forth his volubility once more. But Schoeman interrupted.

“Then you refuse the chance we offer you?”

“On those terms—absolutely.”

“Be it so. Your blood be upon your own head. And now we will leave you with Mynheer, for your hours are but few indeed.”

And the two went out—Swaart Jan shaking his head lugubriously over the astonishing obstinacy of the man he would fain befriend.

Colvin was not one of those who sneer at religion, though his views upon the subject were broad enough to have earned the thorough disapproval of the professors of more dogmatic creeds. As we have already hinted, his motive in sending for the predikant was primarily one of policy, partly in order to gain time, partly to placate those in whose hands he was. Yet now that Mynheer had come he was not sorry, in that he had someone to talk to, and, as we have said, his loneliness had been getting terribly upon his nerves. So he listened while the predikant read some Scripture and said a few prayers, and when the latter asked him if he forgave those at whose door lay his death, he answered that he had no feeling against them; that if they were doing him to death unjustly—well, he supposed he had done things to other people some time or other in his life, which they didn’t like, and this might go as a set-off against such. Adrian De la Rey was the hardest nut to crack, but, on the other hand, he had a grievance which he, Colvin, ought to be the first person to make allowances for. No—he didn’t think he wanted Adrian to come to grief, although he had said so that morning. It didn’t matter to himself anyhow.

Then he wrote some final letters relating to his worldly affairs, the predikant having obtained for him, at some difficulty, the requisite materials. He left a few lines for Stephanus De la Rey, and more than a few for Aletta. Even then of the girl’s presence in the camp Mynheer Albertyn did not inform him, and the reason lay in Aletta’s own wish. She had decided not to see him. She had saved him—as she thought—and it were better not to see him. It was part of the bargain with Adrian, likewise it would bring back all too forcibly the last time she had seen him.

“Well, Mynheer,” said Colvin at length, “now we have put all that straight we can chat for a little. It seems rather selfish keeping you up all night like this, and it was very good of you to come. You won’t regret it either. But you don’t have to sit up every night with a poor devil who’s going to be shot at sunrise anyhow.”

This cheerful calmness under the circumstances was clean outside the predikant’s experience. He felt as though he must be dreaming. It was unreal. Here was a man whose life had reached the limits of a few hours, who was to be led forth to die in cold blood, in the full glow of his health and strength, yet chatting away as unconcerned as if he were at home in his own house. Jestings, too, for Colvin had touched on the comic element, not forgetting to entertain Mynheer with the joke about old Tant’ Plessis and Calvinus. So the night wore on.

The doomed man slept at last, slumbering away the fast waning hours that remained to him of life.

Chapter Fifteen.

Love's Triumph.

The sun had mounted above the eastern end of the Wildschutsberg, and now an arrowy beam, sweeping down from the gilded crags, pierced like a searchlight the cold grey mists of early dawn.

The burgher camp was astir, roused by no bugle call or roll of drum; opening the day by no parade of flashing accoutrements or inspection of arms. Yet every unit in that force was alert and ready, prepared to receive the orders of the day and act upon them with unparalleled celerity and absence of fuss.

This morning a solemn and awed tone seems to pervade the camp, a demeanour perhaps to be explained by the approach of a great and terrible battle; yet not altogether, for most of these men have been through such and it has not so affected them. There is, however, another explanation, for among the first of the orders of the day is that decreeing the taking of the life of Colvin Kershaw.

The life of one man! But they have counted their own dead by dozens already in battle, those of the enemy too. Yet the anticipation of the extinction of this one man is sufficient to move the whole camp to awe. Ah! but there it is. The excitement of the strife is wanting: the combative instinct dashed by the loftier motive of patriotism. This man is to be done to death in cold blood.

Beyond Gideon Roux' homestead, on the side furthest from the tents, is an open space, backed by the steep slope of the hillside. Here the whole camp is collected. The burghers, all armed, are standing in two great lines, not in any order except that the ground between these lines is kept rigidly clear for about twenty yards of width, and the reason thereof is now apparent. The doomed man, escorted by half a dozen guards with loaded rifles, is drawing near.

Colvin's demeanour is calm and self-possessed, but entirely free from bravado or swagger. His clear searching eyes wander quickly over the assemblage, and a faint, momentary surprise lights them as he notices the presence of a few women among this crowd of armed men. They are placed, too, at the further end, quite close to where he himself shall stand.

As he enters the avenue thus left open for him, every head is bared. He lifts his own hat in acknowledgment of this salutation, and proceeds to the place pointed out, which is

marked by a reim placed on the ground. It is the line which he is to toe. The predikant is not beside him, in compliance with his own wish.

As he stands facing his slayers, a dead hush of silence is upon the crowd. Through it rises the voice of Commandant Schoeman, hard, emotionless, yet crisp and clear.

“Even now, Colvin Kershaw, even now, as you stand upon the brink of your grave and are about to pass into the presence of Almighty God, even now we have decided to offer you one more chance. Will you sign and abide by the declaration which was tendered you last night?”

“I refused to purchase my life at such a price last night, Mynheer Commandant, and I refuse again. Here, as you say, upon the brink of my grave, I will die rather than draw trigger on my own countrymen. My sympathies with the Republics and their cause are great, as many here know. But I will not fight against my own countrymen.”

The tone was firm, the answer clear and audible to every soul there present, and the effect thereof did not differ greatly. Some were inclined to resent what they called the obstinacy of the prisoner, but to the minds of most the words carried increased respect.

“One thing more I desire to say,” went on Colvin, holding up his hand as he noticed that the Commandant was about to give the signal. “Here, on the brink of the grave, I solemnly repeat I am being put to death for an act which I never committed. I do not say I would not have committed it had opportunity afforded, for the man was my friend. But I did not. I die the victim of false swearing.”

“You have refused our mercy, even at the twelfth hour,” said Schoeman. “So be it.”

He made a signal. Three men stepped forward, each slapping a cartridge into his rifle, confronting the doomed one at about twenty paces. In that dread and critical moment Colvin recognised two of them—Gideon Roux and Hermanus Delport. The third was unknown to him.

“Where is Adrian De la Rey?” he said, in a tone of good-humoured satire. “He should have been the third. It would have made the plot more complete.”

Up went the three rifles to the shoulder, then down again immediately. A gasp of horror arose—of dismay, amazement, consternation. Something had happened.

The doomed man no longer stood alone. Between him and the deadly, levelled weapons—screening him from them—stood a tall female figure, whose graceful lines were shrouded by a long cloak. Just a fraction of a second more, and the murderous bullets would have transpierced two bodies instead of one.

Among the onlookers the thrill of horror and amazement deepened as the hood was thrown back, revealing the head and features of the wearer, who was known to many of them. The countenance of the doomed man lighted up with a glow of such unutterable affection as to leave room for no other emotion.

“Aletta! So you have come to take leave of me!” he said. “My darling one, and yet the sight of you once more adds a hundredfold to the bitterness of death.”

“Of death? No, no, you shall not die, unless we both do. Not a bullet shall reach you that does not go through me first.”

She clung to him in such wise as to render the truth of her words obvious. The appointed executioners had lowered their weapons and stood irresolute, as though looking for orders.

“Remove her!” cried Commandant Schoeman.

But nobody seemed over eager to obey. Then, after a hurried consultation with three or four of his subordinate commanders, he went on:

“You will have a respite of exactly five minutes, Kershaw. Not one second longer.”

“We have but a short time, Aletta,” resumed Colvin, in English and a low tone. “Tell me quickly—why did you write that strange message—‘Remember—I saw’? What did it mean? What did you see?”

“Ah, let us forget that. Love—love! That is as nothing now. You shall not die.”

“Tell me—tell me! Time is flying,” he urged.

Quickly she told him—how Adrian had warned her that she was being deceived; had proved it to her through the agency of her own eyesight, that day at Johannesburg.

“Adrian was lying. Yet there must be somebody bearing a wonderful likeness to me. Look me in the eyes, Aletta. Here at the grave’s edge I tell you, this story is absolutely untrue. I went straight to Cronje’s column, and did not even leave the train at

Johannesburg. Afterwards you will learn this for yourself. Sweetheart, I have never deceived you in word or deed. Do you believe me now?"

"Implicitly! Oh love, love! I am not fit to live after you, and I will not. Say you forgive me!"

Though they could neither hear nor understand what was said, there was such a wail of despair and loss in her tone as to reach the hearts of the bystanders. Some turned away with wet eyes and a lump in their throats. One or two actually blubbered.

"Forgive?" he repeated.

Only the one word—he too seemed choked for utterance. But it conveyed all—all she would fain have heard. In the face of the whole assembly, she drew down his head, and pressed her lips to his in one long despairing kiss. One or two more of the burghers turned away and blubbered aloud.

"The time has gone," said Schoeman, in his iron voice. But he might as well not have spoken for all the effect his words seemed to have on the two prominent figures in this heart-rending drama. They were locked in each other's embrace, as though alone in the world together.

"Remove her!" repeated the pitiless tones. "It is a scandal for a woman to make such a scene as this, and at such a time. Why are my orders not obeyed?"

"She is the daughter of one of our most respected neighbours, Commandant," growled a burgher from the Sneeuw River. "We cannot lay hands on her."

"Ja, Ja. That is true," echoed several voices.

Schoeman was nonplussed. As Aletta had said, the prisoner could only be shot at the price of her life! Then a bright idea struck him.

"You have shown yourself a brave man hitherto, Kershaw," he called out. "Will you now show yourself a coward and shield yourself behind a woman? If not, put her away from you and stand forth."

"You hear what he says, Aletta? One more good-bye kiss, my very own, and then leave me. Ah God—how are we to part like this?"

“We will not part. If they shoot you they shall shoot me. But—they dare not, the cowards. They dare not. See!”

Now her tone rang hard and steely. Still clinging to him, so that he could not move from her side without using force, and yet leaving herself the freedom of her right hand, she had drawn a revolver—a very nasty looking and business-like one at that.

“Now come, brave burghers,” she cried. “Advance. The first man who makes a move on us I will shoot—will shoot dead. Then the next, and the next, and then myself. As God is in Heaven above I will do this.”

Not a move was made. They stared at each other stupidly, this crowd of armed men. She would be every bit as good as her word—the flash of her eyes told them so much, for it was that of a tigress when her cubs are threatened. Things were at a deadlock.

“The paper, Commandant! Ask him if he will sign the paper now,” was one of the suggestions thrown out.

“Ja, ja. He will sign it now,” cried several voices. “The paper! The paper!”

But Commandant Schoeman was in a cold, quiet sort of rage. He was being set at defiance in the face of his whole command, and that by a girl. He rejected this way out of the difficulty—rejected it curtly and uncompromisingly.

“Remove her,” he said again.

One or two of the older men stepped forward, intending to try the effect of remonstrance. But the revolver covered them instantly, aimed low, they noted, and there was such a deadly gleam in Aletta’s eyes that they stopped short and retired. Schoeman was white with rage. But before he could decide on what to do next, a diversion occurred, unlooked for and startling.

The sound of many hoofs clattering up the road over beyond the nek was borne to their ears. Whoever the new arrivals were, they were advancing at a furious gallop. The cry went up that the English were upon them, and for a moment the assembly was in a state of tumult.

Only for a moment, though. Schoeman, as cool and brave a man as ever lived, quelled the confusion by a word or two. For his ears had caught the challenge of their own vedette on the ridge, and the answer thereto in the taal. These were not enemies, he decided.

A few moments more a score of horsemen appeared on the nek, and rode straight into their midst without drawing rein. A largely built man with a full brown beard was riding at their head.

“Maagtig! It is Stephanus De la Rey!” was muttered from mouth to mouth. Aletta heard it, at the same time that she recognised her father.

“We are safe, sweetheart,” she murmured, beginning to tremble now that danger was over, as she supposed. “I said you should not die. Yes, God is good. We are safe now.”

But those there assembled had not reached the limit of their surprises for that day yet. The party consisted of about a score of armed Boers who had volunteered to accompany Stephanus De la Rey to Schoeman’s camp, but riding beside Stephanus was one who was not a Boer, being none other than Frank Wenlock, the escaped prisoner.

The burghers crowded around the new arrivals, the general feeling being that of intense relief. For now that the original offender was recaptured, there was no need to shoot this other.

“Where was he caught? Who captured him?” were some of the questions showered upon the party.

“Nobody captured me,” replied Frank, in a loud clear voice. “I have come in of my own accord, because I heard—no matter how—that Colvin was to be shot instead of me. So I came back as quickly as I could, and seem to be only just in time.”

“Is that true, brother De la Rey?” said Schoeman.

Stephanus assured them it was. Frank had joined him entirely of his own accord.

“You were to have been shot at sunrise yesterday morning, and it is past sunrise this morning,” went on Schoeman, turning to Frank. “It is you or the man yonder. Are you prepared to undergo our judgment on you?”

“Why, of course,” answered Frank bravely. “I am not going to allow Colvin to die in my place. Englishmen don’t do that sort of thing.”

“Guard him,” said Schoeman. “In ten minutes, be ready.”

Chapter Sixteen.

The Falling of the Scales.

At the end of the prescribed time Frank Wenlock was marched before the Commandant. His demeanour was very different now to what it had been upon the last occasion. All the swagger and aggressiveness had disappeared. His manner was quiet without subserviency.

Schoeman read him a long lecture upon his former shameful conduct and the magnanimity of the burghers of the Republics. Did he wish to apologise for his behaviour and the insulting references he had made to the President?

“Certainly, Mynheer Commandant,” replied Frank. “I’m a rough and ready harum-scarum sort of a chap, and I must have said some rather beastly things about people you all think a lot of. Well, I am sorry.”

“That is good,” said Schoeman. “Mynheer De la Rey has been pleading for you, and some others who have known you at home. Their esteemed words, and remembering that you are little more than a foolish boy, and the only son of your widowed mother, have decided us to spare the life which you had forfeited. But there are two courses, one of which we must exact from you—to be sent to Bloemfontein as an ordinary prisoner of war, or to pledge yourself not to serve against the Republics or those in arms on their behalf. In which case you may go free. Which do you choose?”

Frank’s face clouded a moment, wherein is a paradox. A moment ago he was expecting immediate death—now he was disappointed because denied the opportunity of meeting it every day or so.

“Choose your freedom, man,” said Stephanus kindly. “Remember you have a mother to take care of.”

“Very well. I will give you the pledge, Mynheer Commandant,” Frank answered. “But of course you will not have Colvin shot?”

“Under the circumstances, no,” was the cold reply.

“Hooroosh! You are gentlemen, you are, all of you!” cried Frank, his exuberance getting the better of him. “Wait till we meet in Schalkburg again. We’ll drink old Pritchett’s bar dry. But, now for Colvin.”

The latter had not moved from the spot on which he had stood to meet his death, and Aletta had not moved from him. She still held the revolver in her right hand, keeping jealous watch on the possibility of a suspicious move towards them. But for the moment the attention of everybody was riveted in the other direction. Not until her father approached her alone did she begin to feel reassured.

“Aletta, my child, you may put away that plaything,” called out Stephanus. “Colvin is safe now. I have Schoeman’s word for that. Besides, I am able to ensure his safety myself.”

“Aletta has saved me, Stephanus,” answered Colvin as they exchanged a great handgrip. “Look at this child of yours. But for her you would have been here just ten minutes too late. They had actually levelled the rifles when Aletta deliberately shielded me with herself. It just turned on the merest hairsbreadth of a pressure on the trigger. Look at her, Stephanus, and you will be looking on the bravest, sweetest, truest woman that ever brightened God’s world, and be as proud, to your dying day, that she is your own daughter as I am that she is to be my wife.”

“Er—I say, Colvin, old chap—how are you? I don’t want to intrude—only just to wring your flipper.” And Frank Wenlock, looking from one to the other, edged in, and performed that somewhat syllogistically described feat with a will. “It wasn’t my fault, Miss De la Rey,” he exclaimed. “I hadn’t the ghost of an idea they’d dream of meaning to shoot him till I heard it—well, by accident. When he got me safe off the premises yonder, he swore again and again that he wasn’t running the slightest risk himself—that he stood too much in with them—and so on. Otherwise I wouldn’t have budged. I have my faults, but I wouldn’t have allowed another fellow to get shot instead of me, and that’s why I came back now.”

“Look here, Frank,” said Colvin, “would you mind explaining precisely what on earth you are talking about?”

“Oh, come, that’s rather too good. Ain’t I talking about the night before last, when I was going to be shot in a few hours, and you came in and turned me loose. Eh?”

“Then you are talking of what never took place. As sure as I stand here, the last time I saw you was when you were playing the fool there in front of Schoeman and the rest, simply committing suicide like the consummate ass you were, and always have been. As for turning you loose, I couldn’t have done so even if I’d wanted to. Old Schoeman took jolly good care of that by putting me under arrest myself.”

Frank stared, whistled, then shook his head.

“All I can say is then, that if it wasn’t you, it was your bally ghost. That’s all,” he said.

“Well, you’d better not talk about it any more, Frank,” said Stephanus. “Don’t you see, man? It’s a thing to forget now.”

“Oh—um—ah—of course, I see,” assented Frank readily.

“That may be, Stephanus,” said Colvin, “but I have assured the whole of this crowd upon my honour that I had no more to do with Frank’s escape than the man in the moon. And no more I had.”

“No—no—of course not, old chap,” cheerfully rejoined Frank, who didn’t believe a word of the other’s denial. “Well, after all, what’s the odds now? All’s well that ends well.”

“There’s some mystery behind all this,” said Colvin in a low tone to himself. But Aletta heard it. And then her own doubts came back to her. What if they had all been mistaken? There was evidently someone about who bore an extraordinary likeness to Colvin. Her own eyes had deceived her once. Yes, it was extraordinary.

“Mijn Baas! Mijn lieve Baas!”

Just outside the group stood Gert Bondelzwart. He had watched his opportunity to sidle up, for in a Boer laager native servants were not wont to move about with the same free and independent swagger as, say, in the suburbs of Cape Town. Colvin turned:

“Hullo, Gert, how did you get here?”

“Ah!” cried Stephanus, “you have to thank this rascal that I am here at all, Colvin. He it was who brought Aletta’s note telling me of the fix you were in, and killed one of my best horses in doing so, but that’s nothing. The wonder to me is he got through at all.”

“Ja, Baas. It was a wonder,” put in the Griqua. “Twice I had a volley fired at me, but I knew what delay would mean, so I wouldn’t stop. Ah, well, we came in time—we came in time. And the klein missis told me it didn’t matter if I killed the horse if only we did that.”

“Gert, you are a fine fellow, and I won’t forget in a hurry,” said Colvin, turning a very kindly glance upon his faithful servitor. “Why, what is all this about?”

For a new diversion had occurred. Was there to be no end to the events of that day? A party of burghers were riding up, but—Great Heaven! what was this? What did it mean? Who was that in their midst? Colvin Kershaw? Yet, there stood Colvin Kershaw. But—here he was too! Not a face in that crowd but was agape with wild amaze. What on earth did it mean? Was this man the devil in disguise, they asked, that he could be present in two bodies at the same time? Even the stolid philosophical Dutch nature was stirred to the core, as in breathless excitement the burghers awaited the explanation of the new arrivals with this exact replica of Colvin Kershaw in their midst.

The latter had dismounted with the rest, and, pulling out his pipe, began to fill it. Those looking on could not fail to note that in manner, in every movement, the resemblance between the two men was faultless. He, for his part, not yet having descried his duplicate, was lazily wondering what the deuce all these Dutchmen were looking so scared about.

Aletta, from where she stood, could see the stranger, and a perfect maze of bewilderment flitted across her countenance as she gazed at him. Then a sudden light leaped into her eyes.

“Colvin,” she murmured. “Is that your twin brother?”

“N-no. I have a half-brother somewhere in the world, last heard of in Vancouver. I haven’t seen him for years, but he wasn’t like me then. But brother or not, Aletta, I have an idea we have run my ‘double’ to earth at last.”

“I think so too—darling,” she whispered.

The stranger’s glance had now swept round to where they stood. He gave a start and a whistle of surprise; then approached them.

“I believe I must have struck the real Colvin at last,” he began, without ceremony. Here, again, standing together as they were, the height, the features, even the voices of the two men, were inimitably alike. Yet Aletta, with the eyes of love, and hearing sharpened by its spell, could detect a difference. Nobody else could, however.

“Yes, that is my name,” replied Colvin. “But—you are not Kenneth, surely?”

“I am, though. Look here,” fishing out two or three directed envelopes. “But—I’m rather glad to run into you at last. People are always hailing me as ‘Colvin,’ and abusing me for not wanting to know them again—you know—when I tell them I’m somebody else. It’s becoming a bore.”

“Well, Kenneth. I’m glad to see you, too, after all these years. You shall tell me about yourself by-and-by. But, first of all, would you mind telling me one thing. Have you been staying in Johannesburg some little while of late?”

“Rather—only just left it. Why? Oh, I suppose people have been mistaking me for you, is that it? Has its awkward sides sometimes, hasn’t it?”

“It easily may have,” replied Colvin, with a meaning in his tone, which one, at any rate, standing beside him thoroughly grasped.

“The Commandant wants you. Come!”

Kenneth Kershaw turned leisurely. Two armed burghers stood waiting.

“Oh, all right, I was forgetting. So-long, Colvin. We’ll have a great pow-pow by-and-by.”

They watched his retreating form.

“I think the mystery is for ever clear now, sweetheart,” said Colvin.

But Aletta could not speak. She could only press his arm in silence. All the agony she had suffered came back to her, as in a wave.

“I know what you are thinking, my darling one,” he went on softly. “But I don’t wonder you were taken in by the likeness. It is quite the most remarkable thing I ever saw.”

“Yet, I doubted you. You!”

“Love, think no more of that. Have you not really and truly drawn me out of the very jaws of death this morning? Ah! but our sky is indeed clear—dazzlingly clear now.”

“Tell me about this half-brother of yours, Colvin,” said Aletta presently. “Had you no idea he was in this country?”

“None whatever. For years we had lost sight of each other. The fact is, Aletta, I may as well tell you—though I wouldn’t anybody else—but the chap was rather a bad bargain—on two occasions, indeed, only escaped by the skin of his teeth from coming to mortal grief. I would even bet something he’ll come down on me to help him now, and if it’ll do him any good I will. But he may have improved by now. Some of us do with time, you know.”

It turned out even as Colvin had said. When Kenneth rejoined him for a little talk apart—after his interview with the Commandant—he spoke of his own affairs. He had been very much of a rolling stone, he explained, and now he wanted to settle down. He was going to turn over a new leaf entirely. Would Colvin help him a little?

The latter laughed drily.

“Whom are you going to settle down with, Kenneth?” he asked.

“The sweetest, prettiest, dearest little girl in the world.” (“That of course,” murmured the listener). “You know her, Colvin. It was thanks to my likeness to you that I did.”

“Name?”

“May Wenlock.”

“So? Do you know, Kenneth, this infernal likeness has put me to very serious inconvenience, and came within an ace of costing me my life? I suppose it was you who let out Frank Wenlock.”

“Of course it was. But don’t give it away.”

“No—no. But how did you manage to get here at all to do it without being spotted?”

“Oh, Adrian De la Rey fixed up all that. Of course I had no notion you were anywhere around.”

“I see,” said Colvin, on whom the whole ingenuity of the plot now flashed. All these witnesses against him were not perjured, then. They had been genuinely deceived. The other, watching him, had no intention of giving away his own share, direct or indirect, in the transaction, or his partnership with Adrian in that other matter. In the course of his somewhat eventful and very wandering life Kenneth Kershaw had never found overmuch scruple a paying commodity.

“Well, Kenneth, I’ll do what I can for you,” went on Colvin, “but I’m afraid it won’t be much. And the fact is I’m just taking on an ‘unlimited liability’ myself.”

“Yes, so I concluded just now, from appearances. Well, Colvin, I congratulate you heartily.”

They talked a little about money matters, and then Kenneth broke out:

“Hang it, Colvin; you are a good chap after all. I had always somehow figured you as a priggish and cautious and miserly sort, which was the secret of your luck; but I don’t believe there’s a man jack on earth who would have been as splendid and as generous under the circumstances.”

Colvin’s face softened. “Oh, it’s all right, old man. Don’t get making a speech,” he said. “I wish I could do more, but, as you see, I can’t.”

“See! Rather. And now, look here. I believe I am the bearer of some pretty good news. I didn’t tell you at first, because I wanted to see what sort of chap you were. Not, mind you,” he added, somewhat vehemently, “that I have any interested motive now, not a bit of it. Well—read that—and that.”

Fumbling in his pocket-book, he got out some slips of paper. They were press cuttings from English newspapers, and bore dates of about six weeks previously:

“By the death of Sir Charles Kershaw, Bart, of Slatterton Regis, Dorset, and Terracombe, Devon, which took place suddenly the day before yesterday, the title and both properties, together with considerable sums in personalty, devolve upon his next-of-kin, Mr Colvin Kershaw, at present believed to be in the Transvaal.”

In substance the notices were alike, albeit somewhat different in wording. Colvin reflected for a moment. Then he said:

“I suppose there’s no mistake. It’s rather sooner than I expected, Kenneth, but of course I did expect it sooner or later. I am glad enough for its emoluments, but personally I don’t care about the title. I fancy I shall grow awfully sick of hearing every cad call me by my Christian name. I say, though, Kenneth, we shall be able now to make a bigger thing of that scheme of ours, eh?”

“By Jove, you are a good chap, Colvin,” burst forth the other, understanding his meaning. But he did not let candour carry him far enough to own to the daring scheme he had formed for personating Colvin in the event of the fortune of war going against the latter, as it had so nearly and fatally done. Like scruple, candour was not always a paying commodity.

Colvin, for his part, was thinking with heartfelt gratitude and love, what a bright future he had to lay before Aletta. Kenneth, for his, was thinking, with a glow of satisfaction, that he was going to be very happy with May Wenlock, under vastly improved

circumstances, and that such a state of things was, after all, much more satisfactory than life on a far larger scale, but hampered with the recollection of a great deed of villainy, and the daily chances of detection as a fraud and impostor liable to the tender mercies of the criminal law.

Chapter Seventeen.

Conclusion.

Midnight.

The wind, singing in fitful puffs athwart the coarse grass belts which spring from the stony side of ridge or kopje, alone breaks the dead eerie silence, for the ordinary voices of the night, the cry of bird and beast, are stilled. Wild animate Nature has no place here now. The iron roar of the strife of man, the bellowing, crackling death message from man to man, spouting from steel throats, has driven away all such.

Silent enough now are the bleak, stony hillsides, albeit the day through they have been speaking, and their voice has been winged with death. Silent enough, too, are the men crouching here in long rows, cool, patient, alert; for on the success or failure of their strategy depends triumph or disaster and death. Silent as they are, every faculty is awake, ears open for the smallest sound, eyes strained through the far gloom where lies the British camp.

Hour upon hour has gone by like this, but most of these are men who live the life of the veldt, whose trained eyesight is well-nigh cat-like on such a night as this. They have measured the ground, too, and so disposed matters that they know within a yard and to a minute exactly where and when to open fire upon the advancing British whom their trustworthy emissaries shall guide into sure and wholesale destruction.

Adrian De la Rey, lying there in the darkness, is waiting and longing, as no other, for the deadly work to begin. How he will pour lead into these hated English, how every life taken shall be as the life of his hated English rival! No quarter shall any receive from his hand when the slaughter begins. In the darkness and wild confusion none will see, and if they do, what matter? He will shoot down these cursed rooineks like springbuck, he tells himself, even though they should bellow for mercy.

He has heard of the well-nigh miraculous escape of that rival, and the inopportune appearance of his own accomplice; has heard of it, not witnessed it, because he had sought to be despatched on outpost duty in the early hours of that morning which was to have brought his rival's death. Well, he would console himself with the thought that at any rate he had won Aletta. She had given him her promise, and he knew her well enough to be sure she would keep it. But what of his side of the bargain unfulfilled? He had thought of that. He would persuade her that the firing was to be a sham, and that the firing party were using blank cartridge. He could easily induce Roux and Delport to swear to this. Yet, it was inconvenient that Aletta had mustered up the courage to act as

she had done. He ought not to have overlooked such a contingency. Still, she could not go back upon her promise.

Then, in the darkness, those words return to him—words spoken by his victim on the very threshold of the tomb. “Within three days will death find you.” Words and tone alike appealed to the superstitious side of his nature then, and the effect remains now. Perhaps, however, the fact of his intended victim having escaped death might have robbed the forecast of its prophetic nature.

A barely audible whisper from his next door neighbour, and then but one thought alone can find place in Adrian’s mind. The moment has come. Gripping his Mauser in fierce, eager delight, he brings it forward on to the rest which he has already arranged for it. Pitch dark as it is, he knows to a yard where the first bullet will strike. At the same time, ever so faint a spark away in the blackness catches his glance and the glance of many another. It might be the friction of metal—momentary and accidental—upon a stone lying on the slope, or it might be a signal.

Soon a stealthy sound reaches each listening ear—the sound of footsteps drawing near in the darkness.

Nearer—nearer—and then— The whole ridge bursts into a line of flame and a deafening crackle as of a mighty hailstorm upon myriad iron roofs. Yet, great in volume as it is, not so great as to drown the wild, ringing British cheer as the khaki-clad figures, dimly visible in the unceasing flash of musketry, come surging up the slope, leaping, stumbling, falling, dropping down suddenly, only to spring up again and press on, the dreaded bayonet fixed, for the world-renowned charge before which nothing can stand. But the grim dwellers in these wild wastes are not to be turned so easily. A kopje hard by, silent hitherto, is now ringed with flame, and, caught in this terrible crossfire, the intrepid assailants are literally mown down, and for a few moments the slaughter is terrific.

Adrian De la Rey, lying in his shelter, is pouring in his shots—cool, well-directed and telling. The expression of hate and blood-lust upon his set features is well-nigh devilish; yet his mind preserves a murderous coolness, as he watches every chance, and never fails to take it. But he is in the very forefront of the fray, and in the wild confusion a knot of desperate British, not hearing, or disregarding, the “retire,” have charged with irresistible dash headlong on to his position. Their wild slogan is in his ears, and in the ears of those beside him. The points of the deadly bayonets gleam in the sheeting flashes, and then—and then—with the hard sickening pang which wrenches his very life away—he discharges his Mauser full in the face of the tall soldier, who topples heavily

back with a hole through his brain—and Briton and Boer lie feet to feet—facing each other as they fell.

Morning light—a truce—white flags here and there—the Red Cross symbol everywhere. The hillsides strewn with dead and dying and wounded, and up yonder, in their strongly entrenched laager in the background, Commandant Schoeman and the grim Republican leaders are viewing their many prisoners, impassive, laconic, and manifesting neither surprise nor elation over the efficiency of the trap so carefully laid for the discomfiture of a respected and brave enemy.

Below, on the ridge, Adrian De la Rey is lying—lying where he fell, the bayonet which had let out his life in a great gaping gash resting across his body as it had fallen from the dying grip of the soldier—his dead, rigid face staring upward to the sky.

Ratels Hoek again, peaceful and prosperous—the blue smoke curling up from its chimneys, the flocks and herds scattered over their grazing grounds in the broad valley, black ostriches, with snowy wing-plumes, stalking truculently along the wire fences in the “camps”—Ratels Hoek peaceful and prosperous, as though no stern fratricidal war were going on not so very many miles away.

Down by the river bank two persons are wandering in easy restful happiness, and these two we should recognise, for they have borne their part throughout the time of trial and of storm, which for them, at any rate, has come to an end—has found its climax in the dawn of a lifelong joy and peace.

Around, the sunlight bathes, in a misty shimmer, the roll of veldt, and the slope of mountain and iron-faced cliff. The air, clear and fragrant and balmy, is redolent of the very breath of a new life, and the sky, arching above in unbroken and cloudless blue, is even as their own clear and dazzling horizon. They are talking of many things, these two—of the dark days of doubt and trial, and peril—all of which have but served to refine and cement their great and mutual love—of the wedding which took place but a few days ago in Schalkburg, on such a scale never before witnessed in that somnolent dorp. “One would have thought it Nachtmal time” had been the comment of more than one of the guests, so extensive was the gathering assembled to do honour to that most substantial and respected burgher, Stephanus De la Rey; and indeed the gathering had been as homogeneous as extensive—for every conceivable relative of the bride, whether on the paternal or maternal side, and every casual acquaintance or even stranger, had flocked into Schalkburg to witness it. The church, tightly packed as it was, would not hold them all, nor yet would Ratels Hoek, whither all who could, subsequently repaired to spend the next two days and nights in uninterrupted festivity.

Of all this they were talking now, these two—and of the hundred and one droll and ludicrous incidents which had so appealed to the humorous side of both of them—the outspoken comments of the blunt old farmers and their vrouws as to Stephanus De la Rey marrying his eldest girl to an Englishman, under the palliative circumstances, however, that perhaps a rich Englishman was a better match than an impoverished Boer, after all; of the hopeless efforts to convince many of them that Colvin was not the Governor, merely because he had the right to prefix his name with “Sir”; of old Tant’ Plessis and her conviction that the great Calvinus was a greater man than even she had thought, since he had been able to leave his grandson so much money; of Kenneth Kershaw, who while making a most efficient “best man,” had given rise to endless chaff to the effect that he ought to be branded and ear-marked, lest at the last moment Mynheer should marry him to Aletta by mistake; of Frank Wenlock, who waxed so exuberant amid all the festivities, that he came near starting a little war of his own right in the midst of the convivialities; of Mynheer Albertyn himself, who while congratulating the pair, and fingering gratefully by far the biggest fee he had ever seen in the whole of his professional career, had remarked drily, and not altogether jocosely, that he vastly preferred starting a man on fresh terms in this life to seeing him off into another; of the exceeding attractiveness in their array of bridesmaids of Andrina and Condaas, and a bevy of girl relatives pressed into the service for the occasion; of the absence of May Wenlock, and the future before her and Kenneth.

This brought them down to serious matters and the fate of Adrian.

“Poor chap,” Colvin was saying. “Honestly, I don’t bear him the slightest ill-feeling. I suppose I did come between you and him, dearest, and if that is not enough to justify him in hating me worse than Satan, will you tell me what is?”

Aletta pressed his arm lovingly and for a moment said nothing. Then:

“That is so like you, Colvin,” she said. “You are generosity itself, my darling. Yes, we can afford to think kindly of poor Adrian now. But, oh Colvin—what if you find afterwards that I am not able to make you happy? Remember, I did not know who you were. I thought you were here among us to settle for life and farm.”

“Would it have made any difference if you had known, Lady Kershaw?” he asked quizzically, slipping an arm round her, and looking down into her eyes.

“Not in my loving you,” she answered. “But remember, I am only a Boer girl, after all.”

“Only a what? Only the bravest, truest, sweetest, most refined and lovable specimen of womanhood I ever encountered in a tolerably wide experience. Only—”

“Kwaak—kwaak—kwaa! Kwaak—kwaak—kwaa!”

Shrilling forth his harsh call, an old cock koorhaan sprang upward from the thorn bushes on the opposite river bank, and went circling away over the ostrich camps, yelling up half a dozen others in his flight. The eyes of these two people met, and both broke into a hearty laugh.

“Why, I believe that’s the same old joker I spared when we were here together that day, Aletta,” said Colvin, turning to watch the disappearing bird.

“Yes, it must be, for we are on the same spot. Colvin, my darling, our happiness first came to us on this very spot where we are standing. Do you remember? And now that we stand here again, it is complete for ever. Is it not?”

“For ever,” he answered, a grateful solemnity in his voice.

And here, reader, we will leave them.

The End.