# The Triumph Of Hilary Blachland VOL.I

**By**
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Freeditorial

# "THE TRIUMPH OF HILARY BLACHLAND VOL.I

## Chapter One

## The Camp on the Matya'mhlope

"There! That is Umzilikazi's grave," said Christian Sybrandt, pointing out a towering pile of rocks some little way off, across the valley.

"Is it? Let's go and have a look at it then," was the prompt reply. But immediately upon having made it, the second speaker knew that he had spoken like a fool, for the first gave a short laugh.

"Go over and have a look at it?" he echoed. "Why we'd all be cut to bits before we got within half a mile. It's holy ground, man; guarded, picketed by armed majara, rigidly watched, day and night. You couldn't get near it, no, not at any price."

"Well, I've a great notion to try," persisted the other, to the imaginative side of whose temperament the place of sepulture of that remarkable savage, the remorseless, all-destroying war-leader, the founder and consolidator of a martial nation, irresistibly appealed, no less than the mystery and peril enshrouding the undertaking did to the adventurous side. "No white man has ever seen it close, I think you said, Sybrandt?"

"That's so. And you won't constitute the exception, Blachland. You'll never get there; and, if you did, you'd never get away."

"Yet it would be interesting to constitute that exception," persisted the other. "I like doing things that nobody else has done."

"Well, even if you escaped the five hundred to one chances against you, you wouldn't have the satisfaction of talking about it—not as long as you are in this country, at all events; for let even so much as a whisper get about that you had done such a thing, and your life wouldn't be worth a week's purchase."

The two men were riding over the site of the old Mahlahlanhlela Kraal—distinguishable by its great circle of nearly overgrown hut floors, and sherds of rude pottery, erewhile the head-quarters of a favourite regiment of the Great King, whose tomb they were viewing. There it rose, that tomb, away on the right, a great pile standing boldly against the sky—prominent from the outermost edge of the rugged Matopo, all tumbled rocks, and granite boulders and scant tree growth; in front, an undulating sweep, bounded by

the Inyoka ridge, the site of old Bulawayo. The two men were dressed in serviceable and well-worn buckskin, and carried rifles. Following a little distance behind them came a group of natives, whose burden, the meat and other spoils of a young sable antelope bull, testified to the nature of the errand from which they were returning.

The countenance of both, darkened by sun and exposure, wore the same expression of blended repose and latent alertness which a roving up-country life seems invariably to produce. Sybrandt—he had dropped the original "Van"—was Dutch by birth, though English by sympathies and associations. Trader, hunter, gold-prospector, adventurer all round, his life had been spent mainly on the confines of civilisation, or far beyond the same; and what he did not know about natives, from the Zambesi to Durban, from Inhambane to Walfisch Bay, nobody else did. He, for his part, was no less known to them. "U' Klistiaan," as they called him, in adaptation of his baptismal name, stood to them as a white man who commanded their respect and confidence far and wide. Of cool courage and unflinching resolution, a firm friend, and, while enmity lasted, a determined and dangerous foe, he stood as high in the estimation of the Zulu-speaking races as these qualifications could place him, which is to say at the highest. He was a man of about forty; in outward aspect of medium height and of sturdy and powerful build, his dark hair and pointed beard just turning iron grey. His companion, whom we heard him address by the name of Blachland, was something of a mystery. Nobody knew much, if anything, about him, except that originally he was an English importation with some years of up-country experience, and that he came and went sporadically, disappearing for a time, and turning up again as if he had been away about a week, perfectly unexplanatory, uncommunicative, as to his doings in the interim. He was a tall dark man, who might be any age compatible with a hardy frame and untiring energy. A keen sportsman and keener adventurer, he was ever on the look out for the possibilities underlying up-country life; and, in curious contrast to his normally hard and philosophic nature, was a tendency to fits of almost boyish excitement and recklessness; which would break out when least expected, and with apparently inadequate motive, and which were wont to land their owner in positions of peril or difficulty, but which, by a curious compensating element in nature, were none the less available to extricate him therefrom right at the critical moment.

Now he made no reply to his companion's very confident and more than ominous forecast. But more than one wistful glance did he send in the direction of the great natural mausoleum. The King's grave! This rock sepulchre would hold all that was weird and uncommon, and into it no European eye had ever gazed. That was sufficient for one of Hilary Blachland's temperament.

Soon the last resting-place of Umzilikazi, the Great King, was hidden from sight behind. A few miles more and a strange phenomenon as of a mighty cloud of dust and smoke,

crowning a distant eminence, broke upon the view in front, and through it a vast cluster of round grass roofs, from the silent throne of the dead the pair had turned to front the throne of the living, pulsating with humanity and its primitive impulses—Bulawayo, the great kraal of Lo Bengula, son of that Umzilikazi whose bones lay within the sombre heart of that great rock pile behind.

Not on this, however, were their steps bent. Down in the valley a camp was set, and the white tents of three waggons rose among the scant bush on the banks of the Matya'mhlope, at the foot of the abrupt ridge of shining stones which gives to that insignificant river its name. And as our two wayfarers gained it the sun dropped, and in this latitude without twilight the night began to fall.

Two other white men were seated in camp as these two arrived. Like Christian Sybrandt, Young and Pemberton were traders and hunters, and looked it; whereas the presence of Hilary Blachland with the outfit was inconsequent. But that word more than rather summed up Hilary Blachland. He was all keenness, however, on anything new and strange, and now the impression had grown and grown upon him that Umzilikazi's grave came under both these qualifying adjectives.

Wherefore later, when the fire was roaring up brightly with red and cheery glow, and the sable antelope steaks, hot and fizzing, had been transferred from the frying-pan to the metal enamelled camp plates, he must needs drag in the subject again.

Pemberton, the elder of the other two traders, whistled and shook his heavy beard.

"It's a thing that won't bear meddling with," was his laconic dictum.

"Well, I should like to meddle with it to the extent of having a look at it anyway," persisted Blachland. "Any one here ever seen it close, by the way?"

"No, nor likely to," answered Young. "I saw it once, about a mile off; near enough to get a good look at it through a glass. It's a tall cleft, running right up the face of the boulder, and overhung by another boulder like a porch. There's a tree in front too. I'd just time to see so much when a lot of majara, spotting my binoculars, started for me, yelling like blazes. I judged it wise to take a bee-line for Bulawayo, and get under old Lo Ben's wing; but they ran me hard all the way—got there nearly as soon as I did, and clamoured to be allowed to kill me. Lo Ben wouldn't have that, but he hinted to me quietly that the country wouldn't be healthy for a year or so, and I took the hint. No, take my advice and leave it alone. Apart from the risk, there's no luck meddling with such places—no, none."

“Oh, skittles about luck. It’s the risk I take count of, and that only. The fact is, Young, you old up-country men are as superstitious as sailors,” returned Blachland, with that strange, eager restlessness which now and then, and generally unexpectedly, obtruded to give the lie to his ordinarily calm and immobile demeanour. “I’ll risk the majara—luck doesn’t count,—and sooner or later I’ll explore Umzilikazi’s grave.”

Sybrandt was conscious of what, in a less self-contained man, would have been an obvious start at these words. A dark form had glided silently in among them all. It was only one of their camp servants, but—a native of the country. What if he had heard—had understood? He knew some English too!

“Even if you got through the pickets of majara, Blachland,” struck in Sybrandt, when this man had retired; “you’d have another factor to reckon with. The King’s Snake.”

“Eh?”

“The King’s Snake.”

Blachland spluttered. “See here, Sybrandt,” he said. “Are you seriously trying to fill me up? Me, mind? No, it can’t be.”

“Well, the Matabele say there’s a big snake mounting guard over Umzilikazi’s remains. It is the King’s spirit which has passed into the snake. That is why the snake comes in such a lot when they go periodically and give the sibonga at his grave.”

“And you believe that?”

“They say so.”

“What sort of a snake is it?”

“A black imamba. Mind you, I’ve never seen it.”

“Don’t you be so cocksure about everything, Blachland,” grunted Pemberton, who was fast dropping asleep. “Luck or no luck, there’s mighty rum things happen you can’t explain, nor scare up any sort of reason for.”

“Won’t do—no, not for half a minute,” returned the other, briskly and decisively. “You can explain everything; and as for luck, and all that sort of thing—why, it’s only fit for old women, and the lower orders.”

Pemberton grunted again, and more sleepily still. His pipe at that moment fell out of his mouth, and he lurched over, fast asleep. Sybrandt, too, was nodding, but through his drowsiness he noticed that the native, a low-class Matabele, Hlangulu by name, was moving about, as though trying to sidle up near enough to catch some of the conversation. He was drowsy, however, and soon dropped off.

Blachland, sitting there, felt anything but inclined for sleep. This new idea had caught on to his mind with a powerful hold. It was full of risk, and the object to be attained nil. The snake story he dismissed as sheer savage legend, childish and poor even as such. The luck theory, propounded by Pemberton, smacked of the turnip-fed lore of the average chaw-bacon in rural England. No, the risk lay in the picket-guard. That, to his mind, constituted the real peril, and the only one. It, however, might be avoided; and, the more he thought about it, the more resolved was Hilary Blachland to penetrate the forbidden recess, to explore the tomb of the warrior King, and that at any risk.

Strangely wakeful, he lounged there, filling and lighting pipe after pipe of good Magaliesberg. The stars gleamed forth from the dark vault, so bright and clear and lamp-like in the glow of night in those high, subtropical latitudes, that it seemed as though the hand had but to be stretched forth to grasp them. Away over the veldt, jackals yelped; and the glimmer of the camp fire, dying low, emboldened the hungry little beasts to come nearer and nearer, attracted by the fresh meat brought in during that afternoon. The native followers, their heads in their blankets, had ceased their sonorous hum of gossip, and were mingling their snores with the somewhat discomforting sounds emitted by the nostrils of Pemberton. Away on the northern sky-line, a faint glow still hung, and from time to time a muffled snatch of far-away song. A dance of some sort was in late progress at the King's kraal, but such had no novelty for Blachland. The exploration of the King's grave, however, had; and he could think upon nothing else. Yet, could he have foreseen, his companions had uttered words of sound wisdom. He had better have left Umzilikazi's sepulchre severely alone.

## Chapter Two.

## Before the King.

"Tumble out, Blachland. We've got to go up and interview the King." Thus Sybrandt at an early hour on the following morning. "And," he added in a low voice, "I hope the indaba will end satisfactorily, that's all."

"Why shouldn't it?" was the rather sleepy rejoinder. And the speaker kicked off his blanket, and, sitting up, yawned and stretched himself.

Three savage-looking Matabele were squatted on the ground just within the camp. They were majara, and were arrayed in full regimentals, i.e. fantastic bedizenments of cowhair and monkey-skin, and their heads crowned with the isiqoba, or ball of feathers; one long plume from the wing of a crested crane stuck into this, pointing aloft like a horn. The expression of their faces was that of truculent contempt, as their glance roamed scornfully from the camp servants, moving about their divers occupations, to the white men, to whom they were bearers of a peremptory summons. It was significant of the ominous character of the latter, no less than of the temper of arrogant hostility felt towards the whites by the younger men of the nation, that these sat there, toying with the blades of their assegais and battle-axes; for a remonstrance from Sybrandt against so gross a violation of etiquette as to enter a friendly camp with weapons in their hands had been met by a curt refusal to disarm, on the ground that they were King's warriors, and, further, that they were of the King's bodyguard, and, as such, were armed, even in the presence of the Great Great One himself.

"I only hope no inkling of what we were talking about yesterday has got wind, Blachland," explained Sybrandt, seriously. "If Lo Ben got such a notion into his head—why then, good night. As to which, do you happen to notice that one of our fellows is missing? No, no; don't say his name. Those three jokers have got their ears wide open, and are smart at putting two and two together."

Thoroughly awake now, Blachland, looking around, became aware of the significance of the other's statement. One of the "boys" was missing, and that the one who had seemed to be overhearing when they had talked on that dangerous topic—Hlangulu, the Matabele.

"Hurry now, Amakiwa," growled one of the messengers. "Is not the Great Great One waiting?"

“He can wait a little longer, umfane,” rejoined Pemberton, tranquilly sipping his coffee, which was hot.

“Ah! Who but a madman would provoke the wrath of the Black Bull?” growled the savage.

Pemberton nodded. “The Black Bull in this case is no longer a calf,” he replied. “Therefore he will know that everything cannot be done in a hurry.”

The three savages scowled and muttered. In their heart of hearts they had an immense respect for these cool, imperturbable white men, so entirely but unobtrusively fearless.

At last the latter arose, and, buckling on their bandoliers and taking their rifles, declared that they were ready.

“Put those down. The Great Great One has sent for you. You cannot go before him armed,” said one of the envoys insolently, pointing with his knob stick. But for all the effect the injunction had upon those to whom it was addressed, it might just as well not have been uttered. The slightest possible raising of an eyebrow alone showed that they had so much as heard it. The horses were brought round saddled, and, mounting, they started, a kind of instinct moving them to outmanoeuvre each attempt of their truculent summoners to bring up the rear. But as they moved out of camp the idea was the same in all four minds—whether they were destined ever to re-enter it.

Lo Bengula was, at that time, friendly to the English. Sick of haggling with rival concession-mongers, he had finally concluded terms for the occupation of adjacent Mashunaland, and, having made the best of a bad job, felt relieved that his lines were henceforth cast in peaceful and pleasant places. But he reckoned without the nation which produced Drake and Hawkins, Raleigh and Clive, and—Cecil Rhodes.

He reckoned, also, without his own fighting men. The bumptiousness of these was inordinate, overwhelming. They were fully convinced they could whip all creation—that agglomeration being represented hither to by the inferior tribes, which they had reduced and decimated ever since the exodus from Zululand. Now these troublesome whites were coming into the country by threes and fours—why not make an end of them before they became too numerous? Umzilikazi would have done this—Umzilikazi, that Elephant who had made the nation what it was. So they murmured against Lo Bengula, in so far as they dared, and that was a good deal, for the voice of a nation can make itself heard, even against a despot, when the potentate thinks fit to run counter to its sense.

Now, three out of the four knew the King intimately; the other, Blachland to wit, fairly well. They had frequently visited him at Bulawayo, either spontaneously, or in compliance with a request. But never had they been sent for in such fashion that a trio of armed and insolent youths were thought good enough to be the bearers of the King's message.

Upon this circumstance, and the disappearance of Hlangulu, Christian Sybrandt was expatiating, as they took their way leisurely along the slope where the business part of the present town of Bulawayo now stands, for Lo Bengula's great place crowned the rise some two miles to the eastward. And here signs of busy life were already apparent. Files of women, bearers of wood or water, were stepping along; bunches of cattle being driven or herded; here and there, men, in groups or singly, proceeding to, or returning from the great kraal, their deep-toned voices rising upon the air in contrast to the clearer trebles of the feminine ones, though none the less rich and melodious.

And above the immense kraal, with its ring of clustering huts, a blue smoke cloud, drifting lazily to leeward, as though the place were in a state of conflagration. A peaceful, pastoral scene, but that the sun glinted on the blades of the assegais carried by the men, and on the sheen of their miniature shields.

Nor were other symptoms wanting, and those of a far more ominous character, which should bring home to our party the full fact that they were in the heart of a nation of turbulent and ruthless barbarians; for as they drew nearer to the great kraal, a mighty hubbub arose within its precincts, and there emerged from the stockade a dark surging crowd of armed warriors. These, uttering a ferocious shout, made straight for the new arrivals.

"Steady, Blachland," enjoined Sybrandt, in a low tone. "Don't lose your head, man; keep cool. It's the only thing to be done."

The warning was needed, for he to whom it was addressed had already shown signs of preparing to resist this hostile threatening demonstration. The gravity of the tone in which it was uttered, however, went far to neutralise in his mind the reassuring effect of the imperturbable aspect of his companions.

The swarm of savages came crowding round the four white men, brandishing their assegais and battle-axes, and frightening the horses not a little. But two Bechuana boys who were attendant upon their masters they managed to frighten a good deal more. These turned grey with terror, and really there was some excuse for it.

For each had been seized by a tall ruffian, who, gripping him by the throat, was making believe to rip him with a great assegai brandished in front of the miserable wretch's face, every now and then letting him feel the point sufficiently to make him think the stroke already dealt, causing the victim to yell and whine with terror. The while his white masters could do nothing to protect him, their efforts being needed to calm and restrain their badly-frightened horses: an element of the grotesque which evoked roars of bass laughter from the boisterous and bloodthirsty crowd.

"Cease this fooling!" shouted Sybrandt, in the Sindabele tongue. "Is this how you treat the King's guests? Make way. We are bound upon the King's business."

"The King's business!" echoed the warriors. "The King's business! Ah! ah! We too are bound upon the King's business. Come and see, Amakiwa. Come and see how we black ones, the children of the King, the Eater-up of the Disobedient, perform his bidding."

Then, for the first time, our party became aware that in the midst of the crowd were two men who had been dragged along by raw-hide thongs noosed round their necks; and, their horses having quieted down, they were able to observe what was to follow. That the poor wretches were about to be sacrificed in some hideous and savage fashion was only too obvious, and they themselves could not refuse to witness this horror, for the reason that to do so would be, in the present mood of these fiends, almost tantamount to throwing away their own lives.

"What is their offence, Sikala-kala?" asked Sybrandt, addressing a man he knew.

"Their offence? Au! it is great. They have gone too near the Esibayaneni, the sacred place where the King, the Great Great One, practises mutt. What offence can be greater than such?"

The victims, their countenances set and stony with fear, were now seized and held by many a pair of powerful and willing hands. Then, with the blade of a great assegai, their ears were deliberately shorn from their heads. A roar of delight went up from the barbarous spectators, who shouted lustily in praise of the King.

"So said the Great Great One: 'They had ears, but their ears heard what it was not lawful they should hear, so they must hear no more!' Is he not wise? Au! the wisdom of the calf of Matyobane!"

Again the executioners closed around their victims. A moment more and they parted. They were holding up to the crowd their victims' eyes. The roars of delight rose in redoubled volume.

“So said the Black One: ‘They had eyes, but they saw what it was not lawful for them to look upon. So they must see no more!’ Au! the greatness of the Elephant whose tread shaketh the world!”

There was a tigerish note in the utterance of this horrible paean which might well have made the white spectators shudder. Whatever they felt, however, they must show nothing.

“I shall be deadly sick directly,” muttered Blachland; and all wondered what horror was yet to come.

The two blinded and mutilated wretches were writhing and moaning, and begging piteously for the boon of death to end their terrible sufferings. But their fiendish tormentors were engaged in far too congenial a task to be in any undue hurry to end it. It is only fair to record that to the victims themselves it would have been equally congenial were the positions reversed. At last, however, the executioners again stepped forward.

“So said the Ruler of Nations,” they bellowed, their short-handled heavy knob sticks held aloft: “These two had the power of thought. They used that power to pry into what it is not lawful for them even to think about. A man without brains cannot think. Let them therefore think no more.”

And with these two last words of the King’s sentence—terse, remorseless in the simplicity of its barbarous logic—the heavy knob sticks swept down with a horrid crunch as of the pulverising of bones. Another and another. The sufferings of the miserable wretches were over at last. Their death struggles had ceased, and they lay stark and motionless, their skulls literally battered to pieces.

Not the most hardened and philosophical of the white spectators could entirely conceal the expressions of loathing and repulsion which were stamped upon each countenance as they turned away from this horrid sight. On that of Blachland it was far the most plainly marked, and seemed to afford the ferocious crowd the liveliest satisfaction.

“See there, Amakiwa,” they shouted. “Look and behold. It is not well to pry into forbidden things. Behold the King’s justice.”

And again they chorused forth volleys of sibonga, i.e. the royal praises.

Was it merely a coincidence that their looks and the significance of the remark seemed to be directed peculiarly at Blachland? He himself was not the only one who thought so.

“What do you think now, Blachland?” said Young, dryly. “Better leave that little exploration scheme you were planning strictly alone, eh?”

“Well, I believe I had,” was the answer.

And now the armed warriors clustered round the white men. Some were chatting with Christian Sybrandt as they moved upward to the great kraal, for they had insisted on forming a sort of escort for their visitors; or, as these far more resembled, their prisoners. They were in better humour now, after their late diversion, but still there were plenty who shook their assegais towards the latter, growling out threats.

And as they approached the vast enclosure, the same thought was foremost in the minds of all four. Something had gone wrong. They could only hope it was not as they suspected. They were absolutely at the mercy of a suspicious barbarian despot, the objects of the fanatical hate of his people. What that “mercy” might mean they had just had a grimly convincing object lesson.

## Chapter Three.

## What Happened at Bulawayo.

As they entered the outer enclosure, a deep humming roar vibrated upon the air. Two regiments, fully armed, were squatted in a great crescent, facing the King's private quarters, and were beguiling the time with a very energetic war-song—while half a dozen warriors, at intervals of space apart, were indulging in the performance of gwaza, stabbing furiously in the air, right and left, bellowing forth their deeds of "dering-do" and pantomiming how they had done them—leaping high off the ground or spinning round on one leg. The while, the great crescent of dark bodies, and particoloured shields, and fantastic headgear, swaying to the rhythmic chant; the sparkle and gleam of assegais; the entirely savage note of anticipation conveyed by nearly two thousand excited voices, constituted a spectacle as imposing as it was indisputably awe-inspiring.

"The Imbizo and Induba regiments," said Sybrandt, with a glance at this martial array.

But with their appearance the song ceased, and the warriors composing this end of the crescent jumped up, and came crowding around, in much the same rowdy and threatening fashion which had distinguished the execution party down in the valley.

"Lay down your arms, Amakiwa!" they shouted. "Au! it is death to come armed within the gates of the Ruler of the World."

"It has never been death before—not for us," replied Sybrandt. "At the inner gate, yes—we disarm; not at the outer."

The answer only served to redouble the uproar. Assegais were flourished in the faces of the four white men—for they had already dismounted—accompanied by blood-curdling threats, in such wise as would surely have tried the nerves of any one less seasoned. The while Sybrandt had been looking round for some one in authority.

"Greeting, Sikombo," he cried, as his glance met that of a tall head-ringed man, who was strolling leisurely towards the racket. "These boys of thine are in high spirits," he added good-humouredly.

The crowd parted to make way for the new arrival, as in duty bound, for he was an induna of no small importance, and related to the King by marriage.

"I see you, Klistiaan," replied the other, extending his greeting to the rest of the party.

But even the presence of the induna could not restrain the turbulent aggressiveness of the warriors. They continued to clamour against the white men, whom they demanded should disarm here instead of at the inner gate.

To this demand, Sybrandt, who was tacitly allowed by the others to take the lead in all matters of native etiquette or diplomacy—did not deem it advisable to accede. But something in Sikombo's face caused him to change his mind, and, having done so, the next best thing was to do it with a good grace.

"What does it matter?" he said genially. "A little way here, or a little way there." And he stood his rifle against the fence, an example which was followed by the others. The warriors then fell back, still with muttered threats; and, accompanied by the induna, the four white men crossed the open space to the gate of the King's stockade.

There perforce they had to wait, for the barbarian monarch of Zulu descent and tradition is, in practice, in no greater hurry to receive those who come to consult him than is the average doctor or lawyer of twentieth-century England, however eager he may be in his heart of hearts to do so, and the last of the Matabele kings was not the man to forget what was due to his exalted position.

"What does it all mean, Sybrandt?" said Blachland, as, sitting down upon the dusty ground, they lighted their pipes. "Why are the swine so infernally aggressive? What does it mean anyhow?"

"Mean?" returned Young, answering for Sybrandt, who was talking to the induna, Sikombo. "Why, it means that our people yonder will soon have to fight like blazes if they don't want their throats cut,"—with a jerk of the hand in the direction of the newly occupied Mashunaland. "The majara are bound to force Lo Ben's hand—if they haven't already."

From all sides of the great kraal the ground sloped away in gentle declivity, and the situation commanded a wide and pleasant view in the golden sunlight, and beneath the vivid blue of a cloudless subtropical sky. To the north and west the dark, rolling, bush-clad undulations beyond the Umguza River—eastward again, the plain, dotted with several small kraals, each contributing its blue smoke reek, led the eye on to the long flat-topped Intaba-'Zinduna. Down in the valley bottom—where now stands the huge straggling town, humming with life and commerce—vast cornfields, waving with plumed maize and the beer-yielding amabele; and away southward the shining rocky ridge of the Matya'mhlope; while, dappling the plain, far and near, thousands of multi-coloured cattle—the King's herds—completed the scene of pleasant and pastoral prosperity. In

strange contrast to which the cloud of armed warriors, squatted within the gates, chanting their menacing and barbarous strophes.

Suddenly these were hushed, so suddenly indeed as to be almost startling. For other voices were raised, coming from the stockade which railed in the esibayaneni—the sanctum sanctorum. They were those of the royal "praisers" stentoriously shouting forth the king's sibonga:—

"He comes—the Lion!"—and they roared.

"Behold him—the Bull, the black calf of Matyobane!"—and at this they bellowed.

"He is the Eagle which preys upon the world!"—here they screamed; and as each imitative shout was taken up by the armed regiments, going through every conceivable form of animal voice—the growling of leopards, the hissing of serpents, even to the sonorous croak of the bull-frog—the result was indescribably terrific and deafening. Then it ceased as suddenly as the war-song had ceased.

The King had appeared. Advancing a few steps from the gateway, he paused and stood surveying the gathering. Then, cleaving the silence in thunder tones, there volleyed forth from every throat the salute royal—

"Kumalo!"

Over the wide slopes without it rolled and echoed. Voices far and near—single voices, and voices in groups—the melodious voices of women at work in the cornfields—all who heard it echoed it back, now clear, now faint and mellowed by distance—

"Kumalo!"

There was that in the aspect of the King as he stood thus, his massive features stern and gloomy as he frowned down upon those whose homage he was receiving, his attitude haughty and majestic to the last degree, which was calculated to strike awe into the white beholders if only through the consciousness of how absolutely they were in his power. He had discarded all European attempts at adornment, and was clad in nothing but the inevitable mútya and a kaross made of the dressed skin of a lioness, thrown carelessly over his shoulders. His shaven head was surmounted just above the forehead by the small Matabele ring, a far less dignified-looking form of crest than the large Zulu one. Then, as he advanced a few steps further, with head thrown back, and his form, though bulky, erect and commanding, a more majestic-looking savage it would be hard to imagine.

A massive chair, carved out of a single tree stump, was now set by one of the attendants, and as Lo Bengula enthroned himself upon it, again the mighty shouts of praise rent the air—

"Thou art the child of the sun!"

"Blanket, covering thy people!"

"King mountain of the Matopo!"

"Elephant whose tread shaketh the world!"

"Eater-up of Zwang'indaba!"

"Crocodile, who maketh our rivers to flow clear water!"

"Rhinoceros!"

Such, and many more, were the attributes wherewith they hailed their monarch, who was, to all intents and purposes, their god. Then the chorus altered. A new and more ominous clamour now expressed its burden. It became hostile and bloodthirsty in intent towards the white strangers within their gates.

Who were these whites? chanted the warriors. It were better to make an end of them. They were but the advance-guard of many more—swarms upon swarms of them—even as the few locusts who constituted the advance-guard of swarms upon swarms of that red locust, the devourer, which had not been known in the land before the Amakiwa had been allowed to come and settle in the land. The locusts had settled and were devouring everything—the Amakiwa had settled and were devouring everything. Let them be stamped out.

Those thus referred to sat still and said nothing. For all the effect the bloodthirsty howling had upon them outwardly, they might just as well not have heard it. Lo Bengula sat immovable in frowning abstraction. The two regiments, waxing more and more excited, began to close in nearer. As warriors armed for some service, they were allowed to approach that near the King, with their weapons and shields. They growled and mouthed around their white visitors, and one, at any rate, of these expected to feel the assegai through his back any moment.

But at this juncture one of the indunas seated near the King leaned forward, and spoke. He was a very old man, lean and tall, and, before the stoop of age had overtaken him must have been very tall indeed.

“Peace, children,” he rebuked. “The dogs of the King have other game to hunt. These Amakiwa are not given to you to hunt. They are the friends of the Black Elephant.”

Growls of dissatisfaction greeted this reproof, which seemed not supported by Lo Bengula.

“Have done, then,” thundered the old induna. “Get back, dogs, who have but yesterday learned to yap. Offend ye the ears of the Great Great One with your yelpings? Get back!”

This time the rebuke answered. Respect for age and authority is among the Bantu races instinctive and immense, and the speaker in this instance represented both, for he had participated in the exodus from Zululand, under Umzilikazi, early in the century, and had been one of that potentate’s most trusted indunas before Lo Bengula was born; wherefore the malcontents shrunk back, with stifled growlings, to take up their former position at a distance.

Order being restored, Sybrandt judged it time to open the proceedings.

“Kumalo!” he began, saluting the King, his companions joining.

“I see you, Klistiaan,” returned Lo Bengula, somewhat surlily. “All of you.”

“The King has sent for us, and we have come,” went on Sybrandt. “Strange messengers entered our camp this morning, three majara, armed. Furthermore, they were rude.”

“Au!” exclaimed Lo Bengula, with a shake of the head. “See you not, Klistiaan, my fighting men love not white people just now. It would be better, indeed, if such were to leave the country. It is no longer the healthy season for white people here.”

Which apparently commonplace remark conveyed to these experienced listeners, three distinct meanings—first, that their position was exceedingly dangerous; secondly, that Lo Bengula was aware that even his authority might be insufficient to protect them from the fanatical hate of his warriors, but did not choose to say so in so many words; and lastly, the tone in which it was uttered conveyed a royal command. But to the recipients of the latter, it was exceedingly distasteful. An order of a more startling nature was, however, to follow.

“You, Isipau,” addressing Blachland. “Turn your waggon wheels homeward, before the going down of the sun.”

“Isipau,” signifying “mushroom,” was Blachland’s native name, and as such he had been known among the natives on his first arrival in the country, years before, owing to his inordinate partiality for that delectable vegetable wherever it could be obtained.

“When white people come into my country I welcome them as my friends,” went on the King. “When I give them leave to hunt and to trade, it is well. It is not well when they seek to look into things for which I have given them no permission. Now I have given an order, and I give not my orders twice. Fare ye well. Hambani-gahle.”

And without another word, Lo Bengula rose from his seat, and stalked within the stockade.

Blachland was the first to speak. “Damn!” he ejaculated.

“Be careful, man, for Heaven’s sake,” warned Sybrandt. “If they got wind you were cursing the King, then—good-night!” Then, turning to the old induna, who had quelled the outcry against them, “Who has poisoned the heart of the Great Great One against us, Faku? Have we not always been his friends, and even now we have done no wrong.”

The old induna shrugged his shoulders, as he answered—

“Who am I that I should pry into the King’s mind, Klistiaan? But his ‘word’ has been spoken in no uncertain voice,” he added significantly.

This there was no denying, and they took their leave. As they passed out of the kraal, the lines of warriors glowered at them like wolves, for though the conversation had been inaudible to them, they divined that these whites had incurred the King’s displeasure.

“You’ve got us into a pretty kettle of fish, Blachland,” said Young, rather curtly, as they rode in the direction of their camp.

“Don’t see it,” was the reply. “Now, my belief is, Lo Ben is shirty about our gold-prospecting. My scheme had nothing to do with it.”

“Blachland’s right, Young,” cut in Pemberton. “If it had been the other thing, we wouldn’t have got off so cheaply. Eh, Sybrandt?”

“Rather not. We may thank our stars it wasn’t the other. That rip Hlangulu must have been strung upon us as a spy. The old man is dead off any gold-prospecting. Afraid it’ll bring a swarm of whites into the country, and he’s right. Why, what’s this?”

All looked back, and the same idea was in the mind of each. Had Lo Bengula thought better of it, and yielded to the bloodthirsty clamour of his warriors? For the gates of Bulawayo were pouring forth a dense black swarm, which could be none other than the impi gathered there at the time of their visit,—and this, clear of the entrance, was advancing at a run, heading straight for the four equestrians.

These looked somewhat anxious. Their servants, the two Bechuana boys, went grey with fear.

“Is it a case of leg-bail?” said Blachland, surveying the on-coming horde.

“No, we must face it anyhow,” answered Pemberton, puffing at his pipe tranquilly. “Besides, we can’t leave these poor devils of boys to be murdered. Eh, Sybrandt?”

“Never run away, except in a losing fight and there’s no help for it,” was the reply.

Accordingly they kept their horses at a walk. But the moment was a thrilling one. On swept the impi; but now it had drawn up into a walk, and from its ranks arose a song—

“Uti mayihlome, mayihlome katese njebo!
Ise nompako wayo namanyatelo ayo!
Utaho njalo. Uti mayihlome katese njebo!”
This strophe—which may be rendered roughly to mean, “He says (i.e. the King), ‘Let it (the impi) arm. Let it arm at once. Come with its food, with its sandals.’ He says always. He says, ‘Let it arm at once!’”—was boomed forth from nearly two thousand throats, deafening, terrifying. But the impi swept by, and, passing within a hundred yards, singing in mighty volume its imposing war-song, shields waving, and assegais brandished menacingly towards the white men, it poured up the opposite slope, taking a straight line, significantly symbolical of the unswerving purpose it had been sent to fulfil.

An involuntary feeling of relief was upon the party, upon all but one, that is. For Hilary Blachland, noting the direction taken by this army of destroyers, could not but admit a qualm of very real and soul-stirring misgiving. That he had good grounds for the same we shall see anon.

## Chapter Four.

## Hermia.

“I don’t care. I’ll say it again. It’s a beastly shame him leaving you alone like this.”

“But you are not to say it again, or to say it at all. Remember of whom you are speaking.”

“Oh, no fear of my forgetting that—of being able to forget it. All the same, he ought to be ashamed of himself.”

And the speaker tapped his foot impatiently upon the virgin soil of Mashunaland, looking very hot, and very tall, and very handsome. The remonstrant, however, received the repetition of the offence in silence, but for a half inaudible sigh, which might or might not have been meant to convey that she was not nearly so angry with the other as her words seemed to imply or their occasion to demand. Then there was silence.

An oblong house, of the type known as “wattle and daub,” with high-pitched thatch roof, partitioned within so as to form three rooms—a house rough and ready in construction and aspect, but far more comfortable than appearances seemed to warrant. Half a dozen circular huts with conical roofs, clustered around, serving the purpose of kitchen and storehouse and quarters for native servants; beyond these, again, a smaller oblong structure, constituting a stable, the whole walled round by a stockade of mopani poles;—and there you have a far more imposing establishment than that usually affected by the pioneer settler. Around, the country is undulating and open, save for a not very thick growth of mimosa; but on one hand a series of great granite kopjes rise abruptly from the plain, the gigantic boulders piled one upon the other in the fantastic and arbitrary fashion which forms such a characteristic feature in the landscape of a large portion of Rhodesia.

“Well?”

The woman was the first to break the silence—equally a characteristic feature, a cynic might declare.

“Well?”

The answer was staccato, and not a little pettish. The first speaker smiled softly to herself. She revelled in her power, and was positively enjoying the cat and mouse game, though it might have been thought that long custom would have rendered even that insidious pastime stale and insipid.

“So sorry you have to go,” she murmured sweetly. “But it’s getting late, and you’ll hardly reach home before dark.”

The start—the blank look which overspread his features—all this, too, she thoroughly enjoyed.

“Have to go,” he echoed. “Oh, well—yes, of course, if you want to get rid of me—”

“I generally do want to get rid of people when they are sulky, and disagreeable, and ill-tempered,” was the tranquil reply. But the expression of her eyes, raised full to his, was such as to take all the sting out of her words.

Not quite all, however, for his mind was in that parlous state best defined as “worked up”—and the working-up process had been one, not of hours or of days, but of weeks.

“Well, then, good-bye.” Then, pausing: “Why do you torment me like this, Hermia, when you know—”

“What’s that? I didn’t say you might call me by my name.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs Blachland,” was the reply, bitterly, resentfully emphatic. Then, thawing suddenly, “You didn’t mind it the other day, and—well, you know what you are to me and always will be.”

“Until somebody else is more so,” came the smiling interruption. “Hark”—raising a hand suddenly, and listening intently. “Yes, it is. Will you be a very dear boy, Justin, and do something for me?”

“You know I would do anything for you—anything in the wide world.”

“Oh, this is nothing very great. There are guinea-fowl over there in the kopje—I can hear them. I only want you to take Hilary’s gun, and go and shoot me a few. Will you? The supplies are running low.”

“Of course I will,” was the answer, as they both went inside, and Justin Spence, invested with an excellent Number 12 bore, and a belt full of cartridges, started off on his errand of purveyor to the household, all his ill-humour gone. He was very young, you see, and the next best thing to glowing in the presence of his charmer was to be engaged in rendering her some service.

She stood there watching his receding form, as it moved away rapidly over the veldt in long elastic strides. Once he turned to look back. She waved her hand in encouragement.

"How good-looking he is!" she said to herself. "How well he moves too—so well set up and graceful! But why was he so emphatic just now when he called me that? Was it accidental? I wonder was it? Oh yes, it must have been. That's the worst of an arrière pensée, one is always imagining things. No, the very fact of his putting such emphasis upon the name shows it was accidental. He'd never have been so mean—Justin isn't that sort."

She stood for a little longer, shading her eyes to gaze after him, again smiling softly to herself as she reflected how easily she could turn him round her little finger, how completely and entirely he was her slave; and, indeed, Justin Spence was not the only one of whom this held good. There was a warm-blooded physical attractiveness about her which never failed to appeal to those of the other sex. She was not beautiful, hardly even pretty. Her dark hair was plentiful, but it was coarse and wavy, and she had no regularity of feature, but lovely eyes and a very fascinating smile. Her hands were large, but her figure, of medium height, was built on seductive lines; and yet this strange conglomeration of attractions and defects was wont to draw the male animal a hundredfold more readily than the most approved and faultless types of beauty could ever have done.

Still musing she entered the house. It was cool within. Strips of "limbo," white and dark blue, concealed the wattle and thatch, giving the interior something of the aspect of a marquee. There were framed prints upon the walls, mostly of a sporting character, and a few framed photographs. Before one of these she paused.

"I think you are tired of me, Hilary," she murmured, as though addressing the inanimate bit of cardboard. "I think we are tired of each other. Yet—are we?"

Was there a touch of wistfulness in the words, in the tone as she gazed? Perhaps.

The eyes which met hers from the pictured cardboard were the eyes which had been all powerful to sway her, body and soul, as no other glance had ever availed to do; the face was that which had filled her every thought, day and night, and as no other had ever held it. Ah, but that was long ago: and time, and possession, utterly without restriction, had palled the heretofore only dreamed-of bliss!

"Yes, I think we are tired of each other," she pursued. "He never takes me anywhere with him now. Says a camp's no place for me, with nothing but men in it. As if I'd go if there were other women. Pah! I hate women. He used not to say that. Ah, well! And Justin! he

really is a dear boy. I believe I am getting to love him, and when he comes back I shall give him a— Well, wait till he does. Perhaps by then I shall have changed my mood."

She had dropped into a roomy rocking-chair—a sensuous, alluring personality as she lay back, her full supple figure swaying to the rhythmic movement of the rocker, kept going by one foot.

"It is as Justin said," pursued the train of her meditations, "an abominable shame—a beastly shame, he called it—that I should be left all alone like this. Well, if I am, surely no one can blame me for consoling myself. But what a number of them there have been, all mad, quite mad, for the time, though not all so mad as poor Reggie. No, I oughtn't to be proud of that—still I suppose I am. It isn't every woman can say that a man has blown his brains out for her—and such a man as that too—a man of power and distinction, and wealthy enough even for me. If it hadn't been for Hilary, he needn't have done it. And, now Hilary and I are tired of each other. Ah!"

The last aloud. She rose and went to the door. The sound of a distant shot, then another, had given rise to this diversion. It came from away behind the granite kopjes. Her deputed hunter had got to work at any rate, with what result time would show.

The afternoon sun was declining. His rays swept warm and golden upon the spreading veldt and the pioneer residence, the latter looking, within its stockade, like a miniature fort. The air was wonderfully clear and pure; the golden effulgence upon the warm and balmy stillness rendering life well-nigh a joy in itself. The distant mellow shouts of the native herders, bringing in the cows; the thud of the hoofs of knee-haltered horses, nearer home, driven into their nightly stabling—for lions were prone to sporadic visits, and nothing alive could with safely be left outside; and then, again and again from time to time, the distant crack of the gun away behind the great granite kopjes,—all seemed much nearer by reason of the sweet unearthly stillness.

"He is doing me real service," said Hermia to herself, as she gazed forth over this, and as each far-away report of the double-barrel was borne to her through the sweet evening air. "I think I can see him, sparing no pains—no trouble—climbing those horrid rocks, blown, breathless, simply because I—I—have asked him to do so."

The sensuous glow of the rich African evening seemed to infect her. She stood, the sunlight bathing her splendid form, in its easy but still well-fitting covering. She began to wrap herself in anticipation, even as the glow of the declining day was wrapping her in its wondrous, ever-changing light. He would be back soon, this man whom she had sent out to toil through the afternoon heat in obedience to her behest. What would he not do if she so ordained it? And yet, as a saving clause, there was ever present to her

mind the certainty that in any great and crucial matter his will would come uppermost, and it would be she who should have to receive instructions and follow them implicitly.

But then, if no great or crucial matter ever arose, her regard for him, so far from growing would, in time, diminish. He was younger than she was; his knowledge of the world—let alone his experience of life—immeasurably inferior to hers. Why, even his whole-souled and entire devotion to herself was the outcome of a certain callowness, the adoration of a boy. But to her omnivorous appetite for adoration it counted for something at any time, and here, where the article was scarce, why, like everything else in that remote corner of the earth, its value stood vastly enhanced. Yet even she could not in candour persuade herself that it contained the element of durability.

And that other? Well, he was tired of her—and she was just a little tired of him. Yet she had at one time pictured to herself, and to him, that life, alone with him, such as she was now leading, would be simple and unalloyed Paradise—they two, the world apart. She had looked up to him as to a god: now she wondered how she could ever have done so; there were times, indeed, when she was not careful to avoid saying as much. He had never replied, but there was that in his look which had told her plainer than words that she was fast driving nail after nail into the coffin of their love. His absences had grown more frequent and more prolonged. When at home he was graver, less communicative, never confidential.

And yet—and yet? Could that past ever be slurred over? Had it not left too deep, too indelible a mark on her, on both of them for that? This was a side, however, upon which Hermia never dwelt. Though physically seductive beyond the average, she was lacking in imagination. This kept her from looking forward, still more from such unprofitable mental exercise as retrospect. In sum, she was little more than a mere animal, enjoying the sunniness of life, cowering and whimpering when its shadow came. Just now, sunshine was uppermost, and her strong, full-blooded temperament expanded and glowed with pulsating and generous life.

Her meditations were broken in upon, and that by the sound of distant whistling, rapidly drawing nearer. Somehow the strains of “A bicycle made for two,” and “Ta-ra-ra boomdeay,” seemed to frame a jarring harmony to the sweet sunset beauty of that green and golden sweep of surrounding—the feathery mimosa and the tropical mahobo-hobo tree, and the grey granite piles, yonder, against the purple and red of the western sky—but the shrill whoop and dark forms of the Mashuna boys bringing in the cattle fitted in with the picture. But no eye or ear had she for any such incongruities, any such contrast. Justin Spence was drawing nearer and nearer to the house, with rapid impatient strides, and she could see that he was not returning empty-handed either.

Assuming her most seductive manner and most bewitching smile, she strolled down to the gate to welcome him.

## Chapter Five.

## The Net Spread.

“Look at this—and this. Five altogether, and I only had six chances. Not bad, is it? They were beastly wild, you know, and I had to scramble all over that second kopje after them.”

He flung down two substantial feathered bunches, representing in toto the guinea-fowl just enumerated.

“You are a dear good boy, Justin,” replied Hermia, looking down at the spoils which he had literally laid at her feet, and then up into his eyes. They were clear and blue, the clearer for the healthy brown of the face. How handsome he was, she thought, glancing with a thrill of approval at the tall well set-up form, in all the glory of youth and the full vigour of health. “You are really very reliable—and—you need not go yet. Come in now, and well put away the gun, and you shall stay and have some supper with me; for really I am awfully lonely. Unless, of course, you are afraid of going to your camp so late. They say lion spoor has been seen again.”

“If it had been the devil’s spoor it would matter about as much or as little,” he replied, with huge and delighted contempt.

“Sh! Don’t talk about unpleasant subjects—or people,” she retorted. “It isn’t lucky.”

They had entered the house. After the glow of light without, it seemed almost dark, and the sun had just gone off the world, leaving the brief pretence of an African twilight. An arm stole around her, imprisoning her tightly.

“I want my reward for having carried out your instructions so efficiently,” said the young man. “Now give it me.”

“Reward! Virtue is its own reward, you silly boy,” answered Hermia, glancing up into his eyes, with her mocking ones. “In this case, it will have to be.”

“Will it indeed?” he retorted shortly; and, stirred by the maddening proximity, likewise encouraged by a certain insidious yielding of her form within the enforced embrace, he dropped his lips on hers, and kissed them full, passionately, again and again.

“There, that will do,” she gasped, striving to restrain the thrill that ran through her frame. “I didn’t say you might do that. Really, Justin, I shall have to forbid you the house. Let me go, do you hear?”

“Hear? Yes, but I don’t intend to obey. Oh—damn!”

The last remark was addressed at large as he changed his mind with marvellous alacrity, and, wheeling round, was endeavouring to hang the bandolier to the wall upon a pin that would hardly have held a Christmas card, as though his life depended upon it. For there had suddenly entered behind them one of the small Mashuna boys who did the house and other work—had entered silently withal, the sooty little rascal; and now his goggle eyes were starting from their sockets with curiosity as he went about doing whatever he had to do, sending furtive and interested glances at these two, whom he had surprised in such unwonted proximity.

“See, now, where your impulsiveness comes in,” said Hermia, when the interrupter had gone out.

“Is that the name of that small black nigger?” said Justin Spence, innocently. “I always thought he was yours.”

“Don’t be foolish, dear. It’s a serious matter.”

“Pooh! Only a small black nigger. A thing that isn’t more than half human.”

“Even a small black nigger owns a tongue, and is quite human enough to know how to wag it,” she reminded him.

“I’ll cut it out for the young dog if he does,” was the ferocious rejoinder.

“Excellent, as a figure of speech, my dear Justin. Only, unfortunately, in real life, even in Mashunaland, it can’t be done.”

“Well, shall I give him a scare over it?”

“You can’t, Justin. In the first place, you could hardly make him understand. In the second, even if you could, you would probably make matters worse. Leave it alone.”

“Oh, it was on your account. It was of you I was thinking.”

“Then you don’t mind on your own?”

“Not a hang.”

She glanced at him in silent approval. This straight, erect fearlessness—this readiness to defy the whole world for her sake appealed to her. She was of the mind of those women of other times and peoples—the possession of whom depended on the possessor’s ability to take and keep.

“Well, I must leave you now for a little while,” she said. “Those two pickannins are only of any use when I am looking after them. They haven’t even learnt to lay a table.”

“Let me help you.”

“No. Candidly, I don’t want you. Be a good boy, Justin, and sit still and rest after your walk. Oh, by the way—” And unlocking a cupboard, she produced a bottle of whisky. “I was very forgetful. You’ll like something to drink after the said walk?”

“No, thanks. Really I don’t.”

“You don’t? No wonder you’ve done no good prospecting. A prospector who refuses a drink after a hot afternoon’s exertion! Why, you haven’t learnt the rudiments of your craft yet. But you must want one, and so I’ll fix it up for you. There, say when—is that right?” she went on brightly, holding out the glass. “Yes, I know what you are going to say—of course it is, if I mixed it. You ought to be ashamed to utter such a threadbare banality.”

He took the glass from her hand, but set it down untasted. The magnetism of her eyes had drawn him. It seemed to madden him, to sap his very reason, to stir every fibre in his body.

“No,” she said decidedly, deftly eluding the clasp in which he would fain have imprisoned her again, and extending a warning hand. “No, not again,—so soon,” she added mentally. “Remember, I have not forgiven you for that outrageous piece of impertinence, and don’t know that I shall either. I am wondering how you could have dared.”

If ever there was a past mistress in the art of fooling the other sex, assuredly Hermia Blachland might lay claim to that distinction. Standing there in the doorway, flashing back a bright, half-teasing, half-caressing look, which utterly belied the seeming sternness of her words, the effect she produced was such as to turn him instanter into a most complete fool, because her thorough and subservient slave. Then she went out.

We have said that one of the large circular huts within the enclosure served the purpose of a kitchen, and hither she proceeded with the exceedingly useful and unromantic object of getting supper ready. Yet, standing there in the midst of stuffy and uninviting surroundings, as she supervised the Mashuna boys and the frying of the antelope steaks, even that prosaic occupation was not entirely devoid of romance to-night; for somehow she found herself discharging it extra carefully, for was it not for him?

"Now, Tickey, keep those goggle eyes of yours on what you're doing, instead of rolling them around on everything and everybody else," she warned, apostrophising the small boy whose entrance had been so inopportune a short time ago.

"Yes, missis," replied the urchin, his round face splitting into a stripe of dazzling white as he grinned from ear to ear, whether at the recollection of what he had recently beheld, or out of sheer unthinking light-heartedness. Then he turned and made some remark in their own language to his companion, which caused that sooty imp to grin and chuckle too.

"What's that you're grinning at, you little scamp?" said Hermia, sharply, with a meaning glance at a thin sjambok which hung on the wall, a cut or two from which was now and again necessary to keep these diminutive servitors up to the mark.

"No be angry, missis. Tickey, he say, 'Missis, she awful damn pretty.'"

Hermia choked down a well-nigh uncontrollable explosion of laughter.

"You mustn't use that word, Primrose," she said, trying to look stern. "It's a bad word."

"Bad word? How that, missis? Baas, he say it. Baas in dere—Baas Sepence," was the somewhat perplexing rejoinder.

"Well, it's a white man's word; not a word for children, black or white," explained Hermia, lamely.

The imps chuckled. "I no say it, missis," pursued Primrose. "Tickey, he say missis awful beastly pretty. Always want to look at her. Work no well done, missis' fault. Dat what Tickey say. Always want look at missis."

"You'd better look at what you're doing now, you monkey, and do it properly too, or you know what's likely to happen," rejoined Hermia. But the implied threat in this case was

absolutely an empty one, and the sooty scamps knew it. They knew, too, how to get on the soft side of their mistress.

That, however, was the side very much to the fore this evening. Throughout her prosaic occupation, her mind would recur with a thrill to that scene of a short half-hour ago, and already she longed for its repetition. But she was not going to give him too much. She must tantalise him sufficiently, must keep him on tenterhooks, not make herself too cheap. But was she not tantalising herself too? Certainly she was, but therein lay the zest, the excitement which lent keenness to the sport.

They sat down to table together. The door stood open on account of the heat, and, every now and then, winged insects, attracted by the light, would come whizzing round the lamp. There was a soft, home-like look about the room, a kind of pervading presence, and Justin Spence, basking in that presence, felt intoxicatingly happy. He could hardly keep his eyes from her as she sat at the head of the modest table, and the artificial light, somewhat shaded, toned down any defects of feature or colouring, and enhanced twenty-fold the expression and animation which with her physical contour, constituted the insidious and undefinable attraction which was her greatest charm. Looking at these two it was hard to believe they were the inmates of a rough pioneer hut in the far wilds of Mashunaland, but for the attire of one of them; for a white silk shirt, rather open at the throat, guiltless of coat or waistcoat, a leathern belt and riding breeches hardly constitutes evening dress in more civilised countries.

He was telling her about himself, his position and prospects, to all of which she was listening keenly, especially as regards the latter, yet without seeming to. She knew, none better, how to lead him on to talk, always without seeming to, and now, to-night, she was simply turning him inside out. He had prospects and good solid ones. He had only come out here partly from love of adventure, partly because, after all, prospects are only prospects; and he wanted to make a fortune—a quick and dazzling fortune by gold-digging. So far, he had been no nearer making it than most others out there on the same tack, in that, for all the gold he had struck, he might as well have sunk a shaft on Hampstead Heath. Still, there was no knowing, and all the exciting possibilities were there to spur him on.

Afterwards they sat outside. The night, though warm and balmy, was not oppressive. And it was very still. The screech of the tree frog, the distant yelp of a jackal, the deeper howl of a hyena, broke in upon it from time to time, and the rhythmic drone of voices from the servants' quarters. This soon ceased and the world seemed given over to night—and these two.

"How will you find your way back?" Hermia was saying. "You'll get lost."

“That’s quite likely. So I’m not going to try. You’ll have to give me a shakedown here.”

“No. Justin, dear, believe me it would be much better not. You must even risk the chance of getting lost.”

“What if I’m afraid? Suppose one of those lions they’ve been talking about got hold of me? It would be your doing.”

Hermia smiled to herself. The excuse was too transparent. He afraid! The gleam of her white teeth in the darkness betrayed her.

“It’s no laughing matter,” he said. “Listen, darling, you don’t really want to get rid of me?”

“It would be better if you were to go, dearest,” she answered, slipping her hand into his. “Believe me, it would.”

The softness of her voice, the thrill of her touch simply intoxicated him with ecstasy, and there was an unsteadiness in his tone as he answered—

“Surely in the wilds of Mashunaland we can chuck conventionalities to the winds. If it was any one else who asked you for a shakedown you wouldn’t turn him out. Why me, then?”

“Because it is you, don’t you see?” was the reply, breathed low and soft, as the pressure of her fingers tightened.

They could hear each other’s heart-beats in the still dead silence—could see the light of each other’s eyes in the gleam of the myriad stars. The trailing streak of a meteor shot across the dark, velvety vault, showing in its momentary gleam to each the face of the other. Suddenly Hermia started violently.

“Hark! what is that?” she cried, springing to her feet.

For a loud harsh shout had cleft the stillness of the night. It was followed by another and another. Coming as it did upon the dead silence, the interruption was, to say the least, startling: all the more so to these two, their nerves in a state of high-strung tension.

“Nothing very alarming,” returned Spence. “You must have heard it before. Only a troop of baboons kicking up a row in the kopjes.”

“Of course; but somehow it sounded so loud and so near.”

It was destined to do so still more. For even as she spoke there arose a most indescribable tumult—shrieks and yells and chattering, and over all that harsh, resounding bark: and it came from the granite kopje nearest the house—where Spence had found the troop of guinea-fowl that afternoon.

“What a row they’re making!” he went on. “Hallo! By Jove! D’you hear that?”

For over and above the simian clamour, another sound was discernible—a sound of unmistakable import. No one need go to Mashunaland to hear it, nor anything like as far. A stroll across Regent’s Park towards feeding time at the Zoo will do just as well. It was the deep, throaty, ravening roar of hungry lions.

“Phew! that accounts for all the shindy!” said Justin. “Now do you want me to go, Hermia? There isn’t much show for one against a lion in the dark, and, judging from the racket, there must be several. Well, shall I start?”

She had drawn closer to him instinctively; not that there was any danger, for the stockade was high and strong—in fact, had been erected with an eye to such emergency. Now they were strained together in a close embrace, this time she returning his kisses with more than his own passion.

“You are mine—mine at last, my heart, my life!” he whispered. And the answer came back, merely breathed—

“Yes, I am. All yours.”

And above, the myriad eyes of the starry heavens looked down; and without, the horrible throaty growl of the ravening beasts rent the night.

## Chapter Six.

## After-Thoughts.

If ever any man was in the state colloquially defined as over head and ears in love, and if ever any man had practical demonstration that his love was returned abundantly by the object thereof, assuredly the name of that man was Justin Spence. Yet when the sun rose upon him on the following morning he somehow did not feel as elate as he should have done.

For, whatever poetic associations may cluster around the hour of sunset, around that of sunrise there are none at all. It is an abominably matter-of-fact and prosaic hour, an hour when the average human is wont to feel cheap if ever, prone to retrospect, and, for choice, retrospect of an unwelcome nature. All that he has ever done that is injudicious or mean or gauche will infallibly strike him as more injudicious and meaner and more gauche in the cold and judicial stare of the waking hour. To this rule Justin Spence was no exception. His passion had not cooled—no, not one whit; yet he awoke feeling mean. His conduct had been weak—the development thereof shady: in short, in the words of his own definition, "it was not playing the game."

The worst of it was that he was indebted to Blachland for more than one good turn, and now, what had been his requital for such? The other was his friend, and trusted him—and now, he had taken advantage of that friend's absence. In the unsparing light of early morning the thing had an ugly look—yes, very.

As against that, however, other considerations would arise to set themselves. First of all, he himself was human, and human powers had their limits. Then, again, the other did not in the least appreciate this splendid gift, this matchless treasure which had fallen to his lot: otherwise, how could he leave her all alone as he did, absent himself for days, for weeks at a time? He had not always done so, Justin had gathered; and from Hermia's reminiscences of camp life she seemed to have enjoyed it. If he, Justin, had been in Blachland's place, not for a single day should she have been away from him. But then, Justin was very young, and all the circumstances and surroundings went to make him think that way.

He had known these people for some months, but of them he knew nothing. The hard, reticent, self-reliant up-country trader was not the man to make a confidant of one whom he regarded as a mere callow youth. But he had been very kind to Justin, and had held out a helping hand to him on more than one occasion. Hermia, for her part, had merely noted that the young man was very handsome and well set up, and that in about a week he was desperately in love with herself. There were two or three others of whom

the latter held good, even in that remote region, but they awakened no reciprocal feeling in her. She would keep them dangling simply as a mere matter of habit; but Justin Spence had touched a responsive chord within her. It was one of a sheerly physical nature, but she had more and more grown to look forward to his visits, and we must admit that she had not long to look.

The more he thought it over the less he liked it. He could not even lay the spurious balm to his soul that "every man for himself" was the maxim which justified everything—that the glorious fascinations of this woman went wholly unappreciated by the man who should have been the one of all others to prize them, and therefore were reserved and destined for another, and that himself. This sort of reasoning somehow would not do. It struck him as desperately thin in the cool judicial hour of waking. He had behaved shabbily towards Blachland, and, the worst of it was, he knew he should go on doing so. And as though to confirm him in that conviction, at that moment the voice of the siren, clear but soft, was borne to his ears.

What had become of all his misgivings now, as he sprang out of bed, his one and only thought that of joining her as soon as possible? The voice, however, was not addressed to him. It was merely raised in commonplace command to the small Mashuna boys. What a lovely voice it was! he thought to himself, pausing to listen, lest the splashing of his tub should cause him to lose a tone of it: and he was right so far. Hermia owned a beautiful speaking voice, and it constituted not the least of her fascinations. Recklessly now Justin cast his self-accusations to the winds.

And Hermia? Well, she had none to cast. Self-accusation was a phase of introspect in which she never indulged. Why should she, when the rule of conduct on which she acted with a scrupulosity of observance worthy of a better cause, was "Get all you can out of life, and while you can"? Never a thought had she to waste on the absent. It was his fault that he was absent. Never, moreover, a misgiving.

Yet when Spence joined her there in the gateway of the stockade, the eager, happy glow in his face met with scant response in her own. She affected a reproachful tone and attitude. They had both done very wrong, it conveyed. It could not be helped now, but the least said, soonest mended. They had been very weak, and very foolish, but it must never occur again. And all the while she was killing herself in her efforts to restrain her laughter, for she fully intended that it should occur again—again and again—and that at no distant period: but she was going to keep her adorer's appreciation up to fever heat. To this intent, he must be kept well in hand at first.

Well, he was submissive enough even for her, and again she was convulsed with suppressed mirth, for she promised herself keen enjoyment watching his struggles to

keep within the bounds of conventionality she had imposed upon him. The whirlings and buzzings of the impaled beetle of her childhood's days, as the luckless insect spun round and round in his efforts to free himself from the transfixing pin, were not in it with the fun held out to her by the writhings of this six-foot-one victim. And the sport was already beginning in his blank face and piteous tone.

"No, I don't think you must even use my name, Justin," she said, in wind-up of the programme she was laying before him as to his future rule of conduct. "You will be forgetting, and rapping it out when Hilary is here."

"What then? Would he be very jealous?" returned the victim shortly, very sore with jealousy himself at this recalling of the absent one's existence.

"Perhaps. There's no telling," answered Hermia, with a wholly enigmatical smile. She was thinking that here was a new and entertaining development of the situation. Hilary jealous! Heavens! that would be a feat to have accomplished. She did not believe him capable of any such foolish and youthful passion. And yet, if she misjudged him? And recognising such a possibility, a spice of fear came to season the excitement, only serving however to enhance its original zest.

In the fair scene spread out before these two there was little enough to suggest the growlings and roarings of ravening beasts making terrible the dark night hours. The undulating roll of veldt, green after the recent rains, and radiant in the golden morning, sparkled with innumerable dewdrops. Birds called cheerily; bird-wings glanced through the air in gorgeous colour and flash of sheeny streak; and the great granite kopjes to the westward, rising to the cloudless blue, seemed to tower twice their height in the shimmer and warmth of the newly risen sun.

Upon this lovely outlook one of the two was gazing with a moody brow and a heavy heart. Suddenly he started.

"Who's this, I wonder?" he exclaimed, shading his eyes.

A speck in the distance had arrested his attention—an approaching speck. It might have represented a horseman, almost certainly it did.

"I believe it's Blachland," went on Spence. "I'll get the binocular, and see."

The advancing object was hidden from sight as he dived into the house. But it reappeared about the same time he did. It now took shape as a horseman.

“Yes, it is Blachland,” he went on, the glasses at his eyes. “But he’s all alone. Where’s his waggon and Sybrandt? I wonder if—” And he broke off, looking somewhat anxiously at his companion as he finished the unspoken thought to himself. What if Blachland were returning thus with a purpose—making a sort of surprise return? What if he had intended returning much earlier, but had miscalculated time and distance? What if he had returned much earlier? Oh, Great Heaven! And the thinker’s countenance reflected the consternation of the thought.

That of his companion, however, betrayed no responsive qualm. It was as serene and unruffled as though she had never beheld the man at her side until five minutes ago.

“Now, Justin,” she said, as they watched the approach of the horseman. “I want to give you a word of warning. First of all, you are not to greet him as if he had just risen from the dead, and you wish to goodness he hadn’t. Secondly, you are not to look at and talk to me in a sort of wistful and deathbed manner whenever you have occasion to look at and talk to me. Remember, he’s mighty sharp; I don’t know any one sharper. Come, brisk up, dear, and pull yourself together and be natural, or you’ll give away the whole show.”

“That’s the last sweet word I shall hear from you for a long time to come, I suppose,” said Justin, somewhat comforted. “But you didn’t really mean all you were saying a little while ago? You’re not really sorry?”

“Perhaps not,” she answered softly. “Perhaps we shall have good times again. Only, be careful now. It all depends upon that.”

“Oh, then I’ll be careful enough, with that to look forward to,” he returned, quite cheered up now. Wherein her object was attained.

To one of the two came a feeling of relief a moment after the new arrival had dismounted at the stockade, for his greeting was perfectly easy and natural and pleasant.

“Well, Spence, you’re out early,” was all he said.

Out early. Justin began to feel mean again. Should he say he had been there all night? But Hermia saved him the task of deciding by volunteering that information herself. She was not going to begin making mysteries.

Well, there was no occasion to. Both forgot that the crucial moment was not entirely that of the greeting. The last hundred yards or so before dismounting had told Hilary Blachland all there was to tell. No—not quite all.

"What have we got here?" said the returned master of the house, as, after a tub and a change of clothing, he sat at the head of his table. "Guinea-fowl?" raising the dish-cover.

"Yes, Justin shot five for me yesterday," answered Hermia. "By the way, I am always calling him Justin. 'Mr Spence' is absurdly formal in this out-of-the-way part, and he is really such a boy. Aren't I right, Hilary?"

"Oh, certainly," was the reply, but the dry smile accompanying it might have meant anything. To himself the smiler was thinking, "So this is the latest, is it? What an actress she is, and that being so, I won't pay her the bad compliment of saying it's a pity she didn't go on the stage."

Justin didn't relish that definition of him; however, he recollected there was everything to console him for the apparent slight. And it was part of the acting. In fact, he was even conscious of being in a position to crow over the other, if the other only knew it, and though he strove hard to dismiss the idea, yet the idea was there.

"By the way, Blachland," he said, "how are things doing in Matabeleland? Niggers still cheeky?"

"They're getting more out of hand than ever. In fact, you prospectors had better keep a weather eye open. And, Hermia, I've been thinking things over, and I believe you'd better trek into Fort Salisbury."

"Is there going to be war then?" asked Justin quickly, for the words were as a knell to his newly born fool's paradise. Had he found Hermia only to lose her immediately?

"No, I'll stay on. I don't believe it'll be anything more than a scare," answered the latter with a light laugh.

Hilary Blachland had been watching her, while not appearing to, watching them both. The start of consternation which escaped Justin Spence at the prospect of this separation had not escaped him. He noted, too, that beneath Hermia's lightness of tone there lurked a shadowed anxiety. He was sharp, even as she herself had defined him—yes, he was decidedly sharp-witted was Hilary Blachland.

## Chapter Seven.

## A Limed Bird.

“Was the trip a success this time, Hilary? And—where’s Mr Sybrandt? Didn’t he come back with you?”

“Three questions at once. That’s the feminine cross-examiner all over. Well, it was and it wasn’t. There was no doing any trade to speak of, and Lo Ben was in a very snuffy mood. I found out a good deal that was worth finding out though. Questions two and three. I left Sybrandt half a day’s trek the other side of the Inpembisi river.”

“And do you think there is really any danger of war?” asked Hermia.

“I think you will be far safer away from here. So you had better go. I’m sending the waggon on to Fort Salisbury to-morrow.” And again, without seeming to, his keen observant glance took in Justin’s face.

“But I don’t want to go, Hilary, and I won’t,” was the answer. “I’m not in the least afraid, and should hate the bother of moving just now.”

“Very well, please yourself. But don’t blame me if you do get a scare, that’s all.”

Heavens! what a cold-blooded devil this was, Justin Spence was thinking. If Hermia belonged to him, he would not treat a question of peril and alarm to her as a matter of no particular importance as this one was doing. He would insist upon her removing to a place of safety; and, unable to restrain himself, he said something to that effect. He did not, however, get much satisfaction. His host turned upon him a bland inscrutable face.

“Perhaps you’re right, Spence. I shouldn’t be surprised if you were,” was all the reply he obtained. For Hilary Blachland was not the man to allow other people to interfere in his private affairs.

“By the way, there are lions round here again,” said Hermia. “They were making a dreadful noise last night over in the kopjes. They seemed to have got in among a troop of baboons, and between the lions and the baboons the row was something appalling.”

“Quite sure they were lions?”

“Of course they were. Weren’t they, Justin?”

“No sort of mistake about that,” was the brisk reply.

“Well, I think they were lions too,” went on Blachland, “because the one I shot this morning might easily have been coming from this direction.”

“What?” cried Spence. “D’you mean to say you shot a lion this morning?”

“Yes. Just about daylight. And a fine big chap too.”

“And you never told us anything about it all this time!”

Blachland smiled. “Well, you see, Spence, it isn’t my first, not by several. Or possibly I might have ridden up at a hard gallop, flourishing my hat and hooraying,” he said good-naturedly.

But there was a grimness about the very good nature, decided Spence. Here was a man who had just shot a lion, and seem to think no more of the feat than if he had merely shot a partridge. He was conscious that he himself, under the same circumstances would have acted somewhat after the manner the other had described.

“But how did you come upon him?” asked Hermia, eagerly.

“Just after daylight. Started to ride on ahead of the waggon. Came to a dry drift; horse stuck short, refused to go down. Snake, I thought at first; but no. On the opposite side a big lion staring straight at us, not seventy yards away. Slipped from the gee, drew a careful bead, and let go. Laid him out without a kick, bang through the skull. Quite close to the waggon it was too. I left them taking off the skin. There! that’s the waggon”—as the distant crack of a whip came through the clear morning air. “We’ll go and look at it directly.”

“Oh, well done!” cried Hermia; and the wholly approving glance she turned upon the lion-slayer sent a pang of soreness and jealousy through Justin Spence. He began to hate Blachland. That infernal assumption of indifference was really affectation—in short, the most objectionable form of “side.”

Soon, the rumble of heavy wheels drew nearer, and, to the accompaniment of much whip-cracking, and unearthly and discordant yells, without which it seems impossible to drive a span of oxen, the waggon rolled up. It was drawn within the enclosure to be out-spanned.

“You have got a small load this time,” said Hermia, surveying the great, cumbrous, weather-worn vehicle, with its carefully packed cargo, and hung about with pots and kettles and game horns, and every sort of miscellaneous article which it was not convenient to stow within. “Ah, there’s the skin. Why, yes, Hilary, it is a fine one!”

The native servants gathered to admire the great mane and mighty paws there spread out, and many were the excited ejaculations and comments they fired off. The skin, being fresh, was unpleasantly gory—notably the hole made by the bullet where it had penetrated the skull.

“What a neat shot!” exclaimed Hermia, an expression of mingled admiration and disgust upon her face as she bent down to examine the huge head. Was it a part of her scheme, or the genuine admiration of every woman for a feat of physical prowess, that caused her to turn to Blachland with almost a proud, certainly an approving look? If the former, it served its purpose; for Justin began to feel more jealous and sorer than ever.

“Nkose!”

Blachland turned. A native stood forth with uplifted hand, hailing him. He had seen this man among his servants, but did not choose to recognise him first.

“Oh, it is you, Hlangulu?” he said, speaking in Sindabele; which tongue is a groundwork of Zulu overlaid with much Sechuana and Sesutu. “That is strange, for since you disappeared from our camp on the Matya’mhlope, on the morning that we went to see the King, I have not set eyes on you.”

“Au!” replied the man, with a half-smile, bringing his hand to his mouth in deprecatory gesture, “that is true, Nkose. But the Great Great One required me to stand among the ranks of the warriors. Now I am free once more, I would fain serve Nkose again.”

Blachland looked musingly at him, but did not immediately reply.

“I would fain serve a white man who can so easily slay a great thing like that,” went on Hlangulu. “Take me, Nkose. You will not find me useless for hunting, and I know of that as to which Nkose would like to know.”

Blachland did not start at these last words, which were spoken with meaning, but he would have if his nerves had not long since been schooled to great self-control.

For, remembering the subject under discussion the last time he had seen this man, whom they had all suspected of eavesdropping,—being moreover, accustomed to native

ways of talking "dark," he had no doubt whatever as to the meaning intended to be conveyed.

"Sit still a while, Hlangulu," he said. "I am not sure I have not servants enough. Yet it may be that I can do with another for hunting purposes. I will think about it. Here!"—and he handed him a stick of tobacco.

"You are my father, Nkose," replied the Matabele, holding forth his joined hands to receive it. Then he stepped back.

"Who is he, and what does he want, Hilary?" said Hermia, who had hardly understood a word of this colloquy; and the same held good of Spence.

"Oh, he's a chap we had at Bulawayo. Wants to be taken on here. I think I'll take him."

"I don't much like the look of him," pursued Hermia, doubtfully.

"I should hang him on sight, if I were the jury empanelled to try him," declared Spence.

But for all the notice he took of them, Blachland might as well not have heard these remarks, for he busied himself giving directions to his "boys," relating to the preparation of the lion's skin, and a dozen other matters. Leaving him to this, the other two strolled back to the house.

"I'm going home directly, Hermia," said Spence, with a bitter emphasis on the word "home." "I rather think I'm the third who constitutes a crowd."

"How can you talk like that, after—" And she broke off suddenly.

"Still, I think I'll go, darling. But—are you really going away—to Salisbury?"

"No. But you've got too speaking a face, Justin dear. Why on earth did you look so dismal and blank when he said that?"

"Because I couldn't help it, I suppose."

"But you've got to help it. See here now, Justin, I can't keep you in leading-strings. You are such a great baby, you have no control over yourself. You're quite big enough, and—"

"Ugly enough? Yes, go on."

“No, the other thing—only I’m spoiling you too much, and making you abominably conceited. Now come in, and give me just one little kiss before you start, and then I think you really had better go.”

“Promise me you won’t go away without letting me know,” he urged, when the above-named process—which, by the way, was not of such very diminutive proportions as she had suggested—had been completed. Outside, Blachland’s voice directing the native servants was plainly audible.

“Yes, I promise. Now, go and say good-bye, and get your horse. No, not ‘one more.’ Do be a little prudent.”

“Eh? Want to saddle up, Spence?” said Blachland, as Justin went over to where he was occupied. “All right. I say, though, excuse me; I really am rather busy. Come along, and we’ll get out your horse. Have a drink before you start.”

“Thanks awfully, Blachland, I’ve just had one. Good-bye, old chap, don’t bother to come to the stable. Good-bye.”

The other took a side glance at his retreating guest.

“He’s flurried,” he said to himself. “These callow cubs don’t know how to play the game. They do give it away so—give it away with both hands.”

Then he went on tranquilly with what he was doing. He did not even go to the gate to see Spence off. He simply took him at his word. In social matters, Hilary Blachland was given to taking people at their word. If they didn’t know their own minds, not being infants or imbeciles, that wasn’t his affair.

Then his thoughts were diverted into another channel, and this was effected by the sight of Hlangulu. The Matabele was standing around, lending a hand here or there whenever he saw an opportunity. For some reason of his own he seemed anxious to be kept on there. That he would be of no use at all as a farm servant was obvious, equally so that he had no ambition to fill that rôle. The rather mysterious words he had uttered could refer to but one thing; namely, the exceedingly dangerous and apparently utterly profitless scheme talked over by the camp fire on the Matya’mhlope, and which there could be no doubt whatever but that he had overheard. That being so, was not Blachland indeed in this man’s power?

Turning it over in his mind, Blachland could see two sides to the situation. Either Hlangulu designed to render him a service, and, incidentally, one much greater to

himself—or his intent was wholly sinister, to set a trap for him to wit. He looked at Hlangulu. The Matabele's aspect was not prepossessing. It was that of a tall, gaunt native, with a sinister cast of countenance, never entirely free from something of a scowl,—in fact, an evil and untrustworthy rascal if appearances counted for anything at all. He tried to think whether he had ever given this man cause to harbour a grudge against him, and could recall nothing of the kind; but he did remember that Hlangulu was a clever and skilful hunter. Perhaps, after all, he had really gained the man's respect, and, to a certain extent, his attachment. He would keep him, at any rate for a while, but—would watch him narrowly.

"Hlangulu," he called. "Go now and hurry on the herd of trade cattle. It should have been done before this."

"Nkose!"

And with this one word of salute the man started on his errand, not asking where the object thereof was to be found, where it had been last seen or anything. All of which was not lost upon Blachland. Decidedly he would keep Hlangulu, he told himself.

## Chapter Eight.

## "Merely Spence."

"So that's your latest, is it, Hermia?"

The remark was inconsequent, in that it came on top of nothing at all. The time was the cool of the evening, and Blachland, lying back in a deep cane chair, was lazily puffing out clouds of smoke. He had not been talking much, and what little he had said consisted of a few drowsy remarks about nothing in particular. Now, after an interval of silence, came the above inconsequent one.

"My latest! Who and what on earth are you talking about, Hilary?"

"Merely Spence."

"Oh, is that all? He's such a nice boy, though, isn't he?"

"Candidly, he's only like thirty-nine out of forty, colourless."

"How can you say that, Hilary? Why, he's awfully handsome."

"Oh, I wasn't referring to externals, I mean the more important side of him; and—there's nothing in him."

Hermia made no reply, she only smiled; but the smile was meant to convey that she knew better. Nothing in him! Wasn't there? If Hilary only knew?

Truth to tell, however, she was a little relieved. This was the first reference he had made to the subject, and his silence all these hours had rendered her uneasy. What if he suspected? Now he seemed to drop it as though it were not worth pursuing. She, however, paradoxically enough, intended to let him know that it was. Could she not make him just one atom jealous?

"Poor fellow, he's so lonely over at his camp," she pursued. "It does him good to come over here now and then."

"Who?" said Blachland. His mind was running on the subject of Umzilikazi's grave, and the trustworthiness or the reverse of Hlangulu.

"Who? Why, Justin of course. Weren't we talking about him?"

“Were—yes, that’s it. We were, but I had forgotten all about him, and was thinking of something totally different. What were you saying? That he was lonely in camp? Well, that’s very likely; but then, you see, it’s one of the conditions attendant upon prospecting. And he may as well chuck prospecting if he’s going to spend life galloping over here.”

Thought Hermia to herself, “He is a little jealous after all.”

The other went on: “He’s lonely in camp, and you’re lonely here. That’s about the British of it; eh, Hermia?”

“Well, can you wonder? Here I am, left all by myself to get through time as best I can. How long have you been away this time? Four weeks?”

“Just under. And this was a short trip. It is hard lines, rather; but then, you always knew what life up here was going to mean. You did it with your eyes open.”

“It is mean of you to throw it at me. I never thought you would have done it,” she flashed.

“Throw what? Oh, I see. I wasn’t referring to—that. You might as well give me the benefit of the doubt, Hermia. You ought to know that I was referring to our coming out here at all. We might have gone anywhere else, so it wasn’t England.”

She looked down at him as he sat there, for she was standing, or restlessly moving about. How cool and passionless he was now, she thought. He had not always been so. Decidedly he was tired of her. She could not help drawing a mental contrast between him and the other. The countenance of this one, with its well-cut features, but lined and weather-worn, dark and bronzed by sun and exposure, was indeed a contrast to that of the other, in its smooth, clear-skinned blue-eyed comeliness of youth. Yet, this one, sitting there, strong, reposeful-looking in his cool white raiment was, and would always be, the one when she came to pass in review her polyandrous experiences.

Now his very tranquillity, indifference she called it, nettled her. At any other time, indeed, it would have served as a powerful draw in keeping her to him; now however, the entirely fresh excitement she had struck formed an effective counterblast. If he was tired of her, she would let him see that she was even more tired of him, whether she was so or not.

“To revert to Spence,” he said. “What pleasure can it give you to make a bigger fool of the young idiot than his parents and Nature have already made him?”

“He isn’t at all a fool,” snapped Hermia, shortly.

“Not eh? Well, everything is relative, even in terminology. We’ll call him not so wise as some other people, if you prefer it. If he was as wise, he might be over head and ears in love with you without giving it away at every turn—in fact, thrusting it into the very face of the ordinary observer.”

“Why, Hilary, you really are jealous!” she cried with a ringing laugh. For a moment, however, she had looked perturbed.

“Ha, ha! That’s good—distinctly good. Jealous! There is, or ought to be, no such thing, once past the callowness of youth. The self-respect of any man should be above whining to any one woman because she prefers somebody else. The mere fact of her doing so renders her utterly valueless in his sight there and then.”

“You don’t really mean that, Hilary?” she said. “You’re only just talking, you know.”

“Try it and see.”

His eyes were full on hers. For the life of her, she could not as straightly meet that straight, firm glance. This was the only man she had never been able to deceive. Others she could hoodwink and fool at will, this one never. So, with a light laugh, with a shade of nervousness in it that would have been patent to an even less acute faculty of perception than his, she rejoined—

“Well, you’re out of it this time, Hilary. Justin isn’t in love with me at all. Why, it’s ridiculous!”

She turned away uneasily. For he knew that she was lying, and she knew that he did.

“One moment, Hermia,” he called out to her. She paused. “While we are on the subject: are you not getting a little tired of—our partnership?”

“Why?”

“I’ve seen symptoms of it lately, and I don’t think I’m mistaken. Because, if you are, say so squarely and openly. It’ll be much better in the long run.”

“I think you are tired of it,” she flashed. “I suppose you have a lot of black wives over yonder, like that disgusting old Pemberton and Young. That’s why you’re so fond of going into the Matabele country, and leaving me all alone for weeks.”

“Apparently you know more about Pemberton’s and Young’s conjugal arrangements than I do, but let me assure you you’re utterly wrong in your estimate of mine.”

“I don’t believe it. You are all of you alike, once you take to going among those beastly natives.”

“You don’t believe it? That I can’t help, so there it stays. And now I’ve lazed long enough, I must rustle about and see to things.”

Left there, Hermia watched his tall form, like a pillar of white, wending up the low kopje at the back of the stockade. He had become very reserved, very self-contained and inscrutable of late; so much so indeed, that it was almost impossible to gauge how much he knew or suspected. Now she felt uneasy, uncomfortable with a dim consciousness of having come off second best in the recent cut and thrust. Well, perhaps he was right. She was tired of the existing state of affairs—perhaps a trifle tired of him.

And he? The kopje up which he had taken his way, ascended by an easy acclivity to a point which commanded an immense view to the south and westward. Range upon range of rolling slope and wooded ridge lay there outspread—vast and scarcely inhabited country, a land given over to wild game and a few shrinking, starving remnants of tribes living in daily fear of the sweep of the terrible Matabele besom. The evening was still, and golden, and beautiful, and, seated under a mahobo-hobo tree, Blachland lit his pipe, and began to think out the position.

So Hermia was tired of their life together! He had seen it coming on, and at first the knowledge had caused him some concern. He contrasted the lives of other pioneers, living all alone, or in native fashion, with two or three dusky-hued daughters of the land, in rough, uncivilised manner, growing more and more into the happy-go-lucky, soulless simplicity of life of the barbarous aborigines themselves,—contrasted them with the life he himself led, its comfort, and refined companionship, and, until lately, love,—and, doing so, a qualm of regret tinged his mind. It was evanescent however. For he himself was growing tired of this mode of life. He had embarked on it when he and Hermia had reckoned the world well lost for each other’s sake. Now, neither of them so reckoned any more; nay, further, to be perfectly candid with themselves, they wondered how they ever could have. Why not leave it then, move to some more cheerful and civilised quarter of the globe? To do so would be tantamount to leaving each other.

Hermia had taxed him with being jealous, and he had replied, and rightly, that he was past the capacity for any such foolishness. But he had no intention of remaining her dupe. That he had ample cause for jealousy in the matter just under discussion, he was well aware; but that was nothing to what he would meet with should they return to civilisation together. She could no more cleave to one, and one only, than she could fly over the moon. They had better part.

Over the vast roll of country beneath, stretching away into misty dimness, his glance swept. How would he take to civilisation again? The old restlessness would come upon him. The wandering up-country life had got into his system. The other kind, too, was not so very great as to lure him back to it either. He supposed he had made a mess of things. Well, most people did one way and another, and it couldn't be helped.

Up the slope, through the sparse bushes, a herd of cattle was threading—his cattle; and in the tall dark form of their driver he recognised Hlangulu, the Matabele. Mechanically, however, he took in this while his thoughts reverted to their former train. Would they miss each other? he wondered; or, rather, would he miss Hermia? That she would hardly waste a regret on him he knew, for he had long since discovered the shallow emptiness of her nature, and that what he had at one time taken for depth was the mere frenzied abandonment of a passing passion, wholly unrestrained and absorbing for the time being; but now, and indeed long since, burnt out. Turning, he looked back on the group of primitive buildings within the protecting stockade, his home. A stillness and peace seemed to brood over it in the evening light. He could make out Hermia's form crossing a section of the enclosure. He thought of the years they had been together. Had those years been happy? Well, hardly. Disillusionment had not been long in coming, and with its growth their brief and spurious happiness had faded. They did not quarrel, but it was a case of mutual toleration. And now, at last, he had returned one fine day to recognise that his place was filled by another. Decidedly the time had come for them to part.

"Nkose!"

Blachland looked up. His meditations must have run on, for the utterer of this sonorous salutation was he who, but a moment ago it seemed, was right away down there driving the cattle, yet he had had time to take them borne and return here himself.

"What is it, Hlangulu?"

The man dropped down into a squatting attitude, and began to talk. Blachland, who understood natives, let him run on about nothing in particular—the state of the country,

the new settlements of the pioneers, the King, the decreasing of the game, and so forth,—for he knew something was coming. Presently it came.

“Nkose is even as Umlimo. The dark mysteries of the Great bold no terrors for him?”

“Not any,” was the laconic reply.

“Yet it is certain death to look into such.”

“Death is certain, but the time of death, never. I have looked at ‘certain death’ before, yet here I am.”

“Au, Nkose! What you desire is not possible, save by one way.”

“And that way?”

“Is known to me alone.”

“And you are going to make it known to me. Now, Hlangulu, men are men, and men have motives. Why are you going to do this?”

“What is that which is most desired by all white men, Nkose?”

“Gold.”

“Yeh-bo, Nkose, and by black ones, too, if with it they can buy cattle and wives. Hau! In the abode of the mighty dead there is much of it.”

Blachland didn’t start, but his nerves were all a thrill. The man’s words were plain enough. A quantity of treasure had been buried with the dead King. That was the interpretation.

“Is the gold like this, Hlangulu?” he said, producing a sovereign.

“Eh-hé, Nkose!” assented the Matabele. “It is in a bag, so high,”—holding his hand about a couple of feet from the ground.

Then they talked, the white man and the savage,—talked long and earnestly. The superstitions of the latter precluded him from going near the dreaded sepulchre, let alone entering it. But for the former no such barrier existed. Hlangulu knew a way of getting him through the pickets: then he could accomplish a double purpose, explore the

interior of the King's grave, and bring away the concealed wealth which lay there; and this they would share equally.

It was quite dark when they separated: Blachland all braced up by the prospect of a new and interesting adventure, which, coming when it did, was peculiarly welcome; Hlangulu to dream of an idyllic existence, in some far-away land where Lo Bengula's arm could not reach, where he could sit in his kraal and count his vast herds of cattle, and buy wives, young and new, whenever inclined.

## Chapter Nine.

## A Weird Quest.

Away among the masses of the wonderful Matopo range.

Huge granite piles rearing up skyward in every varied form of bizarre delineation, like the mighty waves of an angry sea suddenly petrified, the great flow of fallen stones covering the entire slope like the inflow of surf upon a slanting shore; the scanty trees, and tall, knife-edged tambuti grass in the valley bottoms, like seaweed in the rainy moisture of the dusking evening. Then a blue gleam of lightning along the grim granite faces; and a dull boom, re-echoed again and again as the thunder-peal is tossed from crag to crag in a hundred deep-toned reverberations.

Standing just within their ample shelter—which is formed by the overhang of a great boulder—Blachland gazes forth upon the weird and awe-inspiring solitude. Opposite, a huge castellated rock, many hundreds of feet in height, balances on its summit a mighty slab, which it seems would need but the touch of a finger to send crashing into the valley beneath; then a ridge of tumbled boulders; further down another titanic pile, reft clean through the centre by a chasm, in whose jaws is gripped tight the enormous wedge of stone which seems to have split it: and so on, till the eye is tired and the mind overawed by the stupendous grimness of these Dante-esque heights and valleys.

The adventure is in full swing now. Blachland and his strange guide have been out several days, travelling when possible only at night, and then keeping to the hills as much as practicable. And now they are nearing their goal.

And, looking at it calmly, it is a strange adventure indeed, almost an aimless one. The story of the buried gold Blachland is inclined to scout utterly. But no amount of questioning will shake the faith of his guide, and so, at last, he has come to believe in it himself. Indeed, otherwise, what motive would Hlangulu have for aiding and abetting that which, in his eyes, was nothing more nor less than a monstrous piece of sacrilege? He knew that savages are the most practical of mortals, and that it is entirely outside their code of ethics to go to a vast deal of trouble and risk without the prospect of adequate and substantial advantage to be gained thereby.

It had occurred to him that there might be another motive, and a sinister one. Hlangulu might be decoying him into the most out-of-the-way recesses of Matabeleland in order to make away with him treacherously; and the idea was not a pleasant one, in that, however on the alert he might be, there must always be times when a crafty and determined foe could strike him down when off his guard. But here, again, motive

counted for something, and here, again, motive utterly failed, as we have said. He could not call to mind that Hlangulu had the faintest occasion to owe him any sort of a grudge, and, even if it were so, he would not go to work in any such roundabout fashion to pay it. There was nothing for it but to set the whole thing down to its real motive, cupidity to wit.

To this had succeeded another idea. What if this concealed gold were really there, and be succeeded in obtaining it? It was then that he would have to watch his guide and companion with a jealous eye. For the whole is greater than the half, and would this covetous savage remain content with the half? He resolved to keep his eyes very wide open indeed, during the return journey.

The return journey! It was rather early to think about that, for the perils of the enterprise were only about to begin. Turning back within their shelter now, he proceeded to question Hlangulu, who was squatting against a rock, smoking a pipe—to question him once more as to the surroundings of the King's grave.

But the man's answers were mere reiterations of all that he had said before. They would soon be within touch of the guards whom, in the ordinary way, it would be impossible to pass. The snake? Yes, there was no doubt but that it was the itongo, or ghost of the Great Great One who sat there. Many had seen it. He, Hlangulu, had seen it twice, and had retreated, covering his face, and calling out the sibonga of the dead King. It was an immense black mamba, and had been seen to go in and out of the grave. It was as long and again half as long as Isipau himself, he declared, looking Blachland up and down.

The latter, remembering Sybrandt's narrative, concluded that there was something decidedly creepy in bearding a particularly vicious and deadly species of serpent within a narrow cleft of rock, the beast being about nine feet long at that—which is what Hlangulu's estimate would make it. Under any circumstances it would be bad enough, but now with all the grim and eerie adjuncts thrown in, why the whole scheme seemed to bristle with peril. And what was there to gain by it? Well, the gold.

It must not be supposed, however, that the idea of obtaining this was cherished without a qualm. Did not the whole thing look uncommonly like an act of robbery, and the meanest kind of robbery too—the robbery of a grave? The gold was not his. It had been put there by those to whom it belonged. What right to it had he? As against this he set the fact that it was lying there utterly useless to any living soul; that if he did not take it, somebody else would; that the transfer of the whole of the Matabeleland to the British flag was only a question of time, and that, during the war which should be necessary to bring about this process, others would come to hear of this buried wealth, or light on it by chance, and then, would they be more scrupulous? Not one whit.

It will be remembered that he was all eagerness to effect this weird exploration even before he had the faintest inkling that the place concealed, or might conceal, anything more valuable than a few mouldering relics—a few trumpery articles of adornment, perhaps, which might be worth bringing away as curios. Yet, strange as it may seem, his later knowledge scarcely added to that eagerness.

A curious trait in Hilary Blachland's character was a secret horror of one day failing in nerve. He could recall at least one experience in his life when this had happened to him, and that at a critical juncture, and it had left an impression on him which he had never forgotten. There were times when it haunted him with a ghostlike horror, and under its influence he would embark in some mad and dare-devil undertaking, utterly inconsequent because utterly without rhyme, reason, or necessity. It was as though he were consumed with a feverish desire to cultivate a reputation for intrepidity, though, as a matter of actual fact, his real motive was to satisfy himself on the point. As a matter of actual fact, too, he was as courageous as the average, and possessed of more than the average amount of resolution.

"We should be starting," said Hlangulu, coming to the entrance of their shelter, and sending a scrutinising look at the sky. "The rain has stopped, and the clouds will all blow apart. Then there will be a moon. We shall arrive there before daybreak." And, without waiting for the other's consent or comment, he dived within again, and began putting together the few things they carried.

One can travel light on such a march, provided the wayfarer makes up his mind, and that rigidly, to take nothing along that is not strictly and absolutely necessary. To this rule the strangely assorted pair had adhered, so that the time taken to get under way was no longer than that required to saddle Blachland's horse.

Hlangulu's prediction was verified, for in less than half an hour the clouds had parted in all directions, revealing the depths of the blue-black vault all spangled with gushing stars—and lo, a silver crescent moon flooded the sombre valleys and fantastic crags with her soft light. It was a strange and eerie march through that grim wilderness in the hush of the silent night—a silence, broken now and again by mysterious cries as of bird or beast—the effect heightened by the varying echo from cave or crag. An ant-bear, looking like a great bald pig in the magnifying moonlight, scuttled across their path. A strange variety of nightjar flitted overhead, looking something between a butterfly and a paper kite; or a troop of baboons, startled suddenly from their feast of roots, would skip hurriedly out of the way, their dark, gnome-like shapes glancing through the long grass as they sought refuge among the granite crags, there to bark loud and excited defiance after the disturbers.

These, however, took no notice, intent only on getting forward. They were safe here from the one great object of their apprehension, their fellow-man—as yet: the point was to cover all the ground possible while such immunity was still theirs. The Matabele led the way in long wiry strides—the horseman following. As a matter of precaution, the horse's shoes had been removed; for the clink of a shod hoof travels far, at night, in uninhabited solitudes, or, for the matter of that, even by day.

During the long night march, Blachland's thoughts were busy, and they were mainly concerned with the events of the three or four days during which he had been making up his mind to this undertaking; with the parting with Hermia, and with the future. She had not accepted the position quietly, and, a rare thing with her, had treated him to rather a stormy scene.

He had only just returned after a long absence, she declared, and now was anxious to start off again. Assuredly he was tired of her—or was it that her suspicions were correct, and that he had a kraal of his own in Matabeleland, like that horrid old Pemberton and other traders? Ah well, if he was tired of her, there might be other people who were not perhaps. If he did not appreciate her, there might be other people who did.

"Meaning, for present purposes, Spence," he had rejoined, but without heat. "Well, you are old enough and experienced enough to know where your own interests lie, and so it is superfluous for me to remind you," he had added. And so they had parted with but scant affection; and it might well be, remembering the perilous nature of his present undertaking, never to behold each other again.

A short off-saddle, about midnight, relieved the march. At length, in the black hour succeeding the setting of the moon, Hlangulu called a halt.

"We must leave the horse here," he said. "We can hide him in yonder cleft until to-morrow night. It will not be safe to ride him any further, Isipau. Look!"

The other had already beheld that to which his attention was now directed. For a dull glow arose upon the night, and that at no great distance ahead: a glow as of fires. And, in fact, such it was; for it was the glow of the watch-fires of one of the armed pickets, guarding, day and night, the approaches to the sacred neighbourhood of the King's grave.

## Chapter Ten.

## Umzilicazi's Grave.

The huge granite pile loomed forth overhead, grim, frowning, indistinct. Then, as the faint streak in the blackness of the eastern horizon banded into red width, the outlines of the great natural mausoleum stood forth clearer and clearer.

Blachland's pulses beat hard, as he stood gazing. At last he had reached the goal of his undertaking—at last he stood upon the forbidden ground. The uneasy consciousness that discovery meant Death—death, moreover, in some barbarous and lingering form—was hardly calculated to still his bounding pulses. He stood there alone. Hlangulu had come as near as he dared, and, with the minutest instructions as to the nearest and safest approach, had hidden to await his return.

How they had eluded the vigilance of the pickets our explorer hardly knew. He called to mind, however, a moment which, if not the most exciting moment of his life, at any rate brought him within as grim a handshaking proximity to certain death as he had ever yet attained. For, at the said moment, Hlangulu had drawn him within a rock cleft—and that with a quick muscular movement which there was neither time nor opportunity to resist, but which, a second later, there was no inclination to, as he beheld—they both beheld—a body of Matabele warriors, fully armed, and seeming to rise out of nowhere, pass right over the very spot just occupied by themselves. He could see the markings of the hide shields, could even make out the whites of rolling eyeballs in the starlight, as the savages flitted by and were gone.

But would they return? Had the sound of strange footsteps reached their ears, and started them in search? Assuredly, if Hilary Blachland stood in need of a new and intense excitement, he had got it now. But a barely breathed inquiry met for some time with no response from his guide, who at length rose up and declared that they must push on.

And now here he stood alone. Before him two massive granite faces arose, leaning forward, as it were, until their overhanging brows nearly met the topmost boughs of a solitary Kafferboen which grew out of the ground fronting the entrance at a distance of some yards. Over the angle formed by these an immense boulder was balanced, in such wise as to form a huge natural porch; but in continuation of the angle was a deft, a tall narrow deft, the entrance to which was roughly built up with stones. This, then, was the King's grave.

The dawn was rapidly lightening. There was no time to lose. He must enter at once, and there remain throughout the entire day. Only in the darkness could he enter, only in the darkness could he leave it.

As he climbed up on the embankment of stones, one, loosened by his tread, dislodged another. Heavens! what a clatter they made, or seemed to make, in the dead stillness. Then he set his teeth hard, stifling a groan. The falling stone had struck his ankle, bruising it sharply and causing intense pain. For a moment he paused. Could he climb any further? It seemed to have lamed him. Then somehow there came back to him old Pemberton's words: "There's no luck meddling with such places—no, none." Well, there seemed something in it, and if his ill-luck began here what was awaiting him when he should have effected his purpose? But he had professed himself above such puerile superstitions, and now was the time to make good his professions. Besides, it was too late to draw back. If he were not under concealment within a moment or so, his peril would be of a more real and material order. So, summoning all his coolness and resolution, exercising the greatest care, he climbed over the remaining stones and dropped down within the cleft.

And now he forgot the pain of his contused ankle, as, full of interest he stood within this wonderful tomb. But for a very slight trend the cleft ran inward straight to a depth of some forty or fifty feet, its sides, straight and smooth, rising to nearly the same height; and at the further end, which narrowed somewhat, ere terminating abruptly in the meeting of the two Titanic boulders which caused it, he could make out something which looked like a heap, an indefinable heap, of old clothes.

Blachland paused. Here, then, was the object of his exploration. Here, then, lay the mouldering remains of the dead King, and here lay the buried gold. Drawing his flask from his pocket, he took a nip to steady his nerves before beginning his search. Before beginning it, however, some impulse moved him to glance forth once more upon the outside world.

The sun had not yet risen, but the land lay revealed in the pearly dawn. There was the rough, long, boulder-strewn ridge, continuing away from this great natural tumulus which dominated it. Away over the valley, the bushy outline of the Intaba Inyoka stood humped against the suffusing sky; but what drew and held his gaze was a kind of natural platform, immediately below, part rock, part soil. This, however, lay black amid the surrounding green—black as though through the action of fire; but its blackness was strangely relieved, chequered, by patches of white. He recognised it for the spot described by Sybrandt and also by Hlangulu—the place where cattle were sacrificed at intervals to the shades of the departed King.

Something else caught his eye, something moving overhead. Heavens! the great boulder, overhanging like a penthouse, was falling—falling over! In a moment he would be shut in, buried alive in this ghastly tomb. Appalled, he gazed upwards, his eyes straining on it, and then he could have laughed aloud, for the solution was simple. A light breeze had sprung and up, the topmost boughs of the Kafferboen, swaying to its movement, were meeting the boulder, then swinging away again, producing just that curious and eerie effect to one in a state of nervous tension. He stood watching this optical delusion, and laughed again. Decidedly his nerves were overstrung. Well, this would not do. Facing once more within the cave, he concluded to start upon his research without further delay.

It was lighter now—indeed, but for the chastened gloom of the interior, nearly as light as it ever would be. He approached the farther end. Mouldering old blankets crumbled under his tread. He could see the whole of the interior, and again he laughed to himself—recalling the legend of the King's Snake. There was no recess that would hide so much as a mouse. He scattered the fragments of old clothing with the stock of his rifle, laying bare layers of crumbling matting. More eagerly still he parted these when he came to the central heap. Layer by layer, he tore away the stuff-ancient hide wrappings, ornamented with worn bead-work—beneath the mats of woven grass; then something white appeared—white, and smooth, and round. Eagerly, yet carefully, he parted the wrappings; and lo, protruding from them—not lying, but in a bolt-upright position—a great grinning skull!

He stepped back a pace or two, and stood gazing at this with intense interest, not unmixed with awe. Here, then, sat the dead King—Umzilikazi, the mighty; the founder of a great and martial nation; the scourge, the devastator of a vast region,—here he sat, the warrior King, before whose frown tens of thousands had trembled, a mere framework of fleshless bones, seated upon his last throne, here, within the heart of this vast silent rock-tomb: and the upright position of the skull, caused by the sitting attitude in which Zulus are buried, seemed to lend to the Death's head something of the majesty which it had worn in life when its cavity had enclosed the indomitable and far-seeing brain, when those eye-sockets had framed the relentless, terrible eyes. For some moments he stood gazing upon the grim face staring at him from its sightless sockets, and then, not in mockery, but moved by certain poetic instincts underlying a highly imaginative temperament, he raised his right hand, and uttered softly—

"Kumalo!"

Yes, even as he would have saluted the living, so he saluted the remains of the dead King. Yet he had already violated and was here to plunder the dead King's grave.

What was this? Something glistening among the rotting heap of wrappings caught his eye. Bending down, he raised it eagerly. It was a large bead about the size of a marble. Two more lay beside them, the remnant of the leather lanyard on which they had been threaded, crumbling to his touch. Gold, were they? They were of solid weight. But a quick close examination convinced him that they were merely brass. Anyway, they would make valuable curios, and he slipped them into his pocket accordingly. Again he could not restrain a start as he raised his eyes. The skull when last he beheld it, of a dull, yellowy white in the deep shadows of the gloomy place was now shining like fire as it glowered at him, suffused as with a reddening incandescent glow. A wave of superstitious awe thrilled him from head to heel. What on earth did it mean? And then the real reason of this startling metamorphosis came home to him.

The sun had risen. High above through a chink between the huge boulders right over the entrance of the cleft, one single spear-like beam found entrance, and, piercing the gloomy shadows of the tomb, struck full upon the fleshless countenance of the dead King, illuminating it with a well-nigh supernatural glow; and with the clearing up of the mystery, the spectator was lost in admiration of the ingenuity that had contrived that the first ray of the rising sun should illuminate the countenance of the Great Great One, whom while living they hailed, among other titles of honour, as "Light of the Sun." Then he remembered that the coincidence was purely accidental, for he himself had uncovered the skull and exposed it to view, and the illusion vanished. And as he gazed, the beam was withdrawn, leaving the Death's head in its former shadow.

Leaning back against the rock wall, Blachland began to attune himself to the situation. At last he had explored the King's grave, he, all by himself. What a laugh he would have over Sybrandt and Pemberton bye-and-bye—they who had scouted the feat as utterly impossible. Well, he had done it, he alone, had done what no white man had ever done before him—what possibly no white man would ever do again. And—it was intensely interesting.

And now, what about the buried treasure? He had all through been sceptical as to the existence of this, but had not insisted on his scepticism to Hlangulu, lest he might cool that acquisitive savage off the undertaking. The latter's reply to his question as to how it was that others were not now in the know as well as he—that the matter was hlonipa, i.e. veiled, forbidden of mention—had not struck him as satisfactory. Well, as he was here he might as well take a thorough look round and make sure.

Acting upon this idea he once more approached the skeleton of the dead King, but a careful search all around it revealed nothing. All around it? Not quite, for he had not tried behind it. There was a dark recess extending perhaps three or four yards behind

it—to where the cleft ended, and this too, seemed spread with old and mouldering wrappings.

These he began, as with the others, raking aside with the butt of his rifle. Then, suddenly his foothold began to tremble—then to move violently from under him. Was there no end to the weird surprises of this uncanny place, was the thought that flashed lightning-like through his mind; and then, as with a superlative effort he just managed to keep his footing—while staggering back a few paces, there befel something so appalling that his blood seemed to run ice within him, and the very hair of his head to stand up.

## Chapter Eleven.

## The King's Snake.

A loud, awful hiss of ear-splitting stridency—and simultaneously there shot up, from the very ground as it were, a long, writhing, sinuous length of black neck, glistening as the half light played upon it—swaying in the gloom of the recess. It was surmounted by a horrible head, with two scintillating eyes. The forked tongue was darting in and out between the widely parted fangs, as the head, waving to and fro was suddenly drawn back as if to strike. And the man had been actually standing upon the hidden coils of this huge and terrible reptile.

For a moment Blachland stood as one petrified, as well he might be by the awfulness and suddenness of this blasting apparition. Then, instinctively, he drew his revolver, as being more sure at close quarters than the rifle, the while stepping back cautiously, and keeping his face turned to the reptile.

The fury of the latter seemed in no wise to diminish. Hissing hideously, its eyes glared, as more and more of its horrible length rose into view, and the further floor of the cave heaved and trembled with the still concealed coils.

Blachland had now drawn back as far as he could, short of clambering out of the place altogether, and, his blood all curdling with horror and dread, he stood watching the monster with a kind of fell fascination. He dared not fire. The cavernous echoes of the report would go booming forth over all the land so to say, and bring an entire hornet's nest about his ears from which there would be no escape. The King's Snake! He recalled the utter derision wherewith he had received Sybrandt's statement on the subject—and yet it was only too fearfully true. A black imamba, Sybrandt had said, and this was one, and an enormous one at that. He knew, moreover, that this species was the most deadly and ferocious of serpents. No, he would stay here no longer—not another moment. Better meet death a hundred times in the ordinary way at the hand of enemies in the open, than remain here, shut up in a charnel house, with this awful black fiend.

Acting on this idea, he began to feel for a firm hold of the stone parapet, intending to spring out quickly and at all risks, but still keeping his eyes on the reptile. It, strange to say, still remained where it was, just behind the skeleton of the King, and though still hissing furiously, made no movement forward to attack him. Encouraged by this, he got a firm grip on the topmost stone, and hoisted himself carefully up. Then he let himself down again. For simultaneously with the appearance of his head above the stones, a shout had broken forth from beneath, then another and another. His presence there had been discovered. Well, he had a choice of two deaths, both equally horrible. Was there

not a third, however, which was less so? There was. He might blow out his own brains. That would be quicker at any rate.

But almost immediately upon the idea came the consciousness that these were no hostile shouts that rose booming, full-voiced, to raise the echoes of the King's grave.

"Kumálo!
Ho, inyoka 'nkulu!
Ho, Inyoka 'mninimamdhla!
Bayéte!"
(See Note 1.)

With a flash of returning hope, Blachland peered forth, trusting to the combined effect of distance and shadow, to render his head invisible from below. Two men were standing on the flat place beneath—where lay the heaps of charred bones—two old men, with right hand uplifted and facing the tomb—and he recognised one as Umjane, a favourite and trusted councillor of Lo Bengula's, the other as Faku, the old induna who had intervened when the warriors were clamouring to be allowed to massacre the four white men on the occasion of their last visit to the King. Now they were here to give the nbonga at the grave of Umzilikazi, and the listener's heart sank again, for he had heard that this was a process which sometimes lasted for hours. But, as though in compensation, he noticed that the snake had abated its fury. It had dropped its hideous head, and lay there, in a shining, heaving coil as the sonorous chant proceeded:

"Ho, Inyoka 'mnyama!
Nkos' inyoka!
Inyoka-ka-Matyobane!
Ho, Inyoka yise wezulu!
Bayéte!"
(See Note 2.)

Strophe by strophe, in a sort of antiphonal fashion, the two old indunas continued this weird litany of the Snake. Then they changed to every kind of other title of sibonga, but always returning to the subject of the serpent. But the strange part of it to the human listener, was the calming effect it seemed to have upon the black horror, then but a few yards off—for the brute quieted down more and more as the voices outside were raised higher. What on earth could be the reason, thought Blachland? There was an idea abroad that reptiles were susceptible to music, but even if such were the case, this monotonous unvarying intonation, never exceeding three notes, was not music. Could it be that in reality the spirit of the dead King was transmigrated into that serpent form? and again he recalled old Pemberton's rough and ready words:—"There's mighty rum

things happen you can't explain nor scare up any sort of reason for." What if this were one of them? And with the idea, and aided by time and place, a kind of superstitious dread began to steal over him with paralysing effect. The white skull, staring at him in the semi-gloom, seemed to take on a fell and menacing expression, and the fleshless face to frown; and beyond it the gliding restless heave of the glistening coils, its terrible serpent guardian.

The chant continued—on and on—now falling, then rising, with renewed attributes to the spirit of the mighty dead. The two old indunas were walking to and fro now, and it seemed that each was striving to outdo the other in inventing fresh titles of praise. And what of the hidden gold? Not for all the wealth this world could produce would Blachland have meddled further with the mysteries of this gruesome tomb. His sole aspiration now was for an opportunity of getting outside of it, and slipping away in safety.

Of this, however, there seemed but small prospect. Hours seemed to have gone by, and yet these two indefatigable old men showed no sign of bringing their loyal, if posthumous, performance to a close. Then a change came over the aspect of affairs, but was it a change for the better?

A party of warriors had appeared a little way behind them. They advanced to the edge of the platform of rock and soil whereon the two indunas were walking up and down—then, at a sign from these, drew nearer. Their assegais flashed in the sunlight: the shiny faces of their hide shields, too, caught the gleam. Then all weapons were let fall as with right hand upraised the new comers with one voice uttered aloud the salute royal:—

"Kumalo!"

And now the watcher became aware of something else. In the midst of the new comers were three black heifers. These were dragged forward on to the sacrifice ground—and thrown down. They bellowed and struggled, but in vain. Like ants besetting the unwary beetle or cricket which has strayed into the disturbed nest, the savages threw themselves upon the luckless animals, and drawing off, revealed these securely bound. Then followed a scene which, his own peril notwithstanding, turned Blachland sick. The wretched beasts were not merely slaughtered, but were half flayed and cut to pieces alive. Quarters were torn off, amid the frenzied bellowings of the tortured victims, and held up towards the tomb of the great King amid roaring acclamations of sibonga, and finally a vast mass of dry brushwood and grass was collected, and being heaped over and around the moaning, agonised creatures, was set alight. The red flames crackled, and roared aloft, and the smoke of the heathenish burnt offering, areek with the horrid smell of burning flesh, floated in great clouds right to the mouth of the cleft, and above and

over all, now augmented to thunder tones by the voices of the later arrivals, the strophes of their fierce and gloomy devil-worship—the paeans in praise of the Snake, in whom now rested the spirit of the dead King—arose in weird and deafening chorus above this holocaust of agony and fire and blood.

Transfixed with horror and disgust, Blachland watched this demoniacal orgy, the more so that in it he saw his own fate in the event of detection. Suddenly the great serpent at the back of the cleft, which had been quiescent for some time, emitted a loud hiss—rearing its head in startling suddenness. Was the brute going to attack him? Then a desperate idea came into his head. Under cover of the smoke would it be practicable to slip out, and getting round the pile of boulders, lie hidden in some crevice or cranny until dark? Again the monster emitted a hiss, this time louder, more threatening. And now he thought he saw the reason. The smoke was creeping into the cleft, not thickly as yet, but enough of it to render the atmosphere unpleasant, and indeed he could hardly stifle a fit of coughing. This would bring the reptile out, perhaps even it was partly designed to do so—in order to satisfy the heathenish watchers that their tutelary deity, the serpent of Umzilikazi, was still there, was still watching over its votaries. In that ease, was he not in its way? It could only find egress by passing over him—and in that case, would it fail to strike him with its venomous deadly fangs? Outside, the assegais of the savages, the death by torture. Within, the horrible repulsive strike of the fearful reptile, the convulsions and agony attendant upon the victims of the bite of that species before death should claim them. It was a choice, but such a choice that the very moment of making might turn a man's hair white in the event of his surviving.

And now the smoke rolled in thicker, and, noonday as it was, those below were quite invisible. A heavy gliding sound from the far end of the cleft was audible. The horror was drawing its fearful coils clear of its covering. In a moment it would be upon him, mad, infuriated in its frenzied rush for the open air. It was now or never. A thick volume of smoke rolled up as Blachland scrambled over the piled stones, nearly choking him, even in the open air. A sharp, sickening pain shot through his bruised ankle. Was it the fangs of the deadly mamba? Two or three of the great stones, displaced, rattled loosely—but the thunderous Snake song raised below must have drowned the rattle. Heavens! the smoke was parting! Only for a moment though, but in that moment the desperate man caught sight of that which encouraged him. The savages were clustering around the burning holocaust, heaping on piles of grass and brush. The concealing cloud closed in again thicker than ever, and under its friendly cover, he gained the rock at the foot of the Kafferboen; then, keeping his head comparatively clear, he crept round the upper side of the granite pile with the instinct of keeping it between himself and his enemies. This object once attained, he staggered blindly forward, the shouting and the song growing fainter behind him. Ha! This would do. A cranny between two boulders six or eight feet deep. He would lie here perfectly still until night. The awful strain he had undergone,

and the anguish of his contused ankle, now stiff and sore, rendered such a rest absolutely essential. Lowering himself cautiously into the crevice he lay for a few moments unsteadily thinking. The pain of his ankle, intensified in its fierce throbbing—was it the mamba poison after all? Then everything seemed to whirl round, and he lost consciousness.

Note 1.

“Oh Great Serpent
O, All powerful Serpent!”
Kumálo and Bayéte are both merely royal salutes.

Note 2.

“Black Serpent!
King Serpent!
Serpent of Matyobane!
Serpent, Father of the Zulus!”

## Chapter Twelve.

## A Turn of the Wheel.

"Oh, lucky Jim!
How I envy hi-im!
Oh-h, Lucky Jim—
"Get up, old sportsman! It's time for 'scoff.'" And the singer thus breaking off from song to prose, dives his head into the tent door, and apostrophises about six-foot-one of recumbent humanity.

"All right, Jack! A fellow isn't dead that it requires all that infernal row to wake him," retorts Justin Spence, rather testily, for his dreams in the heat of the blazing forenoon have been all of love and roses, and the brusque awakening from such to the rough delights of a prospector's camp in the wilds of sultry Mashunaland, is likely not to supply a soothing contrast.

His partner takes no notice of the passing ill-humour save for a light laugh, as he returns to his former occupation, the superintending and part assisting at, a certain cooking process under the shade of a tree, effected by a native boy and now nearly completed. A tent and a small waggon supply the residential quarters, the latter for the "boys," who turn in on the ground underneath it—the former for their masters. A "scherm" of chopped boughs encloses the camp, and within this the donkeys are safeguarded at night: a case of learning wisdom by experience, for already two of these useful little animals have fallen a prey to lions through being left thus unprotected. Just outside this is a partially sunken shaft, surmounted by a rude windlass.

"What have we got for 'scoff,' Jack?" says Justin Spence, yawning lazily as he withdraws his dripping hands from the calabash wash-basin, and saunters across to the scene of culinary operations. "Oh, Lord!" giving a sniff or two as a vile and carrion-like effluvium strikes upon his nostrils. "There's one of those beastly stink-ants around somewhere. Here, Sixpence!" calling to one of a trio of Mashuna boys lounging beneath the shade of the waggon aforesaid. "Hamba petula stink-ant—what the deuce is the word, Jack? 'Iye, yes, that's it Bulal'iye. Comprenny? Well, clear then. Hamba. Scoot."

A splutter of bass laughter went up from the natives at this lucid direction, which, however, the other man soon made clear.

"Oh, never mind about the stink-ant," he said. "Why, man, it's all in the day's work. You must get used to these little trifles, or you'll never do any good at prospecting."

“Oh, damn prospecting! I hate it,” returned Justin, stretching his graceful length upon the ground. “Ladle out the scoff and let’s fall to. I want to have another smoke.”

“Oh, Lucky Jim!
How I envy him—”
resumed Jack Skelsey, while engaged in the above occupation.

“So do I, Jack, or anybody else to whom that word ‘lucky’ can be said to apply—and I’m afraid whoever that is it’ll never be us.”

“You never can tell, old man. Luck generally strikes a chap when least expected.”

“Then now’s the time for it to strike me; right now, Jack.”

“Oh, I don’t know we’ve much to grouse about, Spence. It’s beastly hot up here, and we’re sweating our souls out all for nothing. But after all, it’s better than being stuck away all one’s life in a musty old office, sometimes not even seeing the blessed light of day for a week at a time, if it happens to be foggy—a miserable jet of gas the only substitute for yonder jolly old sun. Rather! I’ve tried it and you haven’t. See?”

Nobody could have looked upon that simple camp without thoroughly agreeing with the speaker. It was hot certainly, but there were trees which afforded a cool and pleasant shade: while around for many a mile stretched a glorious roll of bush veldt—all green and golden in the unclouded sunlight—and the chatter of monkeys, the cackle of the wild guinea-fowl, the shrill crow of the bush pheasant together with the gleam of bright-winged birds glancing overhead, bespoke that this beautiful wilderness was redundant with life. The two men lounging there, with bronzed races and chests, their shirtsleeves turned up from equally bronzed wrists, looked the picture of rude health: surely if ever there was such a thing as a free life—open—untrammelled—this was it.

The day was Sunday, which may account for the lazy way in which we found one at any rate of the pair, spending the morning. For they had made it a rule to do no work on that day, not, we fear, from any particularly religious motive, but acting on the thoroughly sound and wholesome plan of taking one day in seven “off.” A thoroughly sound and wholesome appetite had they too. When they had done, Skelsey remarked:

“Shall we go and have a shoot?”

The other, who was tugging at a knot in the strings of his tobacco bag, looked up quickly.

“Er—no. At least I won’t go,” he said rather nervously. “Er—I think I’ll ride over to Blachland’s.”

“All right, old chap. Let’s go there instead.”

This did not suit Spence at all. “Don’t know whether you’d care for it, Jack. The fact is, Blachland’s away.”

“I see-ee!” rejoined Skelsey, significantly. “Oh-h, l-lucky Jim! How I envy hi-im—” he hummed.

“You know you always swear you hate talking to women,” said Spence eagerly, as though anxious to apologise for or explain his unfriendliness. “So I thought it only fair to warn you as to what you had to expect.”

“I see-ee!” repeated the other with a laugh and a wink. “Who’s this?” shading his eyes and gazing out over the veldt. “Jonah back already?”

A native was approaching, a clothed native; in fact one of their boys. He had been despatched to a trading store, a trifling distance of twenty-five miles away, to procure certain supplies, and now as he reappeared, he was bearing on his head a prodigious load.

“Now we shan’t be long!” ejaculated Skelsey, “and good biz too, for the grog was running most confoundedly low. Jonah is therefore for once a welcome sight.”

The load on being investigated was found to consist of a case of whisky and sundry unconsidered trifles in the grocery line. When this had been overhauled the boy, fumbling in the pockets of his greasy cord jacket, fished out a greasier bundle all rolled up in newspaper.

“The mail, by George!” cried Skelsey. “English mail too. Here you are, Spence. It’s all for you, confound it,” he added disappointedly. “Well, that jolly blue envelope bears a striking family likeness to our old friend the dun. Never mind, old chap, you’re out of that brute’s reach anyway.”

Justin was probably of the same opinion, for he looked dubiously at the suspicious enclosure, and put it aside, beginning upon his other two mail letters. Yet, when half through these something moved him to tear open the other. A glance at its contents—then he started and grew pale. What was this? His hands trembled, and a mist seemed to come between his eyes and the paper, as he held it in front of him, striving to master

the contents. Was it real? Heavens! no! Some fool must have been putting up a practical joke on him. It was impossible. It could not be.

“No bad news I hope, old chap?”

His partner’s voice, anxious, sympathetic, sounded quite far away.

“No—no. Oh no—not bad news,” he answered unsteadily. “I’ll tell you bye-and-bye. Here, Sixpence! Hurry up and get in my horse. Tshetsha—d’you hear! Tshetsha!”

Skelsey watched him furtively and wondered. However, he made no further remark.

“Well, so long, Jack,” said Spence, as he led forth his horse. His partner had further observed that his hands shook during the process of saddling up—and that he seemed in a desperate hurry to be off. “I’ll be back to-night, but after dark, I expect.”

“No, you won’t,” thought Skelsey to himself. “Spence is making a bally fool of himself in that quarter. There’ll be a gorgeous bust-up one of these days.” Then aloud:

“So long, Spence. Remember me to the beautiful Mrs B.”

“No more of this life,” thought Spence to himself as he rode along. A very different one now threw wide its alluring portals before him. He would leave all his share in the joint outfit to Jack Skelsey. He was a good fellow was Jack—

“Oh, l-lucky Jim!
How I envy hi-im—”
Justin laughed aloud, lightheartedly, gleefully, as his chum’s favourite song arose fainter and fainter behind him. And then his chum’s strange prediction, uttered scarcely half an hour ago, recurred to his mind.

“‘Luck generally strikes a man when least expected!’ By Jove! Jack was right.”

We have said that Blachland had undergone a stormy time of it domestically, by reason of this new and sudden absence. But Hermia’s grievance was not a genuine one. So little indeed was it genuine that she was conscious of a distinct feeling of relief when he announced it. But side by side with this was an inherent instinct to deceive herself, since there was no other object on which to practise deception: to deceive herself into the idea that she really was a very ill-used person. He neglected her shamefully, she had declared. She had not bargained for leading this utterly lonely life when she decided to

accompany him to this remote corner of the earth. Well, again let him take care. There were others who appreciated her if he did not. To which he had replied equably:—

“Meaning Spence,” and had gone on with his preparations.

It was this very imperturbability which had always dominated Hermia. She knew their relationship was dangerously near a rupture, and was not quite sure within her heart of hearts that she desired such. But a short while since, she emphatically did not; now it might be otherwise. Yet it was impracticable, for the first essential to her mind was comfort and liberty unstinted. Justin Spence was as poor as the proverbial church mouse, else why should he be out there prospecting? She knew that every cent he had in the world was drawn from an allowance—not a large one either—and that allowances are the most precarious of all means of subsistence, in that they depend solely upon the will and caprice of the allower. It was a thousand pities. If only he were well off, she would not have hesitated. She was perfectly sick of this uncivilised, lonely life. She longed for the world again. Justin adored her. Her will would be his law. Ah, why was he not independent and well off?

She looked back over her past, but it caused her no qualms. She looked back on a period of passion and love, but the retrospect only served to emphasise the subsequent disillusionment. To be content with the love of one—no, that was not in her. New life, new love—the new wine of life! That was to live indeed.

She looked around on the glowing veldt, shimmering in the afternoon heat. Away on yonder rise a line of black objects was moving. She got out the binocular, a clear and powerful glass, and the objects seemed about fifty yards away—a score of sable antelope moving through the low bush, some of them magnificent specimens of that noble buck, and she could clearly distinguish the great scimitar-like horns and black hides, so markedly defined. Yes, this was a grand country for men, but for women, debarred from all outdoor sport and excitement, why it was a living grave. And then, as she looked, suddenly the leaders of the line threw up their heads, stopped short, snuffing the air, and then the whole line turned about and trotted back in the direction from which they had come.

What had alarmed the animals? Sweeping the glass round carefully it revealed another object, a man on horseback, and her heart gave a great bound of delight.

“It is. It’s Justin,” she exclaimed half aloud. “The dear boy! How glad I am. But—what on earth—? What a hurry he’s in!”

For the advancing rider was coming along at something like a hard gallop, which was no pace at which to push a horse on a sweltering day like this. Then Hermia began a little piece of acting. She went into the house, and arranging herself on an old wicker couch covered with a leopard skin rug, began to read.

"Missis—Baas riding this way. Tink it Baas Spence." This from the grinning woolly head of Tickey, inserted through the open doorway. Hermia rose, stretched herself, and the book still in her hand came and stood in the doorway. Then she stretched herself again and thus he found her.

"Why, Justin? Who would have thought of seeing you?" This with round, astonished eyes.

"But—aren't you glad to, dearest?" He was looking her up and down, a tremor of love in his voice, a world of hungry passionate adoration in his gaze.

"You know I am, dear love. Come inside."

She had put out her hand to him, and he, still holding it, needed no second bidding. Once within, however, he seized her splendid form—its lines the more seductive through the thin, summer transparency of her light attire—in a strong and passionate embrace.

"Justin, Justin, let me go!" she urged. "Really, you are getting perfectly unmanageable." And she accompanied her words with a warning gesture towards the door of the inner room. The young man laughed aloud.

"No fear," he said. "You're all alone again as usual."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how. I do know, and it wasn't you who told me. But"—becoming suddenly reproachful—"why didn't you?"

"Oh, I didn't want to distract you from your work, for one thing. You have been neglecting it far too much of late. Hilary says you'll never make a prospector."

"Oh, damn Hilary! He doesn't know everything."

"Ssh—" with a hand over his mouth. "You mustn't use swear words. And now, you dear ridiculous boy, what are you looking so absurdly happy about?"

“Ah, that’ll come in time. I’m not going to tell you all at once,” he retorted, suddenly becoming mysterious. “But, Hermia my darling, it’s like new life to see you again.”

She smiled softly, her dark eyes into his blue ones. It was like new life to her, this passionate and whole-hearted adoration. And he was so handsome too; the sunbrowned face with its refined features, the tall, well-knit figure, stirred the animal side of her, and she found herself contrasting him with the absent one. Hilary was really getting old and prosaic and satirical. He had no more sentiment left in him than a cuttlefish—was the result of the mental contrast which she drew. Whereas this one—it did occur to her that he, too, would one day lose the buoyancy and fire of youth, or even that this might come to be diverted on some object other than herself; but for the first, it was far enough off in all conscience—for the second, she had too much pride in her own powers to give it a thought.

“Ah, yes,” she answered. “You think so now, but—you wouldn’t always. Remember, Justin, I am older than you—well, only a little. But at any rate I have seen far more of the world—of life—than you can possibly have done. But what’s the use of talking? We shall have to part sooner or later.”

They had dropped down on the couch, and were seated side by side, he holding both her hands.

“But why shall we have to part sooner or later?” he asked, and the lack of lugubriousness with which he echoed her words struck her at the time.

“Well, Justin, just look at things in the face. Isn’t love in a cottage a synonym for the very height of absurdity? What about its Mashunaland equivalent—love in a prospector’s camp?”

He laughed aloud. There was something so happy and buoyant in his laugh that it struck her too.

“Yes, it strikes you as funny, doesn’t it?” she said. “Well, it is.”

“So it is,” he answered. “I quite agree. Now look here, Hermia. Supposing it were not a case of love in a prospector’s camp, but love in all the wide world—in any part of it that pleased you—no matter where—the brightest parts of it, where everything combined to make life all sunshine for you, while you made life all sunshine for me? What then?”

“Now you’re getting beyond me, Justin. Suppose you explain.”

“Yes. That’s all right. I will. No more prospecting for me, no need for that or anything else—only to enjoy life—with you. Look at this.”

He put into her hand the communication he had received in camp—the sight of which had caused him that great and sudden agitation, and which had moved his comrade so anxiously to utter a hope that it contained no bad news. Bad news! The news that it imparted was not exactly that he was a millionaire, but that all unexpectedly he had succeeded to a goodly heritage, just stopping short of five figures as a yearly income.

“Now, have we got to part sooner or later?” he cried triumphantly, watching the astonishment and then gladness which overspread her face. “Look, we have all the world before us, and need care for nobody. Come with me, Hermia my darling, my one love. Leave all this and come with me, and see what love really means.”

She did not immediately answer. She was looking him through with her large eyes, and was thinking. She looked back upon her life, and it seemed all behind her. Here was an opportunity of renewing it. Should she take him at his word, or should she play him a little longer? No, that was not advisable under the circumstances. It was now or never. It was strike while the iron is hot—and it was hot enough now in all conscience, she thought, as she looked at his pleading earnest face.

“Justin, my love, I believe I will take you at your word. Only it must be immediately or not at all. Shall I ever regret it, I wonder?” And again she looked him through with a fine expression of great and troubled seriousness.

“Never, darling,” he cried enraptured. “That old fossil doesn’t appreciate you. I will show you what appreciation means. You will go with me at once—to-morrow—never to part?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Ha-ha-haa!” laughed a jackal, questing after prey away in the gloaming shades of the now dusking veldt.

“Ha-ha-haa!” laughed his mate.

## Chapter Thirteen.

## Gone!

When Hilary Blachland awoke to consciousness, the moon was shining full down on his face.

He was chilled and stiff—but the rest and sleep had done him all the good in the world, and now as he sat up in the hard damp rock-crevice, he began to collect his scattered thoughts.

He shivered. Thoughts of fever, that dread bugbear of the up-country man, took unpleasant hold upon his mind. A sleep in the open, blanketless, inadequately protected from the sudden change which nightfall brings, in the cool air of those high plateaux—the more pronounced because of the steamy tropical heat of the day—had laid many a good man low, sapping his strength with its insidious venom, injecting into his system that which should last him throughout the best part of his life.

He peered cautiously out of his hiding-place. Not a sign of life was astir. He shook himself. Already the stiffness began to leave him. He drained his flask, and little as there was, the liquor sent a warming glow through his veins. The next thing was to find his way back to where he had left Hlangulu.

Somehow it all looked different now, as he stepped forth. In the excitement of the projected search he had not much noticed landmarks. Now for a moment or so he felt lost. But only for a moment. The great monolith of the King's grave rose up on his left front, the granite pile, white in the moonlight. Now he had got his bearings.

Cautiously he stepped forth. There was still a reek of smoke on the night air, ascending from the spot of sacrifice and wafted far and wide over the veldt. But of those who had occupied it there was no sign. They had gone. Cautiously now he stole through the shade of the bushes: the light of the moon enabling him to step warily and avoid stumbling. He was glad to put all the distance possible between himself and that accursed spot. His bruised ankle was painful to a degree, and he was walking lame. That there was no luck in meddling with Umzilikazi's last resting-place assuredly he had found.

He travelled but slowly, peering cautiously over every rise prior to surmounting it, not needlessly either, for once he came upon a Matabele picket, the glow of whose watch-fire was concealed behind a great rock. The savages were stretched lazily on the ground, their assegais and shields beside them, some asleep, others chatting drowsily. Well for him that he was cautious and that they were drowsy. But—where was Hlangulu?

Then a thought stabbed his mind. He had brought back no spoil. The Matabele, foiled in his cupidity, would have no further motive for guiding him into safety. All his malevolence would be aroused. He would at once jump to the conclusion that he had been cheated—that Blachland had hidden the gold in some place of safety, intending to return and possess himself of the whole of it. He would never for a moment believe there was none there, or if there was that it was inaccessible. A white man could do everything, was the burden of native reasoning. If this white man had returned without the spoil it would not be that there was no spoil there, but that he had hidden it, intending to keep it all for himself. Acting on this idea Blachland filled the pockets of his hunting coat with small stones so as to give to the appearance of those useful receptacles a considerable bulge. That would deceive his guide until they two were in safety once more—and then—he didn't care.

A sound struck upon his ear, causing him to stop short. It was that of one stone against another. Then it was repeated. It was the signal agreed upon between them. But it was far away on the left. He had taken a wrong bearing, and was shaping a course which would lead him deeper and deeper into the heart of the Matopo Hills. He waited a moment, then picking up a good-sized stone, struck it against a rock, right at hand, thus answering the signal.

Had Hlangulu heard it, he wondered? It was of no use to go in his direction. They might miss in the darkness, pass each other within a few yards. So he elected to sit still. The rest was more than welcome. His bruised ankle was stiff and sore and inflamed. Fortunately he would soon come to where he had left his horse. Much more walking was out of the question. Time wore on. He longed to smoke, but dared not. He was still within the dangerous limits. He was just about to give the signal once more, when—a voice raised in song hardly louder than a whisper! It was Hlangulu.

The eyes of the savage were sparkling with inquiry as he ran them over the white man. The latter rather ostentatiously displayed his bulged pockets, but said nothing—signing to the other to proceed. Not a word was spoken between the two as they held on through the night—and towards the small hours came upon the spot where the horse had been left concealed.

A European could hardly have dissembled his curiosity as to what had happened. The Matabele, however, asked no questions, and if a quick, fleeting look across his mask-like countenance, as they took their way onward through the starlight, betrayed his feelings it was all that did. Just before dawn they turned into a secure hiding-place formed by the angle of two great boulders, walled in in front by another accidental one—to rest throughout the hours of daylight.

And now a sure and certain instinct had taken hold upon Blachland, and the burden of it was that under no circumstances whatever dare he go to sleep. Once or twice he had detected a look upon the sinister race of his confederate and guide which implanted it more and more firmly within his mind. Yet, in spite of the few hours of half-unconscious doze, he was worn out for lack of rest, and there were two more nights and three whole days before he could reach home. He was feeling thoroughly done up. The fiery, gnawing pain of his swelled ankle, the strain which all that he had gone through had placed upon his nerves—combined to render him almost light-headed, yet, with it all, a marvellous instinct of self-preservation moved him to watchfulness. This could not go on. He must put it to the test one way or the other.

"I think I will try to sleep a little, Hlangulu," he said. "Afterwards we can talk about what has been."

"Nkose!" replied the Matabele, effusively, striving to quell the dark look of fierce delight which shot across his sinister countenance.

Blachland lay down, drawing his blanket half over his head. The Matabele sat against a rock and smoked.

Blachland watched him through his closed lids, but still Hlangulu sat and smoked. He became really sleepy. The squatting form of the savage was visible now only as through a far-away misty cloud. He dropped off.

Suddenly he awoke. The same instinct, however, which had warned him against going to sleep warned him now against opening his eyes. Through the merest crack between their lids he looked forth, and behold, some one was bending over him, but not so much as to conceal the haft of a short, broad-bladed, stabbing assegai.

There was not much time to decide. Cool now, as ever, in the face of ordinary and material danger, Blachland realised that his hands were imprisoned in his blanket, and that before he could free them, the blade of the savage would transfix his heart. He heaved a sigh that was partly a snore—and made a movement as though in his sleep, which if continued would still more invitingly present his breast to the deadly stroke. The murderer saw this too and paused.

But not for long. He spun round wildly, his weapon flying from his outstretched hand, then fell, heavily, on his face—and this simultaneously with the muffled roar of an explosion beneath the blanket. The supposed sleeper had stealthily drawn his hip-pocket revolver, and, firing through the covering, had shot Hlangulu dead. Then the

sleep which was overpowering him came upon him, and with a profound sense of security he dropped off, slumbering peacefully, where, but a few yards off lay the corpse of his victim and would-be murderer.

There is often a sort of an instinct which tells that a place is empty, whether house or room—empty, untenanted by its ordinary occupant. Just such a feeling was upon Blachland as he drew near his home. The gate of the stockade was shut and no smoke arose—nor was there any sign of life about the place. It had a deserted look.

The fact depressed him. He was feeling fatigued and ill; in short, thoroughly knocked up. He had even realised that there were times when it is pleasant to have a home to return to, and this was one of them, and now as he rode up to his own gate there was no sign of a welcoming presence.

He raised his voice in a stentorian hail. The two little Mashuna boys shot out of the back kitchen as scared as a couple of rabbits when the ferret is threading the winding passages to their burrow. Scared, anxious-looking, they opened the gate.

“Where is your mistress?” he asked in Sindabele.

“Gone, Nkose,” was the reply.

“Gone!” he echoed mentally.

So Hermia had taken him at his word, and had decided to retreat to Fort Salisbury. Perhaps though, some disquieting news had arrived since his departure, causing her to take that step. His feeling of depression deepened as he entered the empty house. Ah! What was this?

A letter stared at him from a conspicuous place, a sealed enclosure—and it was directed in Hermia’s handwriting. That would explain, he thought. And it did with a vengeance.

“You will not be astonished, Hilary,” it began, “because even you must have seen that this life was getting beyond endurance. You will not miss me, because for some time past you have been growing more and more tired of me. So it is best for us to part: and you can now go back to your Matabele wives, or bring them here if you prefer it; for I shall never return to this life we have been leading. I warned you that if you did not appreciate me, others did—and now I am leaving, not only this country but this continent. I am going into the world again, and now, you too, will be able to make a fresh start. We need never meet again and in all probability we never shall. Farewell.

“Hermia.”

Twice he read over this communication—slowly, carefully, as though weighing every word. So she had gone, had deserted him. There was truth in what she wrote. He had been growing tired of her—very: for he had long since got to the bottom of the utter shallowness of mind which underlay her winning and seductive exterior—winning and seductive, that is, when laying herself out to attract admiration, a thing she had long since ceased to do in his own case. The sting too, about his Matabele wives, he never having possessed any, was a not very adroit insinuation designed to place him in the wrong, and was all in keeping with a certain latent vulgarity of mind which would every now and then assert itself in her, with the result of setting his teeth on edge.

He smiled to himself, rather bitterly, rather grimly. He was sorry for Spence. The boy was merely a fool, and little knew the burden he had loaded up on his asinine and youthful shoulders, and, as for Hermia, his smile became more saturnine still, as he pictured her roughing it in a prospector’s camp: for he looked upon her statement about leaving Africa as mere mendacious bounce, and of course was unaware of any change for the better in Spence’s fortunes. For her he was not sorry, nor for himself. As she had said, he would now be able to make a fresh start, and this he fully intended to do. Yet, as he stood there, ill and tired and shaken, looking around on his deserted home, it may be that some tinge of abandonment and desolation crept over him. Hermia had chosen her time well, at any rate, he thought, as he busied himself fomenting and bandaging his throbbing and swollen ankle.

The sun had gone down, and the shades of evening seemed to set in with a strange, unaccountable chill, as he limped about, looking after his stock and other possessions. Decidedly there was a lonely feeling, vague, indefinable, which hovered about him. And then those dreadful chills increased. Lying out in that rock-crevice, in fact lying out for several nights insufficiently covered, had sown the seeds. Assuredly no luck had come to him through meddling with the King’s grave. And then, before evening had merged for an hour into dark night, Hilary Blachland lay shivering beneath his piled-up blankets as though they had been ice—shivering in the terrible ague-throes of that deadly malaria—weak, helpless as a child, deserted, alone.