The Triumph Of Hilary Blachland VOL.II

By

Bertram Mitford

Freeditorial

Chapter One

Wiser Counsels

"That scamp! That out-and-out irreclaimable scamp! A hundred is just ninety-nine pound nineteen more than he deserves. A hundred. No—I'll make it two."

Sir Luke Canterby looked up from the document he had been perusing and annotating, and biting the end of his pen, sat gazing meditatively out of the window. It was a lovely day of early spring, and the thrushes were hopping about the lawn, and the rooks in the great elms were making a prodigious cawing and fuss over their nest-building. All Nature was springing into new life in the joyous gladsome rush of the youthful year, but the old man, sitting there, was out of harmony with rejuvenated Nature. His meditations and occupation were concerned, not with life, but with death. The document before him was nothing less momentous than the draft of his last will and testament.

In appearance, however, there was nothing about Sir Luke Canterby to suggest impending dissolution, either now or in the near future. Seated there surrounded by the dark oak of his library, he represented a pleasant and wholesome type of old age. He was tall and spare, and, for his years, wonderfully straight. He had refined features and wore a short beard, now silvery white, and there was a kindly twinkle in his eyes. He was a rich man, but had not always been, and, although of good parentage, had made his money in commerce. He had been knighted on the occasion of a Royal visit to the mercantile centre wherein at the time he was prominent, but in his heart of hearts, thought but little of the 'honour' in fact, would have declined it could he have done so with a good grace.

His gaze came back to the paper with a troubled look, which deepened as he made the correction. For although to the legatee in question two hundred pounds would be better than none, yet the said legatee had had reason to expect that the bulk of the whole would be left to him. Still the testator sat staring at what he had just effected, as if it were something he did not relish at all, and in fact, no more he did. Then an interruption occurred in the shape of a knock at the door and the entrance of a servant.

"Canon Lenthall is here, Sir Luke, and would be glad to know if you can see him?"

“Eh? Yes, certainly. Show him up here. The very thing,” he added to himself. “I’ll take Dick’s opinion about it. Ah, there he is. Come in, Canon. Real glad to see you, especially just now.”

“Nothing wrong, Canterby?” said the other, as the two men shook hands cordially.

“Don’t know about wrong, Dick. But I’m in a puzzle over something, and you always had a sound judgment. Sit down.”

The Very Reverend Richard Lenthall was one of the canons attached to the Roman Catholic Cathedral in the adjacent town of Passmore; and the difference in their creeds notwithstanding, for Sir Luke did not profess the ancient faith, the two men had been fast friends for nearly a lifetime. In aspect and manner they were totally dissimilar. The priest was a broad, thick-set man of medium height, with a strong but jovial face, square-jawed and surmounted by a fine forehead, and illuminated by a pair of fine dark eyes, wonderfully searching, as they gazed forth from beneath bushy brows. He had a brisk, hearty, genial manner, differing entirely from the somewhat reposeful and dignified one of his friend. But mentally, both had many points in common—notably a keen sense of humour—and a delight in studying the contrasts and ironies of the satirical side of life.

“What’s the puzzle?” he now said, dropping into a chair.

“I’ll tell you. Oh, by the way, let me ring for a glass of wine for you after your walk.”

“No, thanks. I’ll wait till lunch. I’m going to stop and lunch with you, but I’ll have to get away directly after.”

“As to that you know your own business best. Look here, old friend, advise me. Do you know what this confounded document is?” holding it up.

“Um. It might be a lease, or a deed of partnership—or of sale.”

“No. Try again.”

“Or your will.”

“You’ve struck it. That’s just what it is. The draft of my will. And—I want you to read it.”

“Why?”

“Because I want your opinion, man—doesn’t it stand to reason?”

“See here, Luke,” said the other, and there was a twinkle in his eye. “Aren’t you afraid of the much-abused priest who is supposed to be always poking his nose into other people’s business and interfering in family matters? You know.”

“I only know that you are talking bosh when you ought to be serious, Dick. Do run through that paper and make any remarks on it you like.”

“Well, if you really wish it,” said the Canon, serious enough now, as he got out his glasses, and began to peruse attentively the masses of legal jargon which covered up the testator’s designs. He had not got far, however, before he came upon that which perturbed him not a little, but of such his trained impassive countenance betrayed no sign. Sir Luke sat looking out of the window, watching the thrushes hopping about the lawn.

“Well?” he said at last, but not extending a hand to receive the document which the other was holding out to him.

“You have altered all your former dispositions,” said the Canon.

“Yes. I have been thinking things carefully over. I daren’t trust him, that scamp. He has simply gone from bad to worse, and would make ducks and drakes of the lot. Percival won’t.”

“That scamp!” The hardly perceptible quiver in his old friend’s voice as he uttered the word, did not escape the shrewd ecclesiastic. Indeed, to that skilled and experienced master of human nature in all its phases, the state of his friend’s mind at this moment was a very wide open book.

“Are you sure of yourself, Canterby?” he said. “Is it quite just to entail upon him so ruthlessly sweeping a penalty as this? Are you sure of yourself?”

“Of course I am.”

“No, you’re not. My dear old friend, you can’t throw dust in my eyes. You are not sure of yourself. Then why not give him another chance?”

“Why, that’s just what I have done. Anybody else would have cut him off with a shilling—with the traditional shilling. By George, sir, they would.”

Canon Lenthall smiled to himself, for he knew that when a man of his friend's temperament begins to wax warm in an argument of this sort, it is a sure sign that he is arguing against himself. He considered the victory almost won. Turning over the sheets of the draft once more, he read out a clause—slowly and deliberately:

"To my nephew, Hilary Blachland, I bequeath the sum of two hundred pounds—in case he might find himself in such a position that its possession would afford him a last chance."

"Well?" queried Sir Luke.

"Please note two things, Canterby," said the Canon. "First you say I am to advise you, then that I am to read this document and make any remarks I like."

"Of course."

"Well then, I'll take you at your word. I advise you to draw your pen right through that clause."

"Why? Hilary is an irreclaimable scamp."

"No, he is not."

"Not, eh? 'St. Clair, St. Clair and Blachland.' Have you forgotten that, Canon?" snorted Sir Luke. "And Blachland! My nephew!"

"How long ago was that?"

"How long ago? Why, you know as well as I do. Six years. Rather over than under."

"Yes. Six years is a long time. Time enough for a man to recognise that he has made worse than a fool of himself. How do you know that Hilary has not come to recognise that—is not doing all he can to wipe out that sin?"

"Exactly. How do I know? That's just it. He has never had the grace or decency to let me know that he has—to let me know whether he's dead or alive." The other smiled to himself. "That's not the solitary one of his carryings on, either. Yes. He's an out-and-out scamp."

"I don't agree with you, Canterby. The very fact that he has refrained from communicating with you makes for the contrary. It is a sign of grace. Had he been the

scamp you—don't believe him to be, you'd have heard from him fast enough, with some pitiful appeal for assistance."

"But he ought to have let me hear. I might be thinking him dead."

"Well, the last thing you told him was that he ought to be. If I recollect rightly, you strongly recommended him to go and blow his brains out."

"Well, he didn't. He went off with the woman instead."

"That isn't to say he's with her now."

"I'm surprised at you, Canon," snorted Sir Luke. "Hanged if I ever thought to find you defending—er—vice."

"And you haven't found me doing so yet. But everything has to be determined on its own merits."

"But there aren't any merits in this case. It was a bad case, sir, a rotten bad case."

"Well, we'll say demerits then, if you prefer it. Now there are, or were, two extenuating circumstances in this particular one—the personality of the woman, and—heredity. For the first I have seen her, for the second, Hilary's father. You knew him pretty well, Canterby, but I knew him even better than you did."

"But what would you have me do? I daren't put him into possession of large responsibilities. He has disgraced his family as it is. I can't have him coming here one day, and disgracing it further."

"You would rather put Percival into the position then?"

"Of course. He would fill it worthily. The other wouldn't."

"I don't know about that. I am perfectly certain about one thing, and that is that Percival himself would never accept it at the expense of his cousin, if he knew he was to do so. That boy has a rarely chivalrous soul, and he used almost to worship Hilary."

"Pooh! That wouldn't go so far as to make him deliberately choose to be left nearly a pauper in order to benefit the other," sneered Sir Luke. But he was a man who did not sneer well. It was not natural to him to sneer at all—therefore his sneer was not convincing.

“I don’t agree with you, Canterby. I believe he would. There are some few natures like that, thank Heaven, although it must be conceded they are marvellously scarce. But he need not ‘be left a pauper’—though that of course rests with you—and that without doing the other any injustice—and yourself too. For you know as well as I do, Luke, that Hilary holds and always will hold the first place in your heart.”

“And the same holds good of Percy in regard to yours, eh, Canon? Yet you are arguing against him for all you know how.”

“I am arguing against you, not against him. You invited remark upon the contents of this document, Luke, and asked me to advise you, and I have done my best to comply with both desires. Don’t be in a hurry to commit an act of injustice which you yourself may bitterly repent when it is too late, and past remedying. You are at present sore and vindictive against Hilary, but you know perfectly well in your heart of hearts that he is to you as your own and only son. Stretch out a hand of blessing over him from beyond the grave, not one of wrath and retribution and judgment.”

“It isn’t that, you know,” urged Sir Luke, rather feebly. “My reasons are different. I don’t want him to come here and play ducks and drakes with what I have taken a lifetime to build up—and not easily either—and to bring scandal on my name and memory. That’s what it amounts to.”

“That’s what you are trying to persuade yourself into thinking it amounts to, but you can’t humbug me, old friend. My advice to you therefore is to lock that draft away, or better still, put it in the fire, and leave things as they are.”

“You mean with Hilary as my heir?”

“Just that. I have, however, a suggestion to append. Find out Hilary; not necessarily directly, but find out about him—where he is and what doing. The fact that he has never applied to you for help, is, as I said before, a point in his favour. He may have carved out a position for himself—may be of use in the world by his life and example. Anyway, give him a chance.”

“But if I find just the reverse? What if I find him a thoroughly hardened and disreputable scamp?”

“Then I have nothing further to urge. But somehow I have an instinct that you will find him nothing of the sort.”

A perceptible brightening came over the old man's face. The priest had struck the right chord in saying that Hilary Blachland had been to his friend rather as an only son than as a nephew, and now the thought of having him at his side again was apparent in the lighting up of his face. Then his countenance fell again.

"It's all very well to say 'Find out Hilary,'" he said. "But how is it to be done? We last heard of him from South Africa. He was trading in the interior with the natives. Seemed to like the life and could make a little at it."

"Well, there you are. You can soon find out about him. Although covering a vast area in the vague region geographically defined as South Africa, the European population is one of those wherein everybody knows everybody else, or something about them. Send Percival out. The trip would do him a world of good. You need not tell him its precise object in every particular, I mean of course that he is sent out there to report. But let him know that he is to find Hilary, and he will throw himself into it heart and soul. Then his indirect report will tell us all we want to know."

"By Jove, Canon, that is sound judgment, and I'll act upon it!" cried Sir Luke eagerly. "What on earth are your people about that they don't make you a Cardinal Archbishop? Send Percival! Why, that'll be the very thing. I shall miss the boy though, while he's away, but oh, confound it, yes—I would like to see that other scamp again before I die. Here—this can go in the fire," throwing the draft document into the grate and stirring it up with the poker to make it burn. "We'll send Percival. Ha! That sounds like his step. Shall we say anything to him now about it? Yes. Here he is."

Chapter Two.

A Waft of Strange News.

“I say, Uncle Luke. Do you happen to be aware that it’s jolly well tiffin time—Hallo, Canon! Didn’t know you were here. How are you?”

He who thus unceremoniously burst in upon them, in blissful ignorance of the momentous matter under discussion and of course of how his own fortunes had been balancing in the scale, was a goodly specimen of English youth, tall, and well-hung, and athletic, but the bright frank sunniness of his face, his straight open glance, and entirely unaffected and therefore unspoiled manner rendered him goodly beyond the average. Percival West and Hilary Blachland were both orphaned sons of two of Sir Luke’s sisters, and had been to him even as his own children. There was a difference of many years between their ages, however, and their characters were totally dissimilar, as we have heard set forth.

“Time for tiffin is it, Percy?” said Sir Luke, glancing at his watch. “You see we old fogies haven’t got your fine healthy jackass-and-a-bundle-of-greens appetite. We must have overlooked it.”

“I don’t agree with you at all, Canterby,” laughed the Canon. “I’ll answer for it. I feel uncommonly like beefsteaks, or anything that’s going. And what have you been doing with yourself, Percy?”

“Biking. Got ten miles out beyond Passmore since eleven o’clock. Oh, bye-the-bye, Canon, I saw the Bishop in Passmore. He wanted you badly.”

“Percy, speak the truth, sir,” returned the Canon, with a solemn twinkle in his eyes. “You said the Bishop wanted me badly? And—his Lordship happens to be away!”

“Every word I said is solemn fact,” replied Percival. “I saw the Bishop in Passmore, but I didn’t say to-day though. And there’s no denying he did want you badly. Eh, Canon?”

“You’re a disrespectful rascal, chaffing your seniors, sir, and if I were twenty years younger, I’d put on the gloves and take it out of you.”

“Come along in to tiffin, Canon, and take it out of that,” rejoined Percival with his light-hearted laugh, dropping his hand affectionately on to the old man’s shoulder. And the trio adjourned to the dining-room.

Jerningham Lodge, Sir Luke Canterby's comfortable, not to say luxurious establishment, was a roomy old house, standing within a walled park of about a hundred and fifty acres. Old, without being ancient, it was susceptible of being brought up to fin-de-siècle ideas of comfort, and the gardens and shrubberies were extensive and well kept. It had come into his possession a good many years before, and soon after that he was left a childless widower. Thus it came about that these two nephews of his had found their home here.

The elder of the two, however, did not turn out entirely to the satisfaction of his uncle.

"Hilary is such a confounded young rake," the latter used to say. "He'll get himself into a most infernal mess one of these days."

Both dicta were true. Headstrong and susceptible, there was hardly ever a time when Hilary Blachland was outside some entanglement: more than once getting him into a serious scrape. Such, however, did not invariably come to the ears of his uncle, though now and then they did, and on one occasion Sir Luke found himself obliged to pay down a heavy sum to keep an uncommonly awkward breach of promise case against his nephew from coming into court. Hilary at last made Passmore too hot to hold him, but the worst of it was that sooner or later the same held good of everywhere else. Still, the infinity of trouble he gave him notwithstanding, this scapegrace was the one of his two nephews for whom Sir Luke had the softest place in his heart—but at last the climax arrived, and the name of that climax was the name of the suit which we have just heard Sir Luke mention. Therein Hilary had got himself—as his uncle had forcibly put it—"into a most infernal mess." His said uncle, moreover, had found himself called upon to pay the somewhat heavy damages and costs.

He need not have done so, of course. He might have left the scapegrace to drag himself out of the mud he had got into. But, unlike many men who have coined their own wealth, there was nothing close-fisted about Sir Luke Canterby. He had disbursed the large sum with scarcely a murmur—anything to close down the confounded scandal. But with Hilary Blachland he was seriously angry and disgusted, and told him as much in no halting terms. The other replied he had better go abroad—and the sooner the better. So he took himself off—which, declared Sir Luke, was the most sensible thing he had decided to do for some time. He changed his mind though, on learning that Hilary had not gone alone, and—missed him, as he put it to himself and his most intimate friend, viz. Canon Lenthall, "like the very devil."

"By the way," said Percival when lunch was half through. "I brought out a later paper from Passmore. Here it is," producing it from the pocket of his Norfolk jacket. "Want to see it, uncle? Not much news, I expect."

“Let’s see the stock and share column,” holding out one hand for the paper, and fixing his glasses with the other. A glance up and down a column, then a turning over of the sheet. Then a sudden, undisguised start.

“God bless my soul! What’s this?”

His hand shook as he held the news sheet, running his glance hastily down it. “Why, that must be Hilary. There, Canon, read it out I can hardly see—there—that paragraph.”

The old priest took the paper. “‘Trouble brewing in Mashonaland’? Is that it? Yes? Well, here’s what they say:—

“‘Stirring times seem in store for our Chartered Company’s pioneers in their new Eldorado. It has been known that Lo Bengula’s concession of the mining rights in Mashonaland to that Company was very distasteful to his people, and for some time past these have been manifesting their displeasure in such wise as to show that it is only a question of time when the settlers of Mashonaland will find themselves called upon to vindicate their rights by force, against their truculent neighbours. The last instance that we have seems to have happened early in November, when an armed force of Matabele crossed into Mashonaland, raiding and threatening at their own sweet will. Several native servants in the employ of settlers were murdered in cold blood, Lo Bengula’s warriors asserting their right to carry on their time-honoured pastime, declaring that the lives of these people were not included in the concession; but so far they have refrained from murdering Europeans. One specific example of the unbridled aggressiveness of these savages is also to hand. The impi went to the house of a man named Blachland, a trader and hunter residing near the head waters of the Umnyati river. Two of his servants had got wind of its approach, and after warning their master fled for their lives to the bush. It appears however, that Blachland was ill with a bad attack of fever, and too weak to move.’”

An exclamation from Percival and Sir Luke caused the reader to pause.

“Go on, Canon, go on,” said the latter hurriedly.

“‘It appears that the induna in charge of the impi was well known to the sick man, and while he entered the house and engaged the latter in conversation, his followers amused themselves by ransacking the out-premises. Here they discovered two little Mashona boys, Blachland’s servants, who were hiding in terror. These were dragged forth, and regardless of their shrieks for mercy, were ruthlessly speared, the bloodthirsty savages roaring with delight as they tossed the miserable little wretches to and fro among each other, on the blades of their great assegais. Then they went away, leaving the bleeding

and mangled corpses lying in the gateway, and calling out to the sick occupant of the place that the time for killing white people had not come yet.

"'From there they proceeded to the camp of two prospectors named Skelsey and Spence. The last-named was away, but Skelsey had got wind of their coming and had promptly put his camp into a position of defence—and prepared to give them a warm reception. When they arrived he showed them his magazine rifle and revolver, and called out to the induna in command that he was going to shoot until he hadn't a cartridge left, if they advanced a step nearer. They did not appear to relish the prospect, and drew off, uttering threats. Thus this brave fellow saved the lives of his four scared and cowering Mashona servants, who, however, showed their appreciation by deserting next day.

"'Blachland, it is reported, is out of favour with Lo Bengula, who recently ordered him out of his country for some reason or other, while he was on a trading trip at Bulawayo.'"

Then followed some more comments on the insecurity of life and property at the mercy of savage neighbours, and the necessity for prompt and decided action, and the paragraph ended.

"I suppose there's no doubt about it being Hilary?" said Percival, when the reader had stopped. "Blachland isn't such a common name, and he did go out there as a trader or something. By Jove, wouldn't I like to be with him!"

Both his seniors smiled. They were thinking his wish might soon be realised.

"Down with fever, poor chap!" said Sir Luke. "But that up-country fever isn't fatal, I've heard, not if men take proper care of themselves. He ought to have a run home though. The voyage would soon set him on his feet again."

"Rather!" echoed Percival, enthusiastically. "It would be grand to see the dear old chap again."

"Well, perhaps we may, Percy, perhaps we may," rejoined his uncle, rather excitedly. "How would you like to go over and fetch him?"

"Me? By George! I'd like it better than anything else in the world. But—suppose he wouldn't come?"

"Of course he'd come. Why shouldn't he come?" testily answered Sir Luke, to whom this afterthought was not a pleasant one. And the rest of the time was spent in discussing this news from a far-away land.

“Strange, isn’t it?” said Sir Luke, thereafter, Percival having gone out of the room. “Just as we were talking over Hilary, and here this bit of news comes right in upon us from outside. If Percy hadn’t brought back that paper we might never have heard it.”

“Looks like an omen, doesn’t it, Luke?” laughed the Canon. “Looks as if he were to be instrumental in bringing Hilary back.”

“I hope to Heaven he may. I say, Dick, old friend, I’m more than glad you turned in here to-day, in time to make me put that abominable draft in the fire.”

“Will you walk back with me a little way, Percy?” said the Canon as he was taking his leave, having refused Sir Luke’s offer to send him back on wheels.

“Why rather. Wait, I’ll just get my bike. I can wheel it along, and ride it back.”

They passed down the village street together, nodding here and there to an acquaintance, or acknowledging the salutation of a rustic. The rector of the parish passed them on a bicycle, and the two professors of rival creeds exchanged a cordial and friendly greeting, for somehow, no one was anything other than friendly with Canon Lenthall. But it was not until they had left the village behind and had gained the open country that he began to discourse seriously with his younger friend as to the matter of which both were thinking.

“Let me see. How long is it since you saw Hilary?” he began.

“Oh, about half a dozen years—just before he got into that—er—mess. What a splendid chap he was, Canon. I’ve sometimes thought Uncle Luke was a bit hard on him that time.”

“You’re quite wrong, Percy. Hard is the one thing your uncle could not be. Why, he’s the softest hearted man in existence.”

“Yes, I know. But, does he really want me to go out there and hunt up Hilary?”

“I believe so. As a matter of fact, we happened to be discussing that very thing just before you came in. It was a strange coincidence that you should unconsciously have brought the news you did.”

Percival whistled. “Were you really? Strange indeed. Well, I’m on for the scheme. It doesn’t matter if I enter at the Temple now, or in six or eight months’ time—and, what an experience it’ll be in the mean time.”

They were nearing Passmore, and the chimneys and spires of the town were growing larger and larger in front of them—and already the haze of smoke was dimming the bright green of the expanse of meadow between. They had gained the wooden road-bridge, beneath which the sluggish water ran oily between the black piers, and here the Canon paused.

“It will be a great thing if we can bring Hilary back to his uncle, so that they are thoroughly reconciled. But Percy, my boy—remember that so far, for all these years past you have been the first and only one near him. How will you feel when you see another first—and to all appearances of more consequence than yourself, as is natural in the case of one who has long been away. Are you sure of yourself?”

But the young man burst into a free, frank and hearty laugh.

“Great Scot, Canon!” he cried merrily. “What sort of a bounder are you trying to take me for? There’s nothing I’d like so much as to see the dear old chap back again.”

The old priest gazed steadily at him for a moment, and felt greatly relieved. The answer rang so spontaneous, so true.

“Well, I had that to say to you, and have said it. In fact I brought you with me now on purpose to say it. Now, good-bye my boy, and God bless you.”

Chapter Three.

Bayfield's Farm.

There is a rustling in the cover, faint at first, but drawing nearer. As it does so, the man with the gun, who has been squatting half concealed by a shrub in one corner of the little glade, picks himself up stealthily, noiselessly, and now widely on the alert. A fine bushbuck ram leaps lightly into the open, and as its large protruding eye lights on this unusual object, its easy, graceful bound becomes a wild rush. Then the gun speaks. The beautiful animal sinks in his stride and falls, a frantic, kicking heap, carried forward some six or eight yards by the impetus of his pace. Twirling, twisting, now attempting to rise, and almost succeeding, then rolling back, but still fighting desperately for life—the blood welling forth over his black hide where the deadly loepers have penetrated—the stricken buck emits loud raucous bellowings of rage and fear and agony. But the man with the gun knows better than to approach too near, knows well the power of those long, needle-pointed horns, and the tenacity of life contained within the brain beneath them; knows well that a stricken bushbuck ram, with all that life still in him, can become a terribly dangerous and formidable antagonist, and this is a very large and powerful unit of the species.

The crash of the shot reverberates, roaring from the overhanging krantz—dislodging a cloud of spreuws from its rocky ledges. These dart hither and thither, whistling and chattering, their shrill din mingling with the bellowings of the wounded buck. But upon this arises another din and it is that of canine throats. Two great rough-haired dogs leap forth into the glade, following upon the line taken by the buck. Then ensues a desperate game. The stricken animal, summoning all his remaining strength to meet these new foes, staggers to his feet, and, with head lowered and menacing, it seems that no power on earth can stay the foremost of the dogs from receiving the full length of these fourteen-inch horns in his onward rush. These, however, are no puppies, but old, well-seasoned dogs, thoroughly accustomed to bush-hunting. Wonderfully quick are they in their movements as, just avoiding each deadly thrust, they leap, snapping and snarling, round their quarry—until one, seeing his chance, seizes the latter just below the haunch in such fashion as promptly to hamstring him. The game antelope is done for now. Weakened, too, by the jets of blood spurting from his wounds, he totters and falls. The fight is over.

With it the man with the gun has deemed it sound policy not to interfere. To encourage the dogs would render them too eager—at the expense of their judgment—and to fire a second shot would be seriously to imperil them. Besides, he is interested in this not so very ill-matched combat. Now, however, it is time to call them off.

To call is one thing, but to be obeyed is quite another. The two great dogs, excited and savage, are snarling and worrying at the carcase of their now vanquished enemy—and the first attempt to enforce the order is met with a very menacing and determined growl, for this man is not their master. Wisely he desists.

"Confound it, they'll tear that fine skin to ribbons!" he soliloquises disgustedly. Then—"Oh, there you are, Bayfield. Man, call those brutes off. They don't care a damn for me."

A horseman has dashed into the glade. He, too, carries a gun, but in a trice he has torn a reim from the D. of his saddle, and is lashing and cursing with a will among the excited hounds. These draw off, still snarling savagely, for he is their master.

"Magtig! Blachland, but you're in luck's way!" he exclaimed. "That's the finest ram that's been shot here for the last five years. Well done! I believe it's the same one I drove right over that Britisher last month, and he missed it clean with both barrels. That young fellow stopping with Earle."

"Who's he? A jackaroo?"

"No. A visitor. I don't know who he is. By the way, I must take you over to Earle's one of these days. He's got a good bit of shoot. Look here, Jafta," turning to a yellow-skinned Hottentot, also mounted, who had just arrived on the scene, "Baas Blachland has shot our biggest bushbuck ram at last."

"Ja. That is true, Baas," grinned the fellow, who was Bayfield's after-rider, inspecting the edge of his knife preparatory to the necessary disembowelling and loading up of the quarry.

"We may as well be getting along," said Bayfield. "Jafta, go and fetch Baas Blachland's horse."

"I thought an up-country man like you would turn up his nose at our hunting, Blachland," said Bayfield as they rode along. "But what you can't turn up your nose at is our air—eh? Why, you're looking twice the man you were a fortnight ago even. I suppose that infernal fever's not easily shaken off."

"It's the very devil to shake off, but if anything will do it, this will." And the speaker glanced around with a feeling of complete and restful enjoyment.

The kloof they were threading afforded in itself a noble and romantic scene. Great krantzes soaring up to the unclouded blue, walls of red ironstone gleaming like bronze

in the sun-rays—or, in tier upon tier, peeping forth from festoons of creeper and anchored tree and spiky aloe. Yonder a sweep of spur on the one hand, like a combing wave of tossing tumbling foliage, on the other a mighty cliff, forming a portal beyond which was glimpsed a round, rolling summit, high above in the distance—but everywhere foliage, its many shades of green relieved here and there by the scarlet and pink of the wild geranium, the light blue of the plumbago, and half a dozen other splashes of colour, bright and harmonising; aglow, too, with the glancing of brilliant-winged birds, tuneful with their melodious piping and the murmuring hum of bees. And the air—strong, clear, exhilarating, such as never could be mistaken for the enervating steaminess of up-country heat—for the place was at a good elevation, and in one of the settled parts of the Cape Colony.

Gazing around upon all this, Hilary Blachland seemed to be drinking in new draughts of life. The bout of fever, in the throes of which we last saw him lying, helpless and alone, had proved to be an exceptionally sharp one; indeed, but for the accident of Sybrandt happening along almost immediately after the Matabele raid, the tidings of which had reached England, as we have seen—it is probable that a fatal termination might have ensued. But Sybrandt had tended him with devoted and loyal camaraderie, and when sufficiently restored, he had decided to sell off everything and clear out. “You’ll come back again, Blachland,” Sybrandt had said. “Mark my words, you’ll come back again. We all do.” And he had answered that perhaps he would, but not just yet awhile.

He had gone down country to the seaside, but the heat at Durban was so great at the time of year as to counteract the beneficial effect of the sea air. Then he had bethought himself of George Bayfield, a man he had known previously and liked, and who had more than once pressed him to pay him a visit at his farm in the Eastern Province. And now, here he was.

A great feeling of restfulness and self-gratulation was upon him. He was free once more, free for a fresh clean start. The sequence of his foolishness, which had hung around his neck like a millstone, for years, had been removed, had suddenly fallen off like a load. For he had come to see things clearer now. His character had changed and hardened during that interval, and he had come to realise that hitherto, his views of life, and his way of treating its conditions, had been very much those of a fool.

George Bayfield had received him with a very warm welcome. He was a colonial man, and had never been out of his native land, yet contrasting them as they stood together it was Blachland who looked the harder and more weather-beaten of the two, so thorough an acclimatising process had his up-country wanderings proved. Bayfield was a man just the wrong side of fifty, and a widower. Two of his boys were away from home, and at

that time his household consisted of a small son of eleven, and a daughter—of whom more anon.

The kloof opened out into a wide open valley, covered mainly with rhenoster brush and a sprinkling of larger shrubs in clumps. From this valley on either side, opened lateral kloofs, similar to the one from which they had just emerged, kloofs dark with forest and tangled thickets, very nurseries for tiger and wild-dogs, Bayfield declared—but they had the compensating element of affording good sport whenever he wanted to go out and shoot a bushbuck or two—as in the present case. His boundary lines ran right along the high rand which shut in the broad valley on either side, and the farm was an excellent one for sheep and ostriches. In fact the valley portion of it was a perfect network of wire fencing, and in their respective "camps" the great black bipeds stalked to and fro, uttering their truculent boom, or lazily picking at the aromatic grasses, which constituted their natural and aboriginal food. And the name of the place was Lannercost.

"These confounded ostriches spoil half the shooting on the place, and, for the matter of that, anywhere," remarked Bayfield, as they ambled along through one of the large camps, where one exceptionally fierce bird hung about their flank, only kept from a nearer approach by the presence of the two dogs. "You flush a covey of partridges or a big troop of guinea-fowl, and away they go and squat in complete security under the wing of some particularly 'kwai' bird in the next camp. It's beastly tantalising. Ever shot any wild ostriches up-country, Blachland?"

"Yes, on two occasions—and I enjoyed it for that very reason. I was held up once on top of a rail for nearly two hours besieged on each side by an infuriated tame one. Had to wait until dark to get down. So you see it was a kind of poetic justice to turn the tables on the wild ones."

"Rather. These are good game preservers though, in that they keep the niggers from killing the small bucks in the camps. Look at those few springbuck I'm trying to preserve. They'd all have been killed off if it wasn't for the 'kwai' birds in the camp. By George! the sun'll be down before we get home. That isn't good for a man with fever still in his system at this time of year."

"Oh, that's no matter. I'm a good deal too tough."

"Don't you be so sure about that. We'd better push the nags on a bit."

The house stood at the head of the valley, and had been growing larger and larger as they drew near. The sun was dropping, and that wondrously beautiful glow which

heralds his departure from the vivid, clear South African day was upon the surroundings, softening, toning everything. Hundreds of doves cooed melodiously from the sprays, and as they passed through a gateway, ascending a winding path between high quince hedges, clouds of twittering finks and long-tailed mouse-birds scattered with a whirr on either side of the way. Spreuws, too, whistling among the tall fig-trees in the orchard, helped to swell the chorus of Nature's evensong.

"There are a sight too many of these small birds," observed Bayfield. "They want keeping down. Sonny's getting lazy with that air-gun of his. They'll play the mischief with the garden if he gives them much more rope. There he is, the schepsel. Hi! Sonny!" he called out, as a good-looking boy came down the path to meet them. "Why don't you thin off some of these birds? Look at 'em all. No one would think you'd got an air-gun and half a dozen catapults."

"The gun's out of order, father," answered the boy.

"It's always getting out of order. Those air-guns are frauds. Where's Lyn?"

"She was about just now. We watched you from beyond the third gate. There she is."

Following his gaze they descried a white-clad feminine form in front of the house, which they were now very near.

Chapter Four.

Lyn.

"Well, Mr Blachland, what luck have you had?"

The speaker was standing on the stoep, whither she had come out to meet them. She was rather a tall girl, with a great deal of golden hair, arranged in some wonderful way of her own which somehow enhanced its volume without appearing loose or untidy. She had blue eyes which looked forth straight and frank, and an exquisite skin, which even the fierce glare of the summer sun, and a great deal of open-air life had not in the least roughened, and of which a few tiny freckles, rather adding piquancy to a sweetly pretty face, oval, refined and full of character, were the only trace. If there was a fault to be found in the said face, it was that its owner showed her gums slightly when she laughed—but the laugh was so bright, so whole-hearted, and lighted up the whole expression so entrancingly that all but the superlatively hypercritical lost sight of the defect altogether.

"He's bowled over that thundering big bushbuck ram we've been trying for so often in Siever's Kloof, Lyn," answered her father for his guest.

"Well done!" cried the girl. "You know, Mr Blachland, some of the people around here were becoming quite superstitious about that buck. They were beginning to declare he couldn't be killed. I suggested a silver bullet such as they had to make for those supernatural stags in the old German legends."

"A charge of treble A was good enough this time—no, I think I used loepers," laughed Blachland.

"I almost began to believe in it myself," went on the girl. "Some of our best shots around here seemed invariably to miss that particular buck, Mr Earle for instance, and Stephanus Bosch, and, I was nearly saying—father—"

"Oh don't, then," laughed Bayfield. "A prophet has no honour in his own country. Keep up the tradition, Lyn."

"And, as for the Englishman, the one that came over here with the Earles, why he missed it both barrels, and they drove it right over him too."

"By the way, Lyn," said her father, "what was that Britisher's name? I've clean forgotten."

“That’s not strange, for you’ll hardly believe it, but so have I.”

“Um—ah—no, we won’t believe it. A good-looking young fellow like that!”

“Even then I’ve forgotten it. Yes, he was a nice-looking boy.”

“Boy!” cried her father. “Why, the fellow must be a precious deal nearer thirty than twenty.”

“Well, and what’s that but a boy?”

“Thanks awfully, Miss Bayfield,” said Blachland. “The implication is grateful and comforting to a battered fogey of a precious deal nearer forty than thirty.”

For answer the girl only laughed—that bright, whole-hearted laugh of hers. It was a musical laugh too, full-throated, melodious. She and her father’s guest were great friends. Though now living somewhat of an out-of-the-world life, she had been well-educated, and her tastes were artistic. She drew and painted with no mean skill, and her musical attainments were above the average. So far from feeling bored and discontented with the comparative isolation of her lot, she had an affection for the free and healthy conditions of her surroundings, the beauties of which, moreover, her artistic temperament rendered her capable of perceiving and appreciating. Then this stranger had come into their life, and at first she had been inclined to stand somewhat in awe of him. He was so much older than herself, and must have seen so much; moreover, his quiet-mannered demeanour, and the life-worn look of his firm dark countenance, seemed to cover a deal of character. But he had entered so thoroughly and sympathetically into her tastes and pursuits that the little feeling of shyness had worn off within the first day, and now, after a fortnight, she had come to regard his presence in their midst as a very great acquisition indeed.

“I say, Lyn,” struck in her father. “Better take Blachland inside—yes, and light up some logs in the fireplace. There’s a sharp tinge in the air after sundown, which isn’t good for a man with up-country fever in his bones, as I was telling him just now. I must just go and take a last look round.”

“Did you do any more to my drawing to-day?” asked Hilary, as the two stood within the sitting-room together, watching the efforts of a yellow-faced Hottentot girl to make the logs blaze up.

“I’ve nearly finished it. I’ve only got to put in a touch or two.”

“May I see it now?”

“No—not until it is finished. I may not be satisfied with it then, and tear it up.”

“But you are not to. I’m certain that however it turns out it will be too good to treat in that way.”

“Oh, Mr Blachland, I am surprised at such a speech from you,” she said, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Why, that’s the sort of thing that English boy might have said. But you! Oh!”

“Well, I mean it. You know I never hesitate to criticise and that freely. Look at our standing fight over detail in foreground, as a flagrant instance.”

The drawing under discussion was a water-colour sketch of the house and its immediate surroundings. He would treasure it as a reminder after he had gone, he declared, when asking her to undertake it. To which she had rejoined mischievously that he seemed in a great hurry to talk about “after he had gone,” considering that he had only just come.

Now the entrance of George Bayfield and his youngest born put an end to the discussion, and soon they sat down to supper.

“Man, Mr Blachland, but that is a mooi buck,” began the boy. “Jafta says he never saw a mooi-er one.”

“Perhaps it’ll bring you luck,” said Lyn, looking exceedingly reposeful and sweet, behind the tea-things, in her twenty-year-old dignity at the head of the table.

“I don’t know,” was the reply. “I did something once that was supposed to bring frightful ill-luck, and for a long time it seemed as if it was going to. But—indirectly it had just the opposite effect.”

“Was that up-country, Mr Blachland?” chimed in the boy eagerly. “Do tell us about it.”

“Perhaps some day, Fred. But it’s a thing that one had better have left alone.”

“These children’ll give you no peace if you go on raising their curiosity in that way,” said Bayfield.

“I’ll go up-country when I’m big,” said the boy. “Are you going again, Mr Blachland?”

“I don’t know, Fred. You see, I’ve only just come down.”

The boy said no more on the subject. He had an immense admiration for their guest, who, when they were alone together, would tell him tales of which he never wearied—about hunting and trading, and Lo Bengula, and experiences among savages far wilder and more formidable than their own half-civilised and wholly deteriorated Kaffirs. But he was sharp enough to notice that at other times the subject of “up-country” was not a favourite one with Blachland. Perhaps the latter was tired of it as he had had so much. At any rate, with a gumption rare in small boys of his age, Fred forbore to worry the topic further.

This was one of those evenings which the said guest was wont to prize now, and was destined in the time to come to look back upon as among the very happiest experiences of his life. He regarded his host indeed with a whole-hearted envy, that such should be his daily portion. There was just enough sharpness in the atmosphere to render indoors and a bright, snug fire in a well-lighted room especially reposeful and cosy, as they adjourned to the sitting-room where Lyn’s piano was.

“Fill up, Blachland,” said his host, pushing over a large bladder tobacco-pouch. “Where’s my pipe? No—not that one. The deep one with the wire cover.”

“I’ve got it, father,” cried Lyn. “I’m filling it for you.”

“Thanks, darling,” as she brought it over. “You know, Blachland, my after-supper pipe never tastes so good unless this little girlie fills it for me. She’s done so ever since she was a wee kiddie so high.”

Blachland smiled to himself, rather sadly, as he watched the long tapering fingers pressing down the tobacco into the bowl, and wondered how his friend would feel when the time came—and come it must, indeed any day might bring it—when he would have no one to render this and a hundred and one other little services of love, such as he had noticed during his stay—when Bayfield should be left lonely, and the bright and sweet and sunny presence which irradiated this simple home should be transferred to another. Somehow the thought was distasteful to him, vaguely, indefinably so, but still distasteful.

Meanwhile Lyn had opened the piano, and after an appeal to them for any preference in the way of songs, which was met by an assurance that any and all were equally acceptable, had begun singing. The two men sat back in their armchairs at the further end of the room, listening in supremest content. From the first Blachland had excused

himself from attending her at the piano. He wanted thoroughly to enjoy her performance, which he could not do standing fussing around, and Lyn had appreciated the real and practical compliment thus conveyed. And he did enjoy it. Song after song she sang, now grave and pathetic, now gay and arch, and it seemed to him he could sit there listening for ever. Hers was no concert-hall voice, but it was very sweet and true, and was entirely free from mannerism. She did not think it necessary to roll her r's in the approved professional style whenever that consonant came at the end of a word, or to pronounce "love" exactly according to its phonetic spelling, but every word was enunciated distinctly, and therefore as intelligible as though she had been talking. In short, her singing was utterly without self-consciousness or affectation, and therein lay no small a proportion of its charm.

"There! That's enough for one night!" she cried at last, closing the instrument.

"Not for us," declared Blachland. "But you mustn't overstrain your voice. Really to me this has been an immense treat."

"I'm so glad," said the girl brightly. "I suppose, though, you don't hear much music up-country. Don't you miss it a great deal?"

"Yes, indeed," he answered, and then a picture crossed his mind of evening after evening, and Hermia yawning, and reiterating how intensely bored to death she was. What on earth was it that made retrospect so utterly distasteful to him now? He would have given all he possessed to be able to blot that episode out of his life altogether. Hermia the chances were as five hundred to one he would never set eyes on again—and if he did, she was powerless to injure him; for she had not the slightest legal hold upon him whatever. But the episode was there, a black, unsavoury, detestable fact, and it there was no getting round.

"Now, sonny, it's time for you to turn in," said Bayfield. "By George, I'll have to think seriously about sending that nipper to school," he added, as the boy, having said good-night, went out of the room. "But hang it, what'll we do without the chappie? He's the only one left. But he ought to learn more than Lyn can teach him now."

"Father, you are mean," laughed the girl. "Reflecting on my careful tuition that way. Isn't he, Mr Blachland?"

"I wonder how it would be," pursued Bayfield, "to make some arrangement with Earle and send him over there four or five days a week to be coached by that new English teacher they've got."

“Who is he?” said Blachland. “A Varsity man?”

“’Tisn’t ‘he.’ It’s a she,” returned the other, with a very meaning laugh. “A regular high-flyer too. Mrs Earle isn’t so fond of her as she might be, but I expect that young Britisher has put Earle’s nose out of joint in that quarter. They say she’s a first-rate coach, though.”

“Now, father, you’re not to start talking scandal,” said Lyn. “I don’t believe there’s any harm in Mrs Fenham at all. And she isn’t even pretty.”

“Ho-ho! Who’s talking scandal now?” laughed her father. “Taking away another woman’s personal appearance, eh, Lyn? By the way, there are several round there you won’t get to agree with you on that head.”

“Oh, she’s married, then?” said Blachland, though as a matter of fact the subject did not interest him in the least.

“Has been,” returned Bayfield. “She’s a widow—a young widow, and with all due deference to Lyn’s opinion, rather a fetching one. Now, isn’t that a whole code of danger-signals in itself? Get out some grog, little girl,” he added, “and then I suppose you’ll want to be turning in.”

“Yes, it’s time I did,” replied Lyn, as she dived into a sideboard in fulfilment of the last request. “Good night, Mr Blachland. Good night, old father. Now, you’re not to sit filling up Mr Blachland with all sorts of gossip. Do you hear?”

“All right,” with a wink over at his guest. “Good night, my little one.”

Blachland had long ceased to wonder—even if he had done so at first—at the extraordinary tenderness existing between Bayfield and this child of his. Cudgel his experience as he would, he could find in it no instance of a girl anything like this one. Sunny beauty, grace, and the most perfect refinement, a disposition of rare sweetness, yet withal plenty of character—why, it would require a combination of the best points of any half-dozen girls within that experience to make up one Lyn Bayfield, and then the result would be a failure. To his host he said as much when they were alone together. The latter warmed up at once.

“Ah, you’ve noticed that, have you, Blachland? Well, I suppose you could hardly have been in the house the short time you have without noticing it. Make allowances for an old fool, but there never was such a girl as my Lyn—no, never. And—I may lose her any day.”

“Great Heavens, Bayfield, surely not! What’s wrong? Heart?”

“No—no. Not that way, thank God—by the by, I’m sorry I startled you. I mean she’s bound to marry some day.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” returned Blachland, reassured, yet furtively hoping that the smile wherewith he accepted the reassurance was not a very sickly one. But the other did not notice it, and now fairly on the subject, launched out into a narrative of Lyn’s sayings and doings, as it seemed, from the time of her birth right up till now, and it was late before he pulled up, with profuse apologies for having bored the very soul out of his guest, and that on a subject in which the latter could take but small interest.

But Blachland reassured him by declaring that he had not been bored in the very least, and so far from feeling small interest in the matter, he had been very intensely interested.

And the strangest thing of all was that he meant it—every word.

Chapter Five.

An Episode in Siever's Kloof.

The days sped by and still Hilary Blachland remained as a guest at George Bayfield's farm.

He had talked about moving on, but the suggestion had been met by a frank stare of astonishment on the part of his host.

"Where's your hurry, man?" had replied the latter. "Why, you've only just come."

"Only just come! You don't seem to be aware, Bayfield, that I've been here nearly four weeks."

"No, I'm not. But what then? What if it's four or fourteen or forty? You don't want to go up-country again just yet. By the way, though, it must be mighty slow here."

"Now, Bayfield, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but you're talking bosh, rank bosh. I don't believe you know it, though. Slow indeed!"

"Perhaps Mr Blachland's tired of us, father," said Lyn demurely, but with a spice of mischief.

"Well, you know, you yourselves can have too much of a not very good thing," protested Hilary, rather lamely.

"Ha-ha! Now we'll turn the tables. Who's talking bosh this time?" said Bayfield triumphantly.

"Man, Mr Blachland, you mustn't go yet," cut in small Fred excitedly. "Stop and shoot some more bushbucks."

"Very well, Fred. No one can afford to run clean counter to public opinion. So that settles it," replied Blachland gaily.

"That's all right," said Bayfield. "And we haven't taken him over to Earle's yet. I know what we'll do. We'll send and let Earle know we are all coming over for a couple of nights, and he must get up a shoot in between. Then we'll show him the pretty widow."

A splutter from Fred greeted the words. “She isn’t pretty a bit,” he pronounced. “A black, ugly thing.”

“Look out, sonny,” laughed his father. “She’ll take it out of you when she’s your schoolmissis.”

But the warning was received by the imp with a half growl, half jeer. The prospect of that ultimate fate, which had already been dangled over him, and which he only half realised, may have helped to prejudice him against one whom he could not but regard as otherwise than his natural enemy.

The unanimity wherewith the household of three voted against his departure was more than gratifying to Hilary Blachland. Looking back upon life since he had been Bayfield’s guest, he could only declare to himself that it was wholly delightful. The said Bayfield, with his unruffled, take-us-as-you-find-us way of looking at things—well, the more he saw of the man the more he liked him, and the two were on the most easy terms of friendship of all, which may best be defined that neither ever wanted the other to do anything the other didn’t want to. Even the small boy regarded him as an acquisition, while Lyn—well, the frank, friendly, untrammelled intercourse between them constituted, he was forced to admit to himself, the brightness and sunshine of the pleasant, reposeful days which were now his. He had no reason to rate himself too highly, even in his own estimation, and the last three or four weeks spent in her daily society brought this more and more home to him. Well, whatever he had sown, whatever he might reap, in short, whatever might or might not be in store for him, he was the better now, would be to the end of his days, the better for having known her. Indeed it seemed to him now as though his life were divided into two complete periods—the time before he had known Lyn Bayfield, and subsequently.

Thus reflecting, he was pacing the stoep smoking an after-breakfast pipe. The valley stretched away, radiant in the morning sunshine, and the atmosphere was sharp and brisk with a delicious exhilaration. Down in the camps he could see the black dots moving, where great ostriches stalked, and every now and then the triple boom, several times repeated, from the throat of one or other of the huge birds, rolled out upon the morning air. The song of a Kaffir herd, weird, full-throated, but melodious, arose from the further hillside, where a large flock of Angora goats was streaming forth to its grazing ground.

“What would you like to do to-day, Blachland?” said his host, joining him. “I’ve got to ride over to Theunis Nel’s about some stock, but it means the best part of the day there, so I don’t like suggesting your coming along. They’re the most infernal boring crowd, and you’d wish yourself dead.”

Hilary thought this would very likely be the case, but before he could reply there came an interruption—an interruption which issued from a side door somewhere in the neighbourhood of the kitchen, for they were standing at the end of the stoep, an interruption wearing an ample white "kapje," and with hands and wrists all powdery with flour, but utterly charming for all that.

"What's that you're plotting, father? No, you're not to take Mr Blachland over to any tiresome Dutchman's. No wonder he talks about going away. Besides, I want to take him with me. I'm going to paint—in Siever's Kloof, and Fred isn't enough of an escort."

"I think I'll prefer that immeasurably, Miss Bayfield," replied he most concerned.

"I shall be ready, then, in half an hour. And—I don't like 'Miss Bayfield'—it sounds so stiff, and we are such old friends now. You ought to say Lyn. Oughtn't he, father, now that he is quite one of ourselves?"

"Well, I should—after that," answered Bayfield, comically, blowing out a big cloud of smoke.

But while he laughed pleasantly, promising to avail himself of the privilege, Hilary was conscious of a kind of mournful impression that the frank ingenuousness of the request simply meant that she placed him on the same plane as her father, in short, regarded him as one of a bygone generation. Well, she was right. He was no chicken after all, he reminded himself grimly.

"I say, Lyn, I'm going with you too!" cried Fred, who was seated on a waggon-pole a little distance off, putting the finishing touches to a new catapult-handle.

"All right. I'll be ready in half an hour," replied the girl.

One of the prettiest bits in Siever's Kloof was the very spot whereon Blachland had shot the large bushbuck ram, and here the two had taken up their position. For nearly an hour Lyn had been very busy, and her escort seated there, lazily smoking a pipe, would every now and then overlook her work, offering criticisms, and making suggestions, some of which were accepted, and some were not. Fred, unable to remain still for ten minutes at a time, was ranging afar with his air-gun—now put right again—and, indeed, with it he was a dead shot.

“I never can get the exact shine of these red krantzes,” Lyn was saying. “That one over there, with the sun just lighting it up now, I know I shall reproduce it either the colour of a brick wall or a dead smudge. The shine is what I want to get.”

“And you may get it, or you may not, probably the latter. There are two things, at any rate, which nobody has ever yet succeeded in reproducing with perfect accuracy, the colour of fire and golden hair—like yours. Yes, it’s a fact. They make it either straw colour or too red, but always dead. There’s no shine in it.”

Lyn laughed, lightheartedly, unthinkingly.

“True, O King! But I expect you’re talking heresy all the same. I wonder what that boy is up to?” she broke off, looking around.

“Why, he’s a mile or so away up the kloof by this time. Do you ever get tired of this sort of life, Lyn?”

“Tired? No. Why should I? Whenever I go away anywhere, after the first novelty has worn off, I always long to get back.”

“And how long a time does it take to compass that aspiration?”

“About a week. At the end of three I am desperately homesick, and long to get back here to old father, and throw away gloves and let my hands burn.”

Blachland looked at the hands in question—long-fingered, tapering, but smooth and delicate and refined—brown indeed with exposure to the air, but not in the least roughened. What an enigma she was, this girl. He watched, her as she sat there, sweet and cool and graceful as she plied her brushes, the wide brim of her straw hat turned up in front so as not to impede her view. Every movement was a picture, he told himself—the quick lifting of the eyelid as she looked at her subject, the delicate supple turn of the wrist as she worked in her colouring. And the surroundings set forth so perfectly the central figure—the varying shades of the trees and their dusky undergrowth, the great krantz opposite, fringed with trailers, bristling with spiky aloes lining up along its ledges. Bright spreuws flashed and piped, darting forth from its shining face; and other bird voices, the soft note of the hoepoe, and the cooing of doves kept the warm golden air pleasant with harmony.

“What is your name the short for, Lyn?” he said, picking up one of her drawing-books, whereon it was traced—in faded ink upon the faded cover.

She laughed. “It isn’t a name at all really. It’s only my initials. I have three ugly Christian names represented under the letters L.Y.N., and it began with a joke among the boys when I was a very small kiddie. But now I rather like it. Don’t you?”

“Yes. Very much… Why, what’s the matter now?”

For certain shrill shouts were audible from the thick of the bush, but at no great distance away. They recognised Fred’s voice, and he was hallooing like mad.

“Lyn! Mr Blachland! Quick—quick! Man, here’s a whacking big snake!”

“Oh, let’s go and see!” cried the girl, hurriedly putting down her drawing things, and springing to her feet. “No—no. You stay here. I’ll go. You’re quite safe here. Stay, do you hear?”

She turned in surprise. Her companion was quite agitated.

“Why, it’s safe enough!” she said with a laugh, but still wondering. “I’m not in the least afraid of snakes. I’ve killed several of them. Come along.”

And answering Fred’s shouts she led the way through the grass and stones at an astonishing pace, entirely disregarding his entreaties to allow him to go first.

“There! There!” cried Fred, his fist full of stones, pointing to some long grass almost hiding a small boulder about a dozen yards away. “He’s squatting there. He’s a big black ringhals. I threw him with three stones—didn’t hit him, though. Man, but he’s ‘kwai.’ Look, look! There!”

Disturbed anew by these fresh arrivals, the reptile shot up his head with an ugly hiss. The hood was inflated, and waved to and fro wickedly, as the great coil dragged heavily over the ground.

“There! Now you can have him!” cried Fred excitedly, as Blachland stooped and picked up a couple of large stones. These, however, he immediately dropped.

“No. Let him go,” he said. “He wants to get away. He won’t interfere with us.”

“But kill him, Mr Blachland. Aren’t you going to kill him?” urged the boy.

“No. I never kill a snake if I can help it. Because of something that once happened to me up-country.”

“So! What was it?” said the youngster, with half his attention fixed regretfully on the receding reptile, which, seeing the coast clear, was rapidly making itself scarce.

“That’s something of a story—and it isn’t the time for telling it now.”

But a dreadful suspicion crossed the unsophisticated mind of the boy. Was it possible that Blachland was afraid? It did not occur to him that a man who had shot lions in the open was not likely to be afraid of an everyday ringhals—not at the time, at least. Afterwards he would think of it.

They went back to where they had been sitting before, Fred chattering volubly. But he could not sit still for long, any more than he had been able to before, and presently he was off again.

“You are wondering why I let that snake go,” said Blachland presently. “Did you think I was afraid of it?”

“Well, no, I could hardly think that,” answered Lyn, looking up quickly.

“Yet I believe you thought something akin to it,” he rejoined, with a curious smile. “Listen now, and I’ll tell you if you care to hear—only don’t let the story go any further. By the way, you are only the second I have ever told it to.”

“I feel duly flattered. Go on. I am longing to hear it. I’m sure it’s exciting.”

“It was for me at the time—very.” And then he told her of the exploration of the King’s grave, and the long hours of that awful day, between two terrible forms of imminent death, told it so graphically as to hold her spellbound.

“There, that sounds like a tolerably tall up-country yarn,” he concluded, “but it’s hard solid fact for all that.”

“What a horrible experience,” said Lyn, with something of a shudder. “And now you won’t kill any snake?”

“No. That mamba held me at its mercy the whole of that day—and I have spared every snake I fell in with ever since. A curious sort of gratitude, you will say, but—there it is.”

“I don’t wonder the natives had that superstition about the King’s spirit passing into that snake.”

“No, more do I. The belief almost forced itself upon me, as I sat there those awful hours. But, as old Pemberton said, there was no luck about meddling with such places.”

“No, indeed. What strange things you must have seen in all your wanderings. It must be something to look back upon. But I suppose it will go on all your life. You will return to those parts again, until—”

“Until I am past returning anywhere,” he replied. “Perhaps so, and perhaps it is better that way after all. And now I think it is time to round up Fred, and take the homeward track.”

“Yes, I believe it is,” was all she said. A strange unwonted silence was upon her during their homeward ride. She was thinking a great deal of the man beside her. He interested her as nobody ever had. She had stood in awe of him at first, but now she hoped it would be a long time before he should find it necessary to leave them. What an ideal companion he was, too. She felt her mind the richer for all the ideas she had exchanged with him—silly, crude ideas, he must have thought them, she told herself with a little smile.

But if she was silent, Fred was not. He talked enough for all three the rest of the way home.

Chapter Six.

Concerning the Unexpected.

"How do, Earle?" cried George Bayfield, pulling up his horses at the gate of the first named.

"So, so, Bayfield. How's all yourselves? How do, Miss Bayfield? Had a cold drive? Ha—ha! It must have been nipping when you started this morning. Just look at the frost even now," with a comprehensive sweep of an arm terminating in a pipe over the dew-gemmed veldt, a sheeny sparkle of silver in the newly risen sun. "But you—it's given you a grand colour anyway."

"Yes, it was pretty sharp, Mr Earle, but we were well wrapped up," answered Lyn, as he helped her down. Then, as an ulster-clad figure disentangled itself from the spider—"This is Mr Blachland, who is staying with us."

"How do, sir? Pleased to meet you. Not out from home, are you?" with a glance at the other's bronzed and weather-beaten countenance.

"No. Up-country," answered Bayfield for him. "Had fever, obliged to be careful,"—this as though explaining the voluminousness of the aforesaid wrapping.

"So? Didn't know you had any one staying with you, Bayfield."

"By Jove! Didn't I mention it? Well, I wrote that brievje in a cast-iron hurry, I remember."

"That's nothing. The more the merrier," heartily rejoined Earle, who was a jolly individual of about the same number of years as Blachland. "Come inside. Come inside. We'll have breakfast directly. Who's this?" shading his eyes to look down the road.

"That's Fred and Jafta, and a spare horse. The youngster won't be in the way, will he, Earle? I don't let him shoot yet, except with an air-gun, but he was death on coming along."

"No—no. That's all right. Bring him along."

Their hostess met them in the doorway. She was a large, finely built woman, with a discontented face, but otherwise rather good-looking. She was cordial enough, however,

towards the new arrivals. They constituted a break in the monotony of life; moreover, she was fond of Lyn for her own sake.

“Let’s have breakfast as soon as you can, Em,” said Earle. “We want to get along. I think we’ll have a good day. There are three troops of guinea-fowl in those upper kloofs, and the hoek down along the spruit is just swarming with blekbuck.”

During these running comments a door had opened, and someone entered.

“How d’you do, Mrs Fenham?” said Bayfield, greeting the new arrival cordially. He was followed by Lyn, somewhat less cordial. Then arose Earle’s voice:

“Mrs Fenham—Mr—There now, I believe I didn’t quite catch your name—”

“Blachland.”

“Ah, yes, I beg your pardon—Blachland. Mr Blachland.”

Hilary bowed—then obliged by that other’s outstretched hand to put forth his, found it enclosed in a tolerably firm clasp, by that of—Hermia.

Thus they stood, looking into each other’s eyes, and in that brief glance, for all his habitual self-control, he would have been more than human had he succeeded in concealing the unbounded surprise—largely mingled with dismay—which flashed across his face. She for her part, if she had failed to read it, and in that fraction of a minute to resolve to turn it to account—well, she would not have been Hermia Saint Clair.

To both the surprise was equal and complete. They had no more idea of each other’s propinquity than they had—say, of the Sultan of Turkey suddenly arriving to take part in the day’s sport. Yet, of the two, the woman was the more self-controlled.

“Are you fond of sport?” she murmured sweetly, striving not to render too palpable to other observers the dart of mingled warning and defiance which she flashed at him.

“Yes, as a rule,” he answered indifferently, taking his cue. “Been rather off colour of late. Touch of fever.”

There was a touch of irony in the tone, to the only one there who had the key to its burden. For the words brought back the long and helpless bout of the dread malady, when this woman had left him alone—to die, but for the chance arrival of a staunch comrade.

“Well, lug that big coat off, old chap,” said Earle, whose jovial nature moved him to prompt familiarity. “Unless you still feel it too cold, that is. We’re going to have breakfast.”

The coat referred to was not without its importance in the situation. With the collar partly turned up, Blachland had congratulated himself that it helped to conceal the effect of this extraordinary and unwelcome surprise from the others, and such, in fact, was the case. For nothing is more difficult to dissemble in the eyes of bystanders, in a chance and unwelcome meeting, than the fact of previous acquaintanceship. It may be accounted for by the explanation of extraordinary resemblance, but such is so thin as to be absolutely transparent, and calculated to impose upon nobody. And of this Hilary Blachland was thoroughly aware.

They sorted themselves into their places. Hilary, by a kind of process of natural selection, found himself seated next to Lyn. Hermia was nearly opposite, and next to her three of the Earle progeny—preternaturally well-behaved. But on her other side was a vacant chair, and a place laid as though for somebody. There was plenty of talk going on, which enabled Blachland to keep out of it and observe.

First of all, what the deuce was she doing there? Hermia masquerading as instructor of youth! Oh, Heavens, the joke would have been enough to send him into a fit, had he only heard of it! But there she was, and it would be safe to say that there was not a living being on the wide earth, however detestable, whose presence would not have been warmly welcome to him in comparison with that of this one seated there opposite. What on earth was her game, he wondered, and what had become of Spence? Here she was, passing as a widow under the name of Fenham. And this was the unknown fair who had been the subject of their jokes, and Lyn’s disapproval! Why, even on the way over that morning, Bayfield had been full of chaff, pre-calculating the effect of her charms upon himself. Great Heavens, yes! It was all too monstrous—too grotesque entirely.

“Are you still feeling cold?”

It was Lyn who had turned to him, amid all the chatter, and there was a sort of indefinably confidential ring in her voice, begotten of close friendship and daily intercourse. Was it something of the kind that softened his as he replied to her? But even while he did so he met the dark eyes opposite, the snap of which seemed to convey that to their owner nothing could go unobserved.

“Oh no, I’m quite all right now,” he answered lightly. And then, under cover of all the fanning talk that was going on between Earle and Bayfield, he talked to Lyn, mostly

about matters they had discussed before. A sort of ironical devil moved him. He would let this woman opposite, imperceptibly watching every look, weighing every word, understand that she and her malevolence, whether dormant or active, counted absolutely nothing with him.

There was the sound of a footstep outside, and the door was opened.

“Awful sorry I’m so late, Mrs Earle,” cried a voice—a young and refined English voice—as its owner entered. “How d’you do, Miss Bayfield—Er—how d’you do?”

This to the only one who was personally unknown to the speaker, and who for that very reason seemed to have the effect of a damper upon his essentially English temperament.

“Mr Blachland—Mr West,” introduced their host.

“What?” almost shouted the last-named. “Blachland, did you say? Not Hilary! Why—it is! Hilary, my dear old chap, why, this is real good. By Jove, to think of my running against you here. Where on earth have you dropped from? Earle, you’ve heard me talk about this chap. He’s my first cousin.” And grabbing hold of the other’s hands, he started wringing them as though that newly found relative were the harmless, necessary village pump. “Who’d have thought of running against you here?” went on Percival West volubly. “Why, I thought you were in some out-of-way place up-country. Well, this is a gaudy surprise!”

“Isn’t it? But somebody or other has defined this country as the land of surprises, Percy. So it’s got to keep up its character,” said Blachland, with a queer smile, fully conscious that the irony of the rejoinder would not be lost upon at any rate one other at the table.

“I say, West. Get on with your grub, old chap,” said Earle. “You can have a yarn on the way. We want to make a start, you know.”

“Right you are!” cried Percival, with a jolly laugh, as he slid into the vacant chair beside Hermia. But even amid his surprise, he did not omit to give the latter the good morning in an unconscious change of tone, which in its turn was not lost upon Hilary Blachland; for in it was an unconscious softening, which with the look which came into the young fellow’s eyes as he turned to the woman beside him, caused those of his newly found relative to open—figuratively—very wide indeed. For two considerable surprises had been sprung upon him—enough in all conscience for one morning, yet here was a third. This young fool was already soft upon Hermia. As to that there could be no doubt. Here was a situation with a vengeance, the thinker told himself. How on earth was it going to pan out? And his anticipations on that head were of no pleasurable nature.

“I say, West!” cried Bayfield. “That old ram we drove over you the other day has come to a bad end at last. Blachland’s knocked him over.”

“Oh, well done, Hilary, old chap. I suppose you’ve had a great time with big game, eh? Shocked over no end of lions and elephants, and all that sort of thing?”

“A few, yes,” answered the other, rising, for a signal for a move had been given.

A few minutes of filling up cartridge-belts and fastening reims to saddles, and other preparations, and the sporting party was ready.

“Good luck, father. Good luck, Mr Blachland,” said Lyn, as she stood watching them start.

“That ought to bring it,” answered the latter, as he swung himself into his saddle. But Hermia was not among those who were outside. Percival, who had been, had dived inside again Blachland did not fail to notice. He emerged in a moment, however, looking radiantly happy and brimming over with light-hearted spirits.

“Now, Hilary, old chap, we can have a yarn,” he said, as they started, for the others had the start of them by a hundred yards or so. “So you’re stopping with Bayfield? If only I’d known that, wouldn’t I have been over to look you up. Good chap Bayfield. Nice little girl of his too, but—not much in her, I fancy.”

“There you’re wrong, Percy. There’s a great deal in her. But—how did you fall in with Earle?”

“Knew him through another Johnny I was thick with on board ship, and he asked me over to his place. Had a ripping good time here, too. I say, what d’you think of that Mrs Fenham? Fancy a splendid woman like that spending life hammering a lot of unlicked cubs into shape. Isn’t it sinful?”

“Why didn’t you say you were coming out, Percy? Drop a line or something?” went on his relative, feeling unaccountably nauseated by what he termed to himself the boy’s brainless rattle.

“Drop a line! Why, that’s just where the joke comes in! We none of us knew where on earth you were exactly. In point of fact, I came over here to find you, and by George I have! Never expected to find you so easily, though.”

“Nothing wrong, eh?”

“No. But Uncle Luke is dying to see you again. He said I must be sure and bring you back with me.”

The other looked surprised. Then his face softened very perceptibly.

“Is that a fact, Percy? Why, I thought he never wanted to set eyes on me again as long as he lived.”

“Then you thought jolly well wrong. He does. So you must just make up your mind to go home when I do.”

“Why are you so keen on it, Percy? Why, man, it might be immeasurably to your advantage if I never went back at all.”

“Look here, Hilary, if you really mean that, I’m not a beastly cad yet.”

“Well, I don’t really mean it,” said the other, touched by the young fellow’s chivalrous single-heartedness. “Perhaps we may bring off your scheme all right. I would like to see the dear old chap again. I must have treated him very shabbily. And the old Canon—is he still to the fore?”

“Rather, and as nailing good an old sort as ever. He wants to see you again too—almost as much as Uncle Luke does.”

“Ah, he always was a straight ’un—not an ounce of shoddy or humbug about him—”

“Come on, you fellows, or we’ll never get to work,” shouted Earle’s voice, now very far ahead of them.

And leaving their home talk and reminiscences for the present, they spurred on their steeds—to join the rest of the party.

Chapter Seven.

"It cannot be."

In the conjecture that his cousin had fallen into an infatuation for Hermia, Hilary Blachland was right—the only respect in which he had failed to grasp the full situation being that he had not fathomed the depth of that infatuation.

He knew her little ways, none better; knew well how insidiously dangerous she could be to those who did not know them, when she saw fit to lay herself out to attract. That she was laying herself out to entrap Percy was the solution of the whole problem.

Yet not all of it. She had been with the Earles before Percy's arrival, before she could even have known he was in the country at all. And what had become of Spence? Well, this, too, would be cleared up, for he knew as well as though she had told him in so many words, that before they parted again she meant to have a private talk with him, and an understanding, and to this he was not averse. It would probably be a stormy one, for he was not going to allow her to add young West to her list of victims; and this he was going to give her emphatically to understand.

A rustle and a rush in front, and a blekbuck leaped out of the long grass almost at his horse's feet, for they were riding in line—a hundred yards or so apart. Up went his gun mechanically—a crack and a suspicion of a puff of smoke. The graceful little animal turned a complete somersault, and lay, convulsively kicking its life away. Another started up, crossing right in front of Percival. The latter slipped to the ground in a moment, got a sight on, and turned it over neatly, at rather a long distance shot.

"I say, Bayfield. Those two Britishers are leading off well," said Earle, as they pulled in their horses and lighted pipes, to wait till the other two should be ready to take the line again.

There are more imposing, but few more enjoyable forms of sport, than this moving over a fine rolling expanse of bontebosch veldt, beneath the cloudless blue of the heavens, through the clear exhilarating air of an early African winter day; when game is plentiful, and anything may jump out, or rise at any moment; blekbuck or duiker, guinea-fowl or koorhaan, or partridge, with the possibility of a too confiding pauw, and other unconsidered trifles. All these conditions held good here, yet one, at any rate, of those privileged to enjoy them, keen sportsman as he was, felt that day that something was wanting—that a cloud was dimming the sun-lit beauty of the rolling plains, and an invisible weight crushing the exhilaration of each successful shot.

Blachland, pursuing his sport mechanically, was striving to shake off an unpleasant impression, and striving in vain. Something seemed to have happened between yesterday and to-day. Or was it the thought that Lyn Bayfield would be more or less in Hermia's society throughout the whole of that day? Yet, even if such were the case, what on earth did it matter to him?

The day came to an end at last, but there had been nothing to complain of in the way of the sport. They had lunched in the veldt, in ordinary hunter fashion—and in the afternoon had got in among the guinea-fowl; and being lucky enough to break up the troop, had about an hour of pretty sport—for scattered birds lie well and rise well—and by the time they turned their faces homeward, were loaded up with about as much game—buck and birds—as the horses could conveniently carry.

A flutter of feminine dresses was visible on the stoep, as they drew near the house, seeing which, an eager look came into Percival West's face. It was not lost upon his kinsman, who smiled to himself sardonically, as he recalled how just such a light had been kindled in his own at one time, and by the same cause. What a long while ago that seemed—and to think, too, that it should ever have been possible.

A chorus of congratulation arose as the magnitude of the bag became apparent.

"Those two Britishers knocked spots out of us to-day!" cried Earle. "Bayfield and I can clean take a back seat."

"You wouldn't call Mr Blachland a Britisher, surely, Mr Earle?" struck in Hermia. "Why, he's shot lions up-country."

"Eh, has he? How d'you know?" asked Earle eagerly—while he who was most concerned mentally started.

"Didn't he tell us so this morning?" she said, and her glance of mischief was not lost upon Blachland, who remarked:

"Does that fact denationalise me, Mrs Fenham? You said I couldn't be counted a Britisher."

"Well, you know what I meant."

"Oh, perfectly."

There was a veiled cut-and-thrust between these two: imperceptible to the others—save one.

That one was Lyn. Her straight instinct and true ear had warned her.

"She is an adventuress," was the girl's mental verdict. "An impostor, who is hiding something. Some day it will come out." Now she said to herself, watching the two, "He doesn't like her. No, he doesn't." And there was more satisfaction in this conclusion than even its framer was aware of.

Throughout the evening, too, Hilary found himself keenly observing new developments, or the possibility of such. At supper, they were mostly shooting all the day's bag over again, and going back over the incidents of other and similar days. Percival, in his seat next Hermia, was dividing his attention between his host's multifold reminiscence and his next-door neighbour, somewhat to the advantage of the latter. A new development came, however, and it was after they had all got up from the table, and some, at any rate, had gone out on to the stoep to see the moon rise. Then it was, in the sudden transition from light to darkness, Blachland felt his hand stealthily seized and something thrust into it—something which felt uncommonly like a tiny square of folded paper. Hermia's wrap brushed him at the time, and Hermia's voice, talking evenly to Percival on the other side, arrested his ear. There was a good deal more talk, and lighting of pipes, and presently it was voted too cold to remain outside. But, on re-entering, the party had undergone diminution by two. Mrs Earle was looking more discontented than ever.

"What's the odds?" chuckled her jolly spouse, with a quizzical wink at his two male guests. "They're a brace of Britishers. They only want to talk home shop. Fine woman that Mrs Fenham, isn't she, Blachland?"

"Yes. How did you pick her up?" he replied, noticing that the discontented look had deepened on the face of his hostess, and bearing in mind Bayfield's insinuations, thought that warm times might be in store for Hermia.

"Oh, the wife found her. I hadn't anything to do with it. But she's first-rate in her own line: gets the nippers on no end. Makes 'em learn, you know."

Would surprises never end? thought Hilary Blachland. Here was an amazing one, at any rate, for he happened to know that Hermia's mind, as far as the veriest rudiments of education were concerned, was pretty nearly a blank. How on earth, then, did she contrive to impart instruction to others? He did not believe she could, only that she had succeeded in humbugging these people most thoroughly.

Then they had manoeuvred Lyn to the piano, and got her to sing, but Hilary, leaning back in his chair, thought that somehow it did not seem the same as up there in her own home, when night after night he had sat revelling in the sweet, clear, true notes. And then the other two, entering from their moonlight stroll, had subsided into a corner together. The sight reminded him of Spence, who must needs make an open book of his callow, silly face. Percival was doing the same.

"Just as I thought," he said to himself, an hour later, as under cover of all the interchange of good nights, he managed to slip away for a moment to investigate the contents of the mysterious paper. "'Meet to-morrow and have an explanation, or I may regret it all my life.' Um—ah! very likely I shall do that in any case. Still, I'm curious about the explanation part of it myself, so meet we will."

"Come along, old chap," said Percival, grabbing him by the arm. "You've got to doss down in my diggings, and we'll have a good round jaw until we feel sleepy. Phew! it's cold!" he added, as they got out on to the stoep—for Percival's room was at the end of the stoep, and was quite shut off from the house. The moonlit veldt stretched away in dim beauty around, its stillness broken by the weird yelp of hunting jackals, or the soft whistle of the invisible plover overhead.

They had been talking of all sorts of indifferent things. Blachland knew, however, that the other wanted to talk on a subject that was not indifferent, and was shy to lead up to it. He must help him through directly, because he didn't want to be awake all night. But when they had turned in and had lit their pipes for a final smoke, Percival began—

"I say, Hilary, what do you think of that Mrs Fenham?"

"Rather short acquaintance to give an opinion upon, isn't it?"

"No. Skittles! But I say, old chap, she's devilish fetching, eh?"

"So you seem to find. It strikes me, Percy, you're making a goodish bit of running in that quarter. Look out."

The other laughed good-humouredly, happily in fact.

"Why 'look out?' I mean making running there. By Jove, I never came across any one like her!"

Blachland smiled grimly to himself behind a great puff of smoke. He had good reason to believe that statement.

“It’s a fact,” went on Percival. “But I say, old chap, she doesn’t seem to fetch you at all. I’m rather glad, of course—in fact, devilish glad. Still, I should have thought she’d be just the sort of woman who’d appeal to you no end. You must be getting blasé.”

“My dear Percy, a man’s idiocies don’t stay with him all his life, thank Heaven—though their results are pretty apt to.”

“Well, Hilary, I’m mortal glad to have the field clear in this case, because I want you to help me.”

“I don’t think you need any help. Judging from the very brief period of observation vouchsafed to me, the lady herself seems able and willing to help you all she knows.”

“No, but you don’t understand. I mean business here—real serious—”

“Strictly honourable—or—”

The young fellow flushed up.

“If any one else had said that—” he began, indignantly.

“Oh, don’t be an ass. You surely don’t expect me—me, mind—to cotton to heroics in a matter of this kind. What do you know about the woman? Nothing.”

“I don’t care about that I can’t do without her.”

“She can do without you, I expect, eh?”

“She can’t. She told me so.”

“Did she? Now, Percy, I don’t want to hurt your feelings. But how many men do you suppose she has told the same thing to—in her time?”

“None. Her marriage was only one of convenience. She was forced into it.”

“Of course. They always are. Now, supposing she had told me, for instance, she couldn’t do without me? What then?”

“You? Why, you never set eyes on her till this morning.”

“No. Of course not. I was only putting a case. Again, she’s rather older than you.”

“There you’re wrong. She’s a year or two younger. She told me so.”

Blachland, happening to know that she was, in fact, five or six years the young fellow’s senior, went on appreciating the humours of the situation. And really these were great.

“By Jove! Listen!” said the other suddenly, as a chattering and clucking of fowls was audible outside. “There’s a jackal or a bushcat or something getting at the fowls. They roost in those low trees just outside. I’ll get the gun, and if we put out the light, we may get a shot at him from the window.”

“Not much,” returned Blachland decisively. “The window’s at the head of my bed, not yours. I wouldn’t have it opened this beastly cold night for a great deal. Besides, think what a funk you’d set up among the women by banging off a gun at this ungodly hour. The hens must take their chance. Now look here, Percy,” he went on, speaking earnestly and seriously, “take a word of warning from one who has seen a great deal more of the world, and the crookedness thereof, than you have, and chuck this business—for all serious purposes I mean. Have your fun by all means—even to a fast and furious flirtation if you’re that way disposed. But—draw the line at that, and draw it hard.”

“I wouldn’t if I could, and I couldn’t if I would. Hilary—we are engaged.”

“What?”

The word came with almost a shout. Blachland had sat up in bed and was staring at his young kinsman in wild dismay. His pipe had fallen to the ground in his amazement over the announcement. “Since when, if it’s a fair question?” he added, somewhat recovering himself.

“Only this evening. I asked her to marry me and she consented.”

“Then you must break it off at once. I tell you this thing can’t come off, Percy. It simply can’t.”

“Can’t it? But it will. And look here, Hilary, you’re a devilish good chap, and all that—but I’m not precisely under your guardianship, you know. Nor am I dependent upon anybody. I’ve got a little of my own, and besides, I can work.”

“Oh, you young fool. Go to sleep. You may wake up more sensible,” he answered, not unkindly, and restraining the impulse to tell Percival the truth then and there, but the

thought that restrained him was the coming interview with Hermia on the morrow. He was naturally reluctant to give her away unless absolutely necessary, but whatever the result of that interview, he would force her to free Percival from her toils. To do him justice, the idea that such an exposure would involve himself too did not enter his mind—at least not then.

"I think I will go to sleep, Hilary, as you're so beastly unsympathetic," answered the younger man good-humouredly. "But as to the waking up—well, you and I differ as to the meaning of the word 'sensible.' Night-night."

And soon a succession of light snores told that he was asleep, probably dreaming blissfully of the crafty and scheming adventuress who had fastened on to his young life to strangle it at the outset. But Hilary Blachland lay staring into the darkness—thinking, and ever thinking.

"Confound those infernal fowls!" he muttered, as the cackling and clucking, mingled this time with some fluttering, arose outside, soon after the extinguishing of the light. But the disturbance subsided—nor did it again arise that night, as he lay there, hour after hour, thinking, ever thinking.

Chapter Eight.

"You are in Love with her."

Bright and clear and cold, the morning arose. There had been a touch of frost in the night, and the house, lying back in its enclosure of aloe fence, looked as though roofed with a sheeting of silver in the sparkle of the rising sun. The spreading veldt, too, in the flash of its dewy sheen, seemed to lend a deeper blue to the dazzling, unclouded vault above. The metallic clatter of milk-pails in the cattle-kraal hard by mingled with the deep-toned hum of Kaffir voices; a troop of young ostriches turned loose were darting to and fro, or waltzing, and playfully kicking at each other; and so still and clear was the air, that the whistling call of partridges down in an old mealie land nearly a mile away was plainly audible.

"Where's West?" Bayfield was saying, as three out of the four men were standing by the gate, finishing their early coffee.

"Oh, he's a lazy beggar," answered Earle, putting down his cup on a stone. "He don't like turning out much before breakfast-time."

"I believe you'll miss some of your fowls this morning, Earle," said Blachland. "There was a cat or something after them last night. They were kicking up the devil's own row outside our window. Percy wanted to try a shot at it, whatever it was, but I choked him off that lay because I thought it'd scare the house."

"Might have been a two-legged cat," rejoined Earle. "And it isn't worthwhile shooting even a poor devil of a thieving nigger for the sake of a chicken or two."

"Who are you wanting to shoot, Mr Earle?"

"Ah! Good morning, Mrs Fenham. Blachland was saying there was a cat or something after the fowls last night, and it was all he could do to keep West from blazing off a gun at it. I suggested it might have been a two-legged cat—ha—ha!"

"Possibly," she answered with a smile. "I'm going to take a little stroll. It's such a lovely morning. Will you go with me, Mr Blachland?"

"Delighted," was the answer.

The two left behind nudged each other.

“Old Blachland’s got it too,” quoth Earle, with a knowing wink. “I say, though, the young ’un ’ll be ready to cut his throat when he finds he’s been stolen a march on. They all seem to tumble when she comes along. I say, Bayfield, you’ll be the next.”

“When I am I’ll tell you,” was the placid reply. “Let’s go round to the kraals.”

“Well, Hilary, and how am I looking? Rather well, don’t you think?”

She was dressed quite simply, but prettily, and wore a plain but very becoming hat. The brisk, clear cold suited her dark style, and had lent colour to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes—and the expression of the latter now, as she turned them upon her companion, was very soft.

“Yes. Rather well,” he answered, not flinching from her gaze, yet not responding to it.

“More than ‘rather’ well, you ought to say,” she smiled. “And now, Hilary, what have you been doing since we parted? Tell me all about yourself.”

Most men would have waxed indignant over her cool effrontery in putting things this way. This one, she knew, would do nothing of the sort. If anything, it rather amused him.

“Doing? Well, I began by nearly dying of fever. Would have quite, if Sybrandt hadn’t tumbled in by accident and pulled me through it.”

“Poor old Hilary!—What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing much. Something funny struck me, that’s all. But you were always deficient in a sense of the ridiculous, Hermia, so it’s not worth repeating. You wouldn’t see it. By-the-way, when I was lying ill, a squad of Matabele came around, under that swab Muntusi, and looted a little, and assegai-ed the two piccaninnies.”

“What? Tickey and Primrose? Oh, poor little beasts!”

“I couldn’t move a finger, of course—weak as a cat. In fact, I didn’t know what had happened till afterwards.”

Again the humour of the situation struck him irresistibly. The matter-of-course way in which she was asking and receiving the news just as though they had parted quite in ordinary fashion and merely temporarily, was funny. But it was Hermia all over.

“I’d become sick of it by that time,” he went on. “So I sold out everything, and came down country.”

“To think of your being at the Bayfields’ all this while, Hilary. And you didn’t know I was here?”

“Hadn’t the ghost of a notion. Of course I had heard you were here, but there was nothing to lead me to locate you as ‘Mrs Fenham.’ By the way, Hermia, what on earth made you strike out in the line of instructor of youth? No. It’s really too funny.”

“Isn’t it?” she said ingenuously. “It often amuses me too. I did it for a freak—and—a reason.”

“But why ‘Fenham’? You haven’t really married any—er—fool of that name?”

“Not a bit. Thanks for the implied compliment all the same. The name did as well as any other. That’s all.”

“What has become of Spence?”

“I don’t know, and don’t care. He turned out rather a cur,” she answered with a light laugh, showing no more confusion or restraint in alluding to the circumstance, than he had done when first she broached the subject of their parting. “I had more than enough of him in three months, and couldn’t stand the sight of him in five. He had just succeeded to a lot of money, you know, and became afflicted with swelled head there and then; in fact, became intolerably bumptious.”

“Yes, I heard that from Skelsey, just when I was wondering hard how Spence was in a sudden position to undertake a—well, not inexpensive liability.”

She gave him a little punch on the arm—not ill-naturedly, for she was rather amused.

“It’s mean of you to say that, Hilary. Come now, you can’t say you found it an ‘expensive liability.’”

“Well, I’ll concede I didn’t, Hermia—not pecuniarily, that is. But it isn’t to say that Spence would not have. I thought you were going to make a serious business of it that time. Why didn’t you? You had hooked your fish, and seemed to be playing him all right. Then, just when you ought to have gaffed him—up goes the top joint, whipping aloft, and the fish is off.”

“He was a cur, and I’m well rid of him,” she returned, and there was a hard, vindictive gleam in her dark eyes. “I did mean serious business, and so did he—very much so. Do you know what choked him off, Hilary? It was when he learned there was no necessity for you to set me free—that I was free as air already. While he thought I was beyond his reach, he declared he was only living for the day when I was no longer so. But, directly he found I was quite within it, and had been all along, he cooled off with a sort of magical rapidity.”

“Yes. Human nature is that way—and here too, there was an additional psychological motive. The knowledge would be likely to make a difference, you know. Knock a few chips out of your—er—prestige.”

She burst out laughing. “You have a neat, but rather horrid way of putting things, Hilary. Yes. I quite see what you mean.”

He made no reply, and for some moments they strolled on in silence. He could not refuse to entertain a certain amount of admiration for the consummate and practical coolness of this woman. She would make an ideal adventuress. Nor did he in the very least believe that she was destined to come to grief—as by all the rules of morality he ought to have believed. That was not the way of life. She would probably end by entrapping some fool—either very old, or very young—endowed with infinitely more bullion or valuable scrip than gumption or self-control, and flashing out into a very shining light of pattern respectability.

“What are you thinking about, Hilary?” she said at last, stealing a side look at him. “Are you still the least little bit angry with me about—er—about things?”

“Not in the least. I never was. You had had enough of me—we had had enough of each other. The only thing to do was to separate. You may remember I told you so not long before?”

“I remember. And, Hilary—You would not—stand in my way if—”

“Certainly not. If you can humbug, to your advantage, any fool worth humbugging, that’s no business on earth of mine—”

“Ah, that’s just what I thought of you, Hilary,” she said, her whole face lighting up with animation. “You were always a head and shoulders above any other man I ever knew.”

”—But—” he resumed, lifting a warning hand as he stopped and faced her. “There is one and one only I must warn you off, and that most uncompromisingly.”

“Who is it?”

The very tone was hard and rasping, and her face had gone pale. All the light and animation had died out of her eyes as she raised them to his.

“That unspeakable young ass of a cousin of mine—Percy West.”

“But—why?”

“Hermia, think. How on earth can you ask such a question? The boy is like a younger brother to me, and on no consideration whatever will I stand by and allow his life to be utterly spoiled, wrecked and ruined at the very outset.”

“Why should his life be wrecked or ruined?” she said sullenly, but with averted gaze. “I could make him very happy.”

“For how long? And what then? No. Knowing what we know, it could not be. The thing is impossible—utterly impossible, I tell you. You must simply give up all idea or thought of it.”

“And if I refuse?”

“But you won’t refuse. Good Heavens! haven’t you got the whole world to pick and choose from, but you must needs come here and make a fool of this boy?”

“I didn’t come here and ‘make a fool of him.’ I was here already when he came. I told you I had a reason for stopping here. Well—that is it.”

“It was to tell me this that you arranged to meet me alone,” went on Blachland. “I conclude it wasn’t merely for the pleasure of having a talk over old times. Am I right?”

“Perfectly.”

“Well, then, Hermia, I can’t agree to it. Do be reasonable. You have the whole world to choose from, and you may rely upon it that in any other connection I will never stand in your way by word or act. But in this I will. Why are you so bent on winning this boy? He isn’t wealthy, and never will be, except by his own exertions, i.e. the development of some potential but hitherto undiscovered vein of rascality in his nature. He is much younger than you, too.”

“So you were careful enough to tell him last night,” she flashed. “That was mean of you.”

“Last night!” echoed the other, for the moment taken aback, for Percival had certainly had no opportunity of communicating with her at all that morning.

“Why, yes. I heard you. Remember the ‘bushcat’ that was disturbing the fowls? I was the ‘bushcat’!” And again she broke into a ringing peal of laughter.

“Eh?”

“I was the ‘bushcat,’ I tell you,” she repeated. “That window of yours is very convenient. I heard every word you said to each other. It was very mean of you, Hilary, to try and set him against me.”

“Well, if you heard every word, you must admit that I might have set him against you a great deal more than I did. Moreover, Hermia, I believe I was the unconscious means of saving your life by refusing to open the window and let him shoot. So you owe me a little gratitude after all.”

“No, I don’t,” came the prompt response. “You don’t suppose I’d have waited there to be shot at, do you? Why, directly you touched the window to open it. I’d have made myself scarce. You don’t catch this weasel asleep.”

“Evidently not,” he answered dryly. As a matter of fact she had heard very little indeed of their conversation, only a scrap here and there. For the rest, she had been drawing a bow at a venture.

“Now, Hermia,” he went on, “Let’s have the motive—there’s always a motive, you know. You can’t really care for this youngster—let alone love him—”

“Oh, as for love—You know, Hilary, I never loved any one but you—” she broke off, almost passionately—“never—before or since.”

“Well then, if in that case you couldn’t stick to me, how are you going to stick to this one when you don’t even love him? You know you never would. And he’s got nothing of his own to speak of, and never will have more when you have estranged him from the only relative he has who can help him.”

“But I needn’t estrange him from anybody. Nothing need ever be known.”

“Let’s turn back,” said Hilary. “We have gone far enough. And now, Hermia, I’ll tell you straight. If you don’t give Percy to understand this very morning that you have changed your mind, and will on no account consent to marry him, I shall put him in possession of all the facts concerning ourselves.”

“You will?” she said. “You will do that?”

She had stopped short, and with eyes burning from her pale face, and breast heaving, she stood defiant, facing him, with a very blast of hate and fury in her look.

“Certainly I will,” he returned sternly, and absolutely undaunted. “I forbid this thing—forbid it utterly.”

“He won’t believe you,” she jeered. “Even if he does, he won’t care, he loves me too well. It’ll make no difference to him.”

“I think it will though. In fact I’m sure it will. There was young Spence. He loved you just as well, but it made a good deal of difference to him.”

“Very well, Hilary. Play your hand by all means. Throw your best card, but I can trump it. I have a better hand than you. I hold all the honours, and you shan’t even take the odd trick.”

“Explain,” he said shortly, with, however, more than an inkling as to her meaning.

“Well, I will then. You give me away. I give you away. See?”

“Oh, perfectly. But it’ll make no difference. You can’t injure me, and I wouldn’t for the world injure you—but—I won’t allow this scandalous affair to go any further, no, not at any cost!”

“I can’t injure you, can’t I?” she said, dropping out her words slowly, a sneer of deadly malice spreading over her face. “No? What will the Bayfields say when they hear what you and I have been to each other?”

With infinite self-control, he commanded his features, trusting they did not betray any inkling of the direful sinking of heart with which he grasped the import of her words. He was not altogether taken by surprise, for he had taken such a possibility into account—as a possibility, not a probability.

“That can’t be helped. At any cost I told you I should prevent this. At any cost mind, and at a far greater loss to myself than even that would be. And—I will.”

“Ha-ha-ha!” and the jeering laughter, shrill in its hate and vengeful malevolence, rang out clear on the sweet morning air. “Ha-ha-ha! But I don’t think you’ve altogether counted the cost, my Hilary. How about Lyn—your sweet, pure, innocent Lyn? What will she say when she knows? What will her father say when they both know—that you have allowed her to be under the same roof with—to grasp in ordinary social friendship the hand of your—for years—most devoted and affectionate… housekeeper?”

Well was it for the speaker, well for both of them, that the words were uttered here, and not in the far-away scene of the life to which she referred. For a second, just one brief second, the man’s eyes flashed the murder in his soul. With marvellous self-restraint, but with dry lips and face a shade pale, he answered:

“That would be a regrettable thing to happen. But, it doesn’t shake my determination. I don’t see, either, how the outraging of other people’s finer feelings is going to benefit you, or, to any appreciable extent, injure me.”

“Don’t you? Why, in that event, the sweet, pure, and beautiful Lyn—yes, she is beautiful—I’d concede that and more—will bid you an extremely cold and curt farewell—even if she condescends to speak to you again at all for the remainder of your natural life.”

“That too, would be regrettable, and would pain me. But we should have to say good-bye sooner or later.”

“No, Hilary. You never intended to say anything of the sort. You can’t fool me, you see.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Again the jeering laugh rang out. “What am I talking about?” she echoed, quite undaunted by the curt, stern tones. “You know perfectly well. You are over head and ears in love with her.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? It is though,” she answered, her eyes fixed full upon his and rippling into mischievous laughter. “Why, you have grown quite pale at the bare mention of it! Shall I say it again? You are over head and ears in love with her. And—I wonder if she is with you?”

“Oh, hold your scandalous tongue, woman,” he rejoined wearily, knowing better than to delight her by exhibiting what must necessarily be impotent anger. “Really, you are rendering yourself absolutely and uncompromisingly loathsome. Again I say you must give up this scheme. I will prevent it at any cost.”

“Well, you know what the cost is—and if you don’t, it isn’t for want of warning. Keep quiet and so will I. Interfere with my plans and I’ll wreck all yours. Give me away and I’ll give you away, and then we’ll see which comes out best. Now we are nearly back at the house again, so you’d better be civil, or, what is more important still, look it.”

Chapter Nine.

"What a Man Soweth."

"Percy, I want you to ride part of the way back with me."

"Delighted, old chap. But—"

"There's no 'but' in the case at all. To be plain, you must."

"It isn't to talk any more about—er—what we were on to last night, is it? Because that's settled."

"Well, it concerns that, for it concerns her, and you've got to hear it."

"But I don't want to. And I shan't believe it if I do," was the reply, shortly made.

The two were standing by the cattle-kraal, which contained a troop of horses just driven in from the veldt. In the thick of them, armed with halters and reims, two Kaffir servants and a Hottentot were catching out those required. In front of the house Bayfield's spider was being inspanned.

"Now it's of no use turning restive, Percy. You've got to hear what I've got to tell you. It's about—her. You can take your choice. Either you hear it from me—in which case it need go no farther, or—you'll hear it from anybody and everybody—for then I shall be obliged to make it public."

"Do you mean to say you'll spread abroad your infernal slanders, Hilary!" The young fellow's face was as white as a sheet, and he could hardly speak for the extent of his agitation.

"Not unless you force me to. Look. There's your gee in the kraal now. Tell one of them to catch it and come along with me. You'll live to thank me till your dying day."

The stronger will prevailed—even apart from the fell significance of the alternative held out. By the time the inspanning was complete, and good-byes were in progress, Percival was on the scene with his horse saddled up and ready.

"Aren't you coming in the spider with us, Mr Blachland?" said Lyn, noticing that he, too, was preparing to mount.

“Not the first part of the way,” he answered. “There’s a home matter Percy and I want to talk over, so he’s going to ride an hour or two on the road with me. Good-bye again, Earle. Had a ripping good shoot. Good-bye, Mrs Fenham,” for the latter had now appeared for the first time. She looked quite unruffled, but there was that in her face which told one, at any rate, there, that she was prepared to begin the war.

“Good-bye, Hilary—er—Mr Blachland,” she responded sweetly, contriving that the words and tone should be distinctly audible to Lyn, who, already seated in the spider, could not possibly avoid hearing them. But had Hermia only known it the shaft had fallen harmless.

“Did you hear that, father?” Lyn began, as they drove off. “That woman actually called Mr Blachland by his Christian name?”

Bayfield burst out laughing. Then after a precautionary look behind—

“I expect she reckons him her brother-in-law—no, cousin-in-law already,” he said. “Young West seems to have brought things to a head in that quarter. She and Blachland had a long talk together this morning. I expect they were sort of arranging family matters.”

“Very likely. But I don’t think I ever saw any woman I detested so thoroughly and instinctively. Every time I see her I dislike her more.”

“Hallo, little one! You’re quite fierce on the subject,” laughed her father. “Why do you hate her so? Has she been uncivil to my little girlie?”

“No, quite the contrary. But she’s utterly false somehow. I wouldn’t believe any statement that woman made—even if she were dying. But what a silly boy that young West must be. Why, she’s years older than himself!”

Bayfield laughed again, but he more than half thought Lyn’s estimate was very likely a true one.

Some little way behind, the two men had pulled their horses into a walk.

“Steer ahead,” said Percival doggedly. “Let’s get it over.”

“Yes. I think we might now. So you haven’t found out anything more about—Mrs Fenham, beyond what you told me last night?”

“No. Her husband died about a year ago. That was up-country. I wonder you never ran against him, Hilary.”

“But I know him intimately, only—he isn’t her husband.”

“The deuce! But he’s dead.”

“No, he isn’t. He’s very much alive and kicking—and his name isn’t Fenham either, never was.”

“Well, what is it then?” and his voice was hard and desperate.

“Hilary Blachland.”

“Eh?”

It was all he could say. He could only stare. He seemed to be stricken speechless with the shock, utterly speechless.

“I’m very sorry for you, Percy, very sorry. But you’ll thank me for it bye-and-bye,” went on Blachland concernedly. “That woman has told you a tissue of lies. I can account for her time for nearly half a dozen years, for the simple reason that it has been spent with me—the last two years of it in Mashunaland. She left me though, not much more than half a year ago—cleared out with another Johnny, just such a young ass as yourself, who thought her a goddess, but they got sick of each other in no time. Why, she was telling me all about that herself only this morning, before you were up.”

Percival said nothing. For some little while he rode on in silence, gazing straight between his horse’s ears. The thing had come upon him as a terrible shock, and he sat, half dazed. It never occurred to him for one moment to refuse to believe his kinsman’s statement, nor any part of it. Suddenly he looked up.

“Who is she then?” he asked.

“Hermia Saint Clair. You remember?”

“Yes. Good God!”

“So you see, Percy, you can go no further in this,” went on the other after another interval of silence. “You must break it off—now, absolutely and at once. You quite see that, don’t you?”

“Of course. Great Heavens, Hilary—how I have been fooled!”

“You have certainly, but if it’s any consolation to you, so have others—so will others be—as long as Hermia is about. It isn’t pleasant to be obliged to give her away as I have done—and if it had concerned anybody other than yourself, anybody in whom I had no interest, I should have let the matter rigidly alone, as no business of mine, and kept a strict silence. But I couldn’t stand by and see your life utterly ruined at the start, and there are of course, circumstances in this particular case which rendered it ten times more necessary that you should be warned. I gave her the straight chance though. I told her if she broke off this engagement with you, I wouldn’t breathe a word as to her real identity, and she defied me. So now you know. And now you do know, there’s not the slightest chance of her getting you into the toils again, eh?”

“Good Heavens, no,” he answered emphatically, and in strong disgust. “What a fool I’ve been. What shall I do, Hilary? I don’t feel as if I could ever see her again. Do you think Bayfield would take me in for a few days if I went on now with you?”

“Take my advice, and go straight back. We don’t want to give her away further, and if you clear out abruptly now, it’ll likely have that effect. Besides it has rather a cowardly look. No, give her to understand that you know everything now, and of course there’s nothing more to be thought of between you.”

“I will. But—what an escape I’ve had. Still do you know, Hilary— Oh, dash it all, I was—er—beastly fond of her. Don’t you understand?”

“Well, rather—considering it’s a stage I’ve gone through myself,” answered the other, kindly. “You’ll get over it though. And, look here, Percy, I shall be leaving Bayfield’s myself in a day or two. How would you like to join me? We might go up-country together, and I could show you some real wild life. You see, I know my way about in those parts, and it would be a first-rate opportunity for you to see something of them. What do you say?”

“That’s a real splendid idea, Hilary.”

“Very well. Now go back and get this business over. Get it clean behind you mind, thoroughly and entirely. I’ll send you word in a couple of days at the outside where to join me, then roll up your traps and come straight along. How is that?”

“The very thing.”

“Right. Now, Percy. Seriously, mind. There must be no more dallying. You know what I mean?”

“Not likely, knowing what I know now.”

“Then you’d better go and get it over at once. I’ll say good-bye to the Bayfields for you. You turn round right here. Good-bye now—and one of these days you’ll bless your stars for this lucky escape.”

“Then you’ll let me hear soon, Hilary?”

“In a couple of days at the outside. Good-bye.”

A staunch handgrip, and the older man sat there, looking after the receding form of the younger.

“It strikes me,” he said to himself as he turned his horse’s head along the track again. “It strikes me that I’ve been only just in time to get that young fool out of a most deadly mess. Heavens! what a ghastly complication it would have been. Moreover, I believe he was sent out here to find out about me, and what I was doing. Well, instead of him reclaiming me, it has befallen that I have been the one marked out to reclaim him.”

Then as he sent his horse along at a brisk canter to make up the time lost during their talk, his mind reverted to himself and his own affairs. What a series of surprises had been contained within the last twenty-four hours. Could it have been only yesterday that he came along this road, serene, content, with no forewarning of what lay in store? Why, it seemed that half a lifetime’s drama had been played out within that brief space—and now, as he pressed on to overtake Bayfield’s conveyance, the tilt of which was visible some distance ahead moving through the bushes, it seemed that with every stride of his horse he was advancing into a purer atmosphere. He felt as one, who, having struck upon strange and unwelcome surprises in the foul nauseous air of some long, underground cavern, was drawing nearer and nearer again to the free, wholesome, open light of day.

Well, he had saved his young kinsman, and now he was called upon to face the payment of the price. The time he had spent here, the bright, beautiful, purifying time, was at an end. The past, of which, looking back upon, he sickened, was not to be so easily buried after all. Had it not risen up when least expected, to haunt him, to exact its retribution? Hermia would certainly keep her word; caring nothing in her vindictive spite, to what extent she blackened herself so long as she could sufficiently besmirch him. Still he would do all he could, if not to defeat her intentions, at any rate to draw half their sting.

One, at all events, should remain unsullied by the mire which he well knew she would relentlessly spatter in all directions. That he resolved.

Then a faint, vague, straw of a hope, beset him. What if she had been playing a game of bluff? What if she was by no means so ready to give herself away as she had affected to be? What if—when she found there was nothing to be gained by it—she were to adopt the more prudent course, and maintain silence? It was just a chance, but knowing so well, her narrow, soulless nature, he knew it to be a slender one.

Even then, what? Even did it hold—it would not affect the main fact. In the consummate purifying of this man's nature which the past few weeks had effected, he looked backward thence with unutterable abasement and loathing. As he had sown, so must he reap. The re-appearance of the past personified had but emphasised that—had not altered it. He would be the one to suffer, and he only, he thought, with a dull, anguished kind of feeling which he strove hard to think was that of consolation.

"Oh, it is good to be at home again," said Lyn. "I don't care much for going over to the Earles' at any time, but this time somehow or other, I detested it. But—oh, I beg your pardon, Mr Blachland. And you found your cousin there! How awkward and tactless you must think me!"

"You could never be either awkward or tactless, Lyn," he answered. "Only thoroughly natural. Always be that, child. It is such a charm."

The girl smiled softly, half shyly. "Really, you are flattering me. You spoil me as much as father does, and that's saying a great deal, you know," gaily.

The two were standing on the stoep together, about an hour after their return. Bayfield was down at the kraals, counting in, and looking after things in general, and, helping him, small Fred, who, however, was cracking his long whip in such wise as to be rather less of a help than a hindrance with the flocks. The unearthly beauty of the sunset glow was already merging into the shade of the twilightless evening.

"I wish you were going to stay with us always, Mr Blachland," she went on. "It would be so nice. If you and father were partners, for instance, like Mr Barter and Mr Smith—only they squabble—why, then you'd always be here."

He looked at her—mentally with a great start—but only for a second. The frank, ingenuous, friendly affection of a child! That was what the words, the tone, the straight glance of the sweet blue eyes expressed! There was a tinge of melancholy in his voice as he replied:

“Now you flatter me, little Lyn. You would soon find a battered old fogey like me can be a desperate bore.” Then he proceeded to the prosaic and homely occupation of filling and lighting his pipe, smiling to himself sadly over her indignant disclaimer.

Chapter Ten.

As Good as her Word.

It was post day at Lannercost, and whereas the delivery of Her Majesty's mails was only of weekly occurrence, the fact constituted a small event. Such delivery was effected by the usual harmless necessary native, who conveyed the mail bag by field and flood from the adjacent Field-cornet's—in this instance from Earle's.

"It's just possible, Bayfield, I may hear something by this post which may necessitate my leaving you almost immediately."

"Oh, hang it, Blachland! Are you at that game again? Where do you think of moving to next, if not an impertinent question?"

"Up-country again. I've interests there still. And things are beginning to look dickey. Lo Ben's crowd is turning restive again. We've most of us thought all along that they were bound to force the old man's hand. It's only a question of time."

"So?" And then they fell to talking over that and kindred questions, until finally a moving object, away down the valley, but rapidly drawing nearer, resolved itself into a mounted native.

The two men were sitting in the shade at the bottom of one of the gardens, where Bayfield had been doing an odd job or two with a spade—cutting out a water furrow here, or clearing one there and so forth—pausing every now and then for a smoke and a desultory chat.

"Hey, September! Bring the bag here," he called out in Dutch, as the postboy was about to pass.

The boy swung himself from his pony, and handed over the leathern bag to his master.

"Great Scott, here's a nuisance!" exclaimed the latter, fumbling in his pockets. "I believe I haven't got the key. It's up at the house. We'll have to send September for it—or go up ourselves and open the bag there."

The last thing that Blachland desired was either of these courses. If they sent up for the key, Lyn would be sure to come down with it herself. If they went themselves, the bag would be opened in her presence, and this, for good reasons of his own, he did not wish. In fact he had deftly manoeuvred Bayfield down here with the object of intercepting it.

“Ah, here it is!” cried the latter, disentangling a bunch of keys from the recesses of a pocket. “Got into the lining.”

In a trice the bag was unlocked and its contents extracted by the simple process of turning them out on to the ground.

“Here you are, Blachland,” handing him two. “Miss Bayfield, Miss Bayfield,” he read out, “that’s all for Lyn. Illustrated London News—George Bayfield—George Bayfield. Here’s another, that’s for you—no, it isn’t, it’s me. Looked like Blachland at first. That’s all. Here you are, September. Take that on to Miss Lyn,” replacing the latter’s correspondence in the bag.

“Ja, Baas.” And the Kaffir jogged off.

Blachland stood there, outwardly calm, but, in reality, stirred through and through. The blow had fallen. The writing on the enclosure which his friend had so nearly handed to him, how well he knew it; could it be, he thought, in a flash of sardonic irony—there had once been a time when it was the most welcome sight his glance could rest upon? The blow had fallen. Hermia had been as good as her word, but even then there were mitigating circumstances, for a ghastly idea had occurred to him that she might, in the plenitude of her malice, have written direct to Lyn, whereas the addresses on the girl’s correspondence were in different hands, and which in fact he had seen before. Indeed had it been otherwise he intended to warn Bayfield on no account to pass on the letter until that worthy had satisfied himself as to its contents.

“Just as I thought. I’ve got to clear, and rather sharp too. In fact, to-morrow,” running his eyes over his letters.

“Have you, old chap? What a beastly nuisance,” answered Bayfield, looking up. “We shall miss you no end.”

Would he? Why on earth didn’t the man get on with his correspondence, thought Blachland, for the tension was getting upon his nerves. But the other went chatting on—partly regrets over his own departure—partly about some stock sale of which he had just had news.

“Hallo! Who’s this from?” he said at last. “I don’t know that writing a hang. Well, it’s soon settled,” tearing the envelope open, with a laugh.

But in a moment the laugh died. George Bayfield was grave enough now. A whistle of amazement escaped him, and more than one smothered exclamation of disgust. Blachland, without appearing to, watched him narrowly. Would he never get to the end of that closely written sheet and a half?

“Have you any idea what this is about?”

The tone was short. All the old cordiality seemed to have left it.

“Very much of an idea, Bayfield. I expected something of the kind, and for that very reason, to be quite candid with you, I manoeuvred we should get the post out here away from the house.”

“I didn’t think you’d have done that to us, Blachland. To think of this—this person, under the same roof with—even shaking hands with—my Lyn. Faugh! Good Heavens! man, you might have spared us this!”

“Wouldn’t I—if it had been possible? But it was not. I give you my word of honour I had no more idea of that woman’s presence at Earle’s, or indeed in the neighbourhood, or even in this country, than you had yourself. You’ll do me the credit of believing that, won’t you?”

“Why, yes, Blachland. Anything you give me your word for I believe implicitly.”

“Thanks. You are a true friend, Bayfield. You may believe another thing—and that is that had I known of her presence in the neighbourhood, I should have kept away from it. Why, she didn’t even know of mine either. Each was about as surprised as the other when we met, yesterday morning. What could I do then, Bayfield? Raise a scene on the spot, and expose her—and kick up a horrible scandal, with the result of simply bespattering the air with mire, around the very one we intend to keep from any such contact? No good purpose could be served by acting otherwise than as I acted. Could it now?”

“No. I suppose not. In fact, I quite see the force of all you say. Still, it’s horrible, revolting.”

“Yes. Believe me, Bayfield, I am as distressed about it as you are. But there is this consolation. Not an atom of real harm has been done so far. Lyn is in blissful ignorance as to who it was she met, and there is no reason on earth why she should ever know.”

Even while he spoke there occurred to him another aspect of the case—and the probability that this had not been overlooked by Lyn's father occurred to him too. Would not the latter regard him as upon much the same plane as Hermia herself?

"You see," he went on, "I shall be clearing out the first thing in the morning, so she," with a jerk of the thumb in the direction of far-away Earle's, "is not likely to give you any further trouble. Besides, after giving herself away like this, she will have to go her way as well. If she doesn't, I advise you to let Earle into the story. She won't be long there after that. By the way, would you mind letting me see exactly what she has said? We shall know better where we are then."

"Yes, I think so," said the other.

Blachland took the letter and read it through carefully and deliberately from end to end. It was a narrative of their liaison, and that only. But the blame of its initiation the writer ascribed to himself. This he pointed out to Bayfield.

"The boot was, if anything on the other foot," he said. "But let that pass. Now, why do you suppose she has given all this away?"

"To revenge herself upon you for leaving her."

"But I didn't leave her. She left me—cleared with a young ass of a prospector, during one of my necessary absences, of which I notice, she's careful not to say one word. Clearly she never bargained for my seeing this at all."

"By Jove! You don't say so?"

"It's hard fact. Well, her motive is to revenge herself upon me, but not for that. It is because she had entangled that young fool Percy West—had made him engage himself to her. He told me this the night we were at Earle's, and I put my foot down on it at once. I gave her the chance of drawing out of it, of releasing him, and she refused it.—I put the alternative before her, and she simply defied me. 'If you give me away, I'll give you away,' those were her words. I couldn't allow the youngster to enter into any such contract as that, could I?"

"Of course not. Go on."

"So I told him the whole thing on our way out the other morning. It choked him clean off her—of course. I was as good as my word, and she was as good as hers. That's the whole yarn in a nutshell."

Bayfield nodded. He seemed to be thinking deeply, as he filled his pipe meditatively, and passed the pouch over to Blachland. There was one thing for which the latter felt profoundly thankful. Remembering the more than insinuation Hermia had thrown out, he had noticed with unspeakable relief that there was no reference whatever to Lyn throughout the communication. Even she had shrunk from such an outrage as that, and for this he felt almost grateful to her.

"This Mrs Fenham, or St. Clair, or whatever her name is," said Bayfield, glancing at the subscription of the letter, "seems to be a bad egg all round. Seems to be omnivorous, by Jove!"

"She has an abnormal capacity for making fools of the blunder-headed sex, as I can testify," was the answer, given dryly. "Well Bayfield, I don't want to whitewash myself, let alone trot out the old Adamite excuse—I don't set up to be better than other people, and have been a good deal worse than some. You know, as a man of the world, that there is a certain kind of trap laid throughout our earlier life to catch us at every turn. Well, I've fallen into a good many such traps, but I can, with perfect honesty, say I've never set one. Do you follow?"

"Perfectly," replied Bayfield, who thought that such was more than likely the case. He was mentally passing in review Blachland's demeanour towards Lyn, during the weeks they had been fellow inmates, and he pronounced it to be absolutely flawless. The pleasant, unrestrained, easy friendship between the two had been exactly all it should be—on the part of the one, all that was sympathetic, courteous and considerate, with almost a dash of the paternal, for the girl was nearly young enough to be his daughter—on that of the other, a liking, utterly open and undisguised, for Lyn liked him exceedingly, and made no secret of it—and if hers was not a true instinct, whose was? Bayfield was not a man to adjudge another a blackguard because he had sown some wild oats, and this one he acquitted entirely—and he said something to that effect.

"Thanks," was the reply. "I don't care a rap for other people's opinions about myself, good, bad, or indifferent, as a rule, but I'm rather glad you don't judge me too hardly, on account of this infernal contretemps?"

"Oh, I don't judge you at all, old chap, so don't run away with that idea. We ain't any of us silver-gilt saints if the truth were known, or if we are, it's generally for want of opportunity to become the other thing, at any rate, that's my belief. And Lyn likes you so much, Blachland, and her instinct's never at fault."

“God bless her!” was the fervent reply. “I don’t wonder, Bayfield, that you almost worship that child. I know if she were my child I should rather more than entirely.”

“Would you?” said the other, his whole face softening. “Well, that’s about what I do. Come along up to the house, Blachland, and let’s forget all about this rotten affair. I’ll take jolly good care I keep it away from her by hook or by crook, anyhow. It’s a beastly bore you’ve got to clear to-morrow, but you know your own business best, and it never does to let business slide. You’ll roll up again next time you’re down this way of course. I say though, you mustn’t go getting any more fever.”

As a matter of fact, Blachland’s presence was no more needed up-country, either in his own interests or anybody else’s, than was that of the Shah of Persia. But, it would simplify matters to leave then, besides affording Bayfield a freer hand: and for another thing, it would enable him to make sure of getting his young kinsman out of the toils.

Something of a gloom lay upon that household of three that evening, by reason of the impending departure of this one who had been so long an inmate in their midst, and had identified himself so completely with their daily life.

“Mr Blachland, but I wish I was big enough to go with you,” announced small Fred. “Man, but I’d like to see those Matabele chaps, and have a shot at a lion.”

“Some day, when you are big enough, perhaps you shall, Fred. And, look here, when your father thinks you are big enough to begin to shoot—and that’ll be pretty soon now—I’m to give you your first gun. That’s a bargain, eh, Bayfield?”

“Magtig! but you’re spoiling the nipper, Blachland,” was the reply. “You’re a lucky chap, Fred, I can tell you.”

Somehow, Lyn was not in prime voice for the old songs in the course of the evening, in fact she shut down the concert with suspicious abruptness. When it became time to say good night, she thrust into Blachland’s hand a small, flat, oblong packet:

“A few of my poor little drawings,” she said, rather shyly. “You said you would like to have one or two, and these will remind you perhaps a little of old Lannercost, when you are far away.”

“Why, Lyn, how awfully good of you. I can’t tell you how I shall value them. They will seem to bring back all the good times we have had together here. And, now, good night. I suppose it’s good-bye too.”

“Oh no, it isn’t. I shall be up to see you off.”

“But think what an ungodly hour I’m going to start at.”

“That doesn’t matter. Of course I’m going to see you off.”

“Why, rather,” struck in small Fred.

Morning dawned, frosty and clear, and the intending traveller appreciated the thick warmth of his heavy ulster to the full, as he prepared to mount to the seat of Bayfield’s buggy, beside the native boy who was to bring back the vehicle after depositing him at the district town, nearly fifty miles away. There was no apparent gloom about the trio now. They were there to give him a cheery send off.

“Well, good-bye, old chap,” cried Bayfield, as they gripped hands. “I think there’s everything in the buggy you’ll want on the way.”

“Good-bye, Bayfield, old pal,” was the hearty reply. “Good-bye, Lyn,” holding the girl’s hands in both of his, and gazing down affectionately into the sweet, pure face. “God bless you, child, and don’t forget your true and sincere old friend in too great a hurry. Fred—good-bye, old chappie.” And he climbed into his seat and was gone.

The trio stood looking after the receding vehicle until it disappeared over the roll of the hill—waving an occasional hat or a handkerchief as its occupant looked back. Then Fred broke forth:

“Man—Lyn, but Mr Blachland’s a fine chap! Tis waar, I’m sorry he’s gone—ain’t you?”

He had pretty well voiced the general sense. They felt somehow, that a vacant place had been set up in their midst.

Later that morning Bayfield chanced to return to the house from his work outside. It seemed empty. Small Fred was away at the bottom of the garden with a catapult, keeping down the swarming numbers of predatory mouse-birds and the wilier spreuw. But where was Lyn? Just then a sound striking upon the silence brought him to a standstill, amazement and consternation personified, so utterly strange and unwonted was such a sound in that household, and it proceeded from the girl’s room. Gently, noiselessly, he opened the door.

She was seated by her bed, her back towards him. Her face was buried in her hands, and her whole form was heaving with low convulsive sobs.

“Lyn! Great Heaven! What’s the matter? Lyn—My little Lyn!”

She rose at her father’s voice and came straight into his arms. Then she looked up at him, through her tears, forcing a smile.

“My little one, what is it? There, there, tell your old father,” he pleaded, a whirlwind of tenderness and concern shaking his voice as he held her to him. “Tell me, sweetheart.”

“It’s nothing, dearest,” she answered but quaveringly, and still forcing herself to smile. “Only— No, it’s nothing. But—when people are here a long time, and you get to like them a lot and they go away—why it’s—oh, it’s beastly. That’s all, old father—” dashing away her tears, and forcing herself to smile in real earnest. “And I’m a little fool, that’s all. But I won’t be any more. See, I’m all right now.”

“My little Lyn! My own little one!” he repeated, kissing her tenderly, now rather more moved than she was.

And Lyn was as good as her word. All his solicitous but furtive watching, failed to detect any sign or symptom that her outburst of grief was anything more than a perfectly natural and childlike manifestation of her warm little heart.

And yet, there were times, when, recurring to it in his own mind, honest George Bayfield would grow grave and shake his head and ejaculate softly to himself:

“My little Lyn! No—it can’t be. Oh, Great Scot!”

BOOK-III
Chapter One.

"Woz'ubone, kiti kwazulu."

Lo Bengula sat within the esibayaneni—the sacred enclosure wherein none dare intrude—at his great kraal, Bulawayo.

The occupation on which the King was then engaged, was the homely and prosaic one of eating his breakfast. This consisted of a huge dish of bubende, being certain ingredients of the internal mechanism of the bullock, all boiled up with the blood, to the civilised palate an appalling article of diet, but highly favoured by the Matabele. Yet, while devouring this delicacy with vast appetite, the royal countenance was overcast and gloomy in the extreme.

Lo Bengula sat alone. From without a continuous roar of many voices reached him. It was never hushed, the night through it had hardly been hushed, and this was early morning. Song after song, some improvised, others the old war-songs of the nation, interluded with long paeans of his own praises, rising from the untiring throats of thousands of his warriors—yet the King, in his heart of hearts, was tired of the lot.

He looked around upon his sheep and goats—for the sacred enclosure included the kraal which contained his private and particular flock—and he loved them, for he was by nature a born farmer, called by accident, and even then, reluctantly, to rule this nation of fierce and turbulent fighters. He looked upon the flocks surrounding him and wondered how much longer they would be his—how much longer anything would be his—for war was not merely in the air but was actually at his gates; war with the whites, with whom he had ever striven to live on friendly and peaceful terms. But, as had long been foreseen, his people had forced his hand at last.

Unwillingly he had bowed to the inevitable, he the despot, he, before whose frown those ferocious and bloodthirsty human beasts trembled, he the dark-skinned savage, whose word was law, whose ire conveyed terror over a region as wide-spreading and vast as that under the sway of any one of the greater Powers in Europe. But as long as the nation was a nation and he was alive, he intended to remain its King, however reluctant he had been to assume the supreme reins of government, and consistently with this it had been out of his power to check the aggressive ebullitions of his fiery adherents. And now war was within the land, and hourly, runners were bringing in tidings of the advance—straight, fell, unswerving of purpose—of a strong and compact expedition of whites—their goal his capital.

Yes, day by day these were drawing nearer. The intelligence brought by innumerable spies and runners was unvarying. The approaching force in numbers was such that a couple of his best regiments should be able to eat it up at a mouthful. But it was splendidly armed, and its organisation and discipline were perfect. Its leaders seemed to take no risks, and at the smallest alarm all those waggons could be turned into a complete and defensive fort almost as quickly as a man might clap his hands twice. And then, from each corner, from every face of this unscaleable wall, peeped forth a small, insignificant thing, a little shining tube that could be placed on the back of a horse—yet this contemptible-looking toy could rain down bullets into the ranks of his warriors at a rate which would leave none to return to him with the tale. Nay more, even the cover of rocks and bushes would not help them, for other deadly machines had these whites, which could throw great bags of bullets into the air to fall and scatter wherever they chose, and that at well-nigh any distance. All of this Lo Bengula knew and appreciated, but his people did not, and now from without, ever and increasing upon his ears, fell the din and thunder of their boasting songs of war.

"Au! They are poor, lean dogs!" he growled to himself. "They will be even as dogs who snarl and run away, when they get up to these whites. They bark loudly now and show their teeth. Will they be able to bite?"

Personally, too, he liked the English. He had been on very friendly terms with several of them. They were always bringing him presents, things that it was good to have, and of which now he owned considerable store. He liked conversing with them too, for these were men who had travelled far and had seen things—and could tell him wonders about other lands, inhabited by other whites, away beyond the great sea. They were not fools, these English. And their bravery! Who among dark races would go and place themselves in the power of a mighty and warrior race as these did? What three or four men of such would dare to stand before him here—at this very place, calm, smiling, unmoved, while thousands of his warriors were standing around, howling and clamouring for their blood? Not one. Then, too, their knowledge was wonderful. Had not several of them, from time to time, done that which had eased him of his gout, and of the shooting pains which afflicted his eyes, and threatened to deprive him of his sight? No, of a truth he desired not to quarrel with such. Well, it might be, that when these dogs of his had been whipped back—when they had thought to hunt bucks and found that they had assailed instead, a herd of fierce and fearless buffalo bulls—that then he might order them to lie down, and that peace between himself and the whites might again prevail.

Having arrived at this conclusion, and also at that of his repast, the King gave utterance to a call, and immediately there appeared two izinceku, or personal attendants of the royal household. These ran forward in a crouching attitude, with bodies bent low, and while one removed the utensils and traces of the feast, the other produced a great bowl

of baked clay, nearly filled with fresh water. Into this the King plunged his hands, throwing the cold water over his face and head with great apparent enjoyment, then, having dried himself with a towel of genuine civilisation, he rose, strode over to his waggon—the two attendants lying prostrate in the dust before him as he moved—and lifting the canvas flap, disappeared from mortal ken: for this waggon was the place of his most sacred seclusion, and woe indeed to the luckless wight who should presume to disturb him in that retreat.

Without, the aspect of the mighty circle was stirring and tumultuous to the last degree. The huge radius of grass roofs lay yellow and shining in the fierce sunlight, alive too, with dark forms ever on the move, these however, being those of innumerable women, and glistening, rotund brats, chattering in wide-eyed excitement; for the more important spot, the great open space in front of the King's enclosure, was given over to the warriors.

With these it was nearly filled. Regiment upon regiment was mustered there: each drafted according to the standing of those who composed its ranks, from the Ingubu, which enjoyed the high privilege of attending as bodyguard upon the King, hence its name—the Blanket, i.e. the King's—ever around the royal person—the fighting Imbizo, and the Induba—down to the slave regiments such as the Umcityu, composed of slaves and the descendants of conquered and therefore inferior races. All these were in full war array. The higher of them wore the intye, a combination of cape and headpiece made of the jetty plumage of the male ostrich, others were crowned with the isiqoba, a ball of feathers nodding over the forehead, and supporting the tall, pointed wing feather of the vulture, or the blue crane. Mútyas of monkey-skin and cat-tails, in some few instances leopard's skin, fantastic bunches of white cowhair at elbow and knee and ankle, with bead necklaces, varying in shape and colour, completed the adornment. But all were fully armed. The national weapon, the traditional implement of Zulu intrepidity and conquest, the broad-bladed, short-handled, close-quarter assegai—of such each warrior carried two or three: a murderous-looking battle-axe with its sickle-like blade: a heavy-headed, short-handled knob-kerrie, and the great war-shield, black, with its facings of white, a proportion white entirely—others red—others again, streaked, variegated, and surmounted by its tuft of fur or jackal's tail, or cowhair—this array, chanting in fierce strophes, stamping in unison, and clashing time with weapon-haft upon hard hide shield, amid the streaming dust, made up a picture—as terrific as it was formidable—of the ferocious and pent-up savagery of a hitherto unconquered, and in its own estimation, unconquerable race.

A musky, foetid effluvium hung in the air, the mingled result of all this gathering of perspiring, moving humanity, and vast heaps of decaying bones, already decomposing in the fierce sunlight there on the killing place just outside the huge kraal at its eastern

end, where a great number of the King's cattle had been slaughtered on the previous day in order to feast the regiments mustered for war—while myriads of buzzing flies combined to render the surcharged atmosphere doubly pestilential. Seated together, in a group apart, the principal indunas of the nation were gathered in earnest conference, while, further on, the whole company of izanusi, or war-doctors, arrayed in the hideous and disgusting trappings of their order, were giving a final eye to the removal of huge mutt bowls, containing some concoction equally hideous and disgusting, from the secluded and mysterious precincts wherein such had been brewed: for the whole army was about to be doctored for war.

Now a fresh stir arose among the excited armed multitude gathered there, and all eyes were turned to the eastward. Away over the rolling plain, from the direction of the flat-topped Intaba-'Zinduna, a moving mass was approaching, and as it drew nearer the gleam of spears and the sheen of hide shields flickered above the dark cloud. It was the Insukamini regiment, for whose presence those here had been waiting in order to render the master complete. As it swung up the slope, an old war-song of Umalikazi came volleying through the air to those here gathered:

"Yaingahlabi
Leyo'mkonzi!
Yai ukúfa!"
(Note: "That Bull did not gore (merely). It was death!")

With full-throated roar the vast gathering took it up, re-echoing the fell chorus until it became indescribable in its strength of volume, and soon, the newly arrived regiment, over a thousand strong, filed in, and fell into line, amid the thunder of its vociferous welcome.

Then the company of ixanuri came forward, and for some time these were busy as they went along the lines, administering to each warrior a morsel of the horrible hotch-potch they had been concocting, and which was designed to render him, if not quite impervious to the enemy's missiles, at any rate to lessen his chances of being struck, and to make him a very lion of strength and courage in the day of battle.

This over, yet one ceremony remained, to sing the war-song in the presence of the King, and depart. A silence had fallen upon all after the doctoring was concluded. Soon, however, it was broken by the "praisers" shouting the King's titles.

As Lo Bengula appeared in front of his warriors, the whole immense crescent fell forward like mown corn, and from every throat went up in one single, deep-voiced, booming roar, the royal greeting:

Kumalo!

The King did not seat himself. With head erect and kindling eyes, he paced up and down slowly, surveying the whole martial might of his nation. He, too, was arrayed in full war costume, crowned with the towering intye, and wearing a mútya of splendid leopard skin. He was attended by his shield-bearer, holding aloft the great white shield of state, but in his hand he carried another and a smaller shield, also white, and a long-hafted, slender, casting assegai.

Long and loud were the shouts of sibonga which rent the air as the warriors fell back into a squatting posture, their shields lying flat in front of them. They hailed him by every imaginable title of power and of might—as their father, as their divinity, as the source of all that was good and beneficial which they possessed. They called the lightnings of the clouds, the thunders of the air—everything—into requisition to testify as to his immensity—till at last, as though in obedience to some sudden and mysterious signal, they subsided into silence. Then Lo Bengula spoke:

"Children of Matyobane, the enemy is already in your land. These Amakiwa, who came to me few and poor, and begging, are now many and rich, and proud. They begged for a little land wherein to dig gold, and I gave it them, but, lo, they want more. Like devouring locusts, these few whites who came begging, and sat down here so humbly before me, were but the advance-guard of a swarm. I gave them meat, and now they require a whole ox. I gave them an ox, and now they require the whole herd. I gave them the little land they craved for, and now, nothing will satisfy them but to devour the whole land. Soon they will be here.

"There are dogs who bark and turn away, and there are dogs who bite. There are dogs who are brave when it is a matter of pulling down an antelope, but who put down their tails and slink away when it is a lion who fronts them. Of which are ye?

"Lo, the spirit of the Great Great One who founded this nation is still alive. His serpent still watches over those whom he made great in the art of war. Shall you shame his name, his memory? Of a truth, no.

"Yonder comes the white army—nearer, nearer day by day. Soon it will be here. But first it will have to pass over the bodies of the lions of Matyobane. Shall it do so? Of a truth, no!"

The King ceased. And upon the silence arose mighty shouts. To the death they would oppose this invasion. The King, their father, might sit safe, since his children, his

fighting dogs were at large. They would eat up these whites—ha—ha! a mere mouthful, and the race of Matyobane should be greater than ever among the great nations of the world.

Then again a silence fell suddenly, and immediately from a score of points along the lines, voices began to lead off the war-song:

"Woz'ubone!
Woz'ubone, kiti kwazulu!
Woz'ubone! Nantz'indaba.
Indaba yemkonto.
Jjí-jjí! Jjí-jjí!

"Nantz'indaba? Indaba yezizwe?
Akwasimuntu.
Jjí-jjí! Jjí-jjí!

"Woz'ubone! Nantz'indaba.
Indaba ka Matyobane."
(See Note 1.)

Louder and louder, in its full-throated cadence, the national war-song rolled forth, thundrous in its wild weird strophes, to the accompaniment of stamping feet and clashing of shields—the effect of the deep humming hiss of the death chorus alone appalling in its fiendlike intensity. The vast crescent of bedizened warriors swayed and waved in its uncontrollable excitement, and the dust clouds streamed overhead as an earnest of the smoke of burning and pillage, which was wont to mark the fiery path of this terrible race in its conquering progress. Louder, louder, the song roared forth, and then, when excitement had reached its highest pitch, silence fell with a suddenness as startling as the mighty outburst which had preceded it.

For the King had advanced from where he had been standing. Facing eastward he now stood. Poising the long, slender, casting assegai in his hand with a nervous quiver, he hurled it far out over the stockade.

"Go now, children of Matyobane!" he cried in tones of thunder.

It was the signal. Rank upon rank the armed legions filed forth from the gates of the great kraal. In perfect silence now they marched, their faces set eastward—a fell, vast, unsparing host upon destruction bent. Woe to the invading force if it should fail to repel the might of these!

Note 1.

“Come behold come behold at the High Place!
That is the tale - the tale of the spears.
That is the tale? The tale of the nations?
Nobody knows.
Come behold. That is the tale.
The tale of Matyobane.”

“Jjí-jjí!” is the cry uttered on closing in battle.

Chapter Two.

"The Tale of the Spear."

"Whau!" ejaculated Ziboza, one of the fighting indunas of the Ingubu Regiment. "These two first."

The two men constituting the picket are seated under a bush in blissful unconsciousness; their horses, saddled and bridled, grazing close at hand. Away over the veldt, nearly half a mile distant, the column is laagered.

In obedience to their leader's mandate a line of dark savages darts forth, like a tongue, from the main body. Worming noiselessly through the bush and grass, yet moving with incredible rapidity, these are advancing swiftly and surely upon the two white men, their objective the point where they can get between the latter and their horses.

These men are there to watch over the safety of the column laagered up yonder, but who shall watch over their own safety? Nearer—nearer! and now the muscles start from each bronze frame, and the fell, murderous assegai is grasped in sinewy grip. Straining eyeballs stare forth in bloodthirsty exultation. The prey is secure.

No. Not quite. The horses, whose keener faculties can discern the approach of a crowd of musky-smelling barbarians, while the denser perceptions of the two obtuse humans cannot, now cease grazing and throw up their heads and snort. Even the men can hardly close their eyes to such a danger signal as this. Starting to their feet they gaze eagerly forth, and—make for the horses as fast as they can.

Too late, however, in the case of one of them. The enemy is upon them, and one of the horses, scared by the terrible Matabele battle-hiss, and the waving of shields and the leaping of dark, fantastically arrayed forms, refuses to be caught. The owner starts to run, but what chance has he against these? He is soon overtaken, and blades rise and fall, and the ferocity of the exultant death-hiss of the barbarians mingles with the dropping rifle. Are they are keeping up on his fleeing companion, and the sputter and roll of volleys from the laager. For this is what has been happening there.

Steadily, ever with the most perfect discipline and organisation, the column had advanced, and now after upwards of a month of care and vigilance, and difficulties met and surmounted, was drawing very near its goal.

The enemy had hovered, upon its flanks since the last pitched battle, now nearly a week ago, as though making up his mind to do something towards redeeming his defeat upon

that occasion; but unremitting vigilance together with a few timely and long range shells had seemed to damp his aspirations that way.

“I wonder if they’ll try conclusions with us once more, before we get there,” observed the commanding officer, scanning the country, front and flank, with his field glasses. “What do you think, Blachland?”

“I think they will, Major,” was the confident reply.

“No such luck,” growled one of the group. “After the hammering we gave them at Shangani. I tell you what it is, Blachland. These wonderful Matabele of yours are miserable devils after all. I don’t believe they’ve another kick in them,” added this cocksure Briton.

Hard, weather-beaten men these—tough as nails from the life they have been leading since the beginning of the campaign. They have been tested again and again, and have passed the ordeal well: not only under fire, but the more nerve-straining duties of scouting and reconnoitring and nocturnal guard. Hilary Blachland is attached to the scouting section, and is somewhat of an important personality in the command, by reason of his complete knowledge of the country to be traversed, and his acquaintance with its inhabitants, now the enemy.

“No more bad country you say?” went on the commanding officer, making some notes in a pocket-book.

“No. It’s all pretty much as we see it, open, undulating and moderately bushed. Yonder is the Intaba-’Zinduna, and we hold to the left of its further end by about a couple of miles. We are certain to be attacked between this and Bulawayo, and that’s barely twenty miles, why any minute may settle it.”

“Why what’s this?” muttered the commanding officer hurriedly, bringing his glass to his eyes.

“Ah, I thought so,” said Blachland with a smile. “We shall get it here, Major.”

Dark masses of the enemy were now appearing, away in front—still about a mile off. No sooner had the shells begun to drop among these than the alarm was raised much nearer home, and, as with the celerity of perfect discipline every man was at his place within the laager, the battle line of the savages could be seen sweeping forward through the thorns on the northern side. Then the rattle of volleys, and the knock-like thud of the machine guns playing upon them, mingles for a time with the deep, humming war-hiss

of the Matabele and the defiant whoops of individual excited warriors, leaping in bravado as though challenging the marksmanship of the defenders.

The line of battle soon wavers, halts, then drops down, only to glide on again. More and more press on from behind, and soon the line is seen to be extending, as though for a surround. There are firearms too, within the savage host, and the bullets begin to whizz and "ping" around the ears of the defenders.

"They have got another kick in them after all, eh, Grantham?" remarks Blachland to the officer who had uttered the above disparaging remark. For a piece of sharp splinter, chipped from the side of a waggon, had struck the latter, causing his ear to bleed profusely, while the speaker himself gives an involuntary duck, as another Martini bullet hums right over his head, and near enough for him to feel its draught.

"Oh damn them, yes!" answers the man apostrophised, grinding his teeth with the sharp pain, and discharging his rifle—aiming low—into the enemy's line.

For a while matters are lively. Massing at this and that point the swarming Matabele will essay a charge, but the deadly machine guns are turned on with telling precision, breaking up every attempt at organised movement, and the veldt is strewn with dark bodies, dead, motionless, or writhing in death—and shields flung around in all directions, for which their owners will never more have use. But within the laager the organisation is complete. Every man has his own duty to do and does it, and has no time or attention to spare for what is going on elsewhere.

"Come along, Blachland!" shouted another member of the scouting section, in a state of the wildest excitement. "Jump on your gee, man! We've got to go and turn back those horses, or we'll lose every hoof of them."

He addressed, looked round and took in the situation at a glance, and a thrilling one it was. A large troop of horses, which had been grazing outside, by some blundering on the part of the herders, had been headed off while being driven into the laager, and now were making straight in the direction of the enemy's lines.

There was little organisation among the handful of mounted men who dashed forth to turn them back, but there was plenty of coolness, commonsense, and unflinching courage. Away streamed the panic-stricken horses, but soon at a hard hand gallop, and keeping well off them, the pursuers were forging up even with the leaders of the stampede.

“Hold to the right! More to the right!” cried Blachland, edging further in the direction indicated, even though it took him perilously near the swarming lines of the Matabele, whom he could now make out, pouring down in a black torrent to cut off himself and his comrades as well as the runaway steeds. But an intense wild exhilaration was upon him now, during this mad gallop: buoyant, devil-may-care, utterly scorning the slightest suspicion of fear. On, on! The sharp “crack—crack” of the rifles of the advancing savages, the “whigge” and hum of missiles overhead—in front—around—all was as nothing. Then he realised that they had headed the wild stampede, had turned it away from the enemy’s line. And then—

“Help, help! For God’s sake, don’t leave me!”

A rumble and a heavy fall immediately behind him. Even before he turned his head, he realised what had happened. As he did so he saw it all, the sprawling horse, the rider dragging himself up from the ground. He saw, too, that the fallen man and himself were the last on the outside of the chase, and that the others were receding fast, as, closing further and further in, they were turning the runaway horses back to the camp. He saw, too, that the Matabele had noted their brief success, and were rushing forward with redoubled energy and shouts of exultation to secure at any rate this one victim.

“For God’s sake, don’t leave me!” again yelled the unfortunate man, the terror of certain death in his voice, and stamped upon his countenance. And that countenance, in the quick resourceful glance, taking in every chance, every possibility, Hilary recognised as that of Justin Spence.

To return was almost certain death. The momentum of the speed of his own horse had carried him some distance onward, even while the agonised cry of the despairing man was sounding in his ears. Why should he help him, why throw his own life away for the sake of this cur who had so grossly abused his friendship, requiting it in such mean and despicable fashion? Anybody else—but this one—no, he would not.

Yet what was it that rose before his mental light in that crucial moment. Not the face of her for whom yonder man now about to meet a bloody death had betrayed him—but another and a purer vision swept his brain, and it was as the face of an angel from Heaven, for it was that of Lyn. Hilary Blachland triumphed.

Turning his steed with a mighty wrench, he rode straight back to the unhorsed trooper. From the ranks of the charging savages, now near enough to recognise him, there arose a mighty roar.

“Isipau! Ha! Isipau!”

“Quick, Spence! Get up behind me. Quick!”

The other needed no second bidding. As the horse with its double burden—either of these, singly, would have been a sufficient one for the poor brute, blown as he was—started once more, the foremost line of the savages was barely two hundred yards distant. Leaping, bounding, uttering their blood-curdling war-hiss, they reckoned their prey secure. The horse, weighted like that could never distance them. They would overtake it long before camp should be reached. Already they gripped their assegais.

“Sit tight, Spence, or you’ll pull us both to the ground,” said Hilary, with a sardonic suspicion that if the other saw a chance of throwing him off without risking a similar fate himself, he was quite mean enough to seize it. “Sit light too, if you can, and spare the horse as much as possible.”

Down into a hollow, and here, in the bed of a dry watercourse, the game steed stumbled heavily, but just saved his footing, and thereby the lives of his two riders. Bullets flew humming past now, but it seemed that the din of their pursuers was further behind, and indeed such was the case, for they arrived at the laager at the same time as the rescued troop horses.

“Good God! Blachland! You are a splendid fellow, and I owe you my life,” gasped the rescued man. “But what must you think of me?” he added shamefacedly.

“No more no less than I did before,” was the curt reply. “Get off now. You’re quite safe.”

“You ought to get the V.C. for this,” went on Spence.

But the other replied by coupling that ardently coveted decoration with a word of a condemnatory character. “I believe I’ve nearly killed my horse,” he added crustily.

There were those in the laager who witnessed this, and to whom the circumstances of the former acquaintanceship between the two men were known—but they tactfully refrained from making any comment. Percival West, however, was not so reticent.

“Why, Hilary, you splendid old chap, what have you done?” he cried, fairly dancing with delight. “Why didn’t you take me with you though—”

“Oh go away, Percy. You are such a silly young ass,” was the very ill-humoured reception wherewith his transports were greeted by his kinsman.

The fight was over now and the enemy in retreat. Yet not routed, for he still hung about at a safe distance, in sufficient force to make things warm for any pursuing troop who should venture after him into the thicker bush, until a few deftly planted shells taught him that he had not yet achieved a safe distance. Then he drew off altogether.

Chapter Three.

A Flaming Throne.

"Too late, boys, I guess the Southern Column got there first." And the utterer of this remark lowered his field glasses and turned to the remainder of the little band of scouts with an air of profound conviction.

Away in the distance dense columns of smoke were rising heavenward. For some time this group of men had been eagerly intent upon watching the phenomenon through their glasses, and there was reason for their eagerness, for they were looking upon the goal of the expedition, and what should practically represent the close of the campaign—Bulawayo to wit, but—Bulawayo in flames. Who had fired it?

Considerable disappointment was felt and expressed. Their prompt march, their hard and victorious fighting had not brought them first to the goal. The Southern Column had distanced them and was there already. Such was the conclusion arrived at on all sides.

One man, however, had let go no opinion. Lying full length, his field glass adjusted upon a convenient rock, he had been steadily scanning the burning kraal in the distance during all the foregoing discussion, ignoring the latter as though he were alone on the ground. Now he spoke.

"There's no Southern Column thereat all. No sign or trace of a camp."

This dictum was received with dissent, even with a little derision.

"Who's set it on fire then, Blachland?" said one of the exponents of the latter phase, with a wink at the others. "You're not going to tell us that Lo Bengula's set his own shop alight?"

"That's about what's occurred," was the tranquil reply. "At least I think so."

"It's more'n likely Blachland's right, boys," said one of the scouts, speaking with a pronounced American accent. "He's been there anyway."

With renewed eagerness every glass was once more brought to bear. There appeared to be four great columns of smoke, and these, as they watched, were merging into one, of vast volume, and now bright jets of flame were discernible, as the fire licked its way along the thatch of the grass huts. Then something strange befel. They who watched saw a fresh outburst of smoke rise suddenly like an enormous dome from the centre of that

already ascending, seeming to bear aloft on its summit the fragments of roofs, fences, débris of every description, and then they were conscious of a mighty roar and a vibrating shock, as the whole mass subsided, releasing the flames, which shot up anew.

"That's an explosion!" cried some one excitedly. "Old Lo Ben's not only burnt his nest, but blown it up into the bargain."

For some time further they lay there watching the distant work of destruction. Then it was decided that their number should be divided, and while some returned to the column to report the result of their observations, the remainder should push on, and get as near Bulawayo as they possibly could—an undertaking of no slight risk, and calling for the exercise of unflagging caution, for there was no telling what bands of the enemy might be hovering about in quite sufficient strength to prove dangerous to a mere handful, though the opinion was that the bulk of the nation's forces, with the King, had fled northward.

"Well, Percy? Tired of this kind of fun yet?" said Blachland as he and his young kinsman rode side by side, the two or three more also bent on this service advancing a little further on their right flank.

"Rather not. I wish it wasn't going to be over quite so quickly."

The other laughed. "I'm not so sure that it is," he said.

"Eh? But we've got Bulawayo."

"But we haven't got Lo Ben yet. My impression is that the tougher part of this campaign is going to begin now. I may be wrong of course, but that's my impression."

"Oh, then that settles it," answered Percival, not ironically, but in whole-hearted good faith, for his belief in, and admiration for his relative had reached the wildest pitch of enthusiasm. There was no greater authority in the world, in his estimation, on everything to do with the country they were in. He would have accepted Hilary's opinion and acted upon it, even though it went clean contrary to those in command all put together, upon any subject to do with the work in hand, and that with the blindest confidence. And then, had he not himself witnessed Hilary's gallant and daring deed, during the battle fought a couple of days ago?

His presence there with the scouts instead of as an ordinary trooper in the column, he owed to his relative, the latter having specially asked that he should be allowed to accompany him in such capacity. Blachland at that juncture, with his up-to-date

knowledge of the country and the natives, was far too useful a man not to stretch a point for, and Percival West, although new to that part, was accustomed to sport and outdoor life at home, and brimful of pluck and energy, and now, in the short time he had been out, had thoroughly adapted himself to the life, and the vicissitudes of the campaign.

To the cause of their being up here together Hilary never alluded, but he noted with quiet satisfaction that the cure in the case of his young cousin seemed complete. Once the latter volunteered a statement to that effect.

"Ah, yes," he had replied. "Nothing like a life of this sort for knocking any nonsense of that kind out of a fellow—" mentally adding, somewhat grimly, "When he's young."

For Hilary Blachland himself did not find the busy and dangerous, and at times exciting, work of the campaign by any means such an unfailing panacea as he preached it to his younger relative. With it all there was plenty of time for thought, for retrospect. What an empty and useless thing he had made of life, and now the best part of it was all behind him—now that it had been brought home to him that there was a best part, now that it was too late. He was familiar with the axiom that those who sell themselves to the devil seldom obtain their price, and had often scoffed at it: for one thing because he did not believe in the devil at all. Yet now, looking back, he had come to recognise that, in substance at least, the axiom was a true one.

Yes, the better part of his life was now behind him, with its ideals, its possibilities, its finer impulses. Carrying his bitter introspect within the physical domain, had he not become rough and weather-beaten and lined and seamed and puckered? It did not strike him as odd that he should be indulging in such analysis at all—yet had he let anybody else, say any of his present comrades, into the fact that he was doing so, they would have deemed him mad, for if there was a man with that expedition who was envied by most of his said comrades as the embodiment of cool, sound daring, combined with astute judgment, of rare physical vigour and striking exterior, assuredly that man was Hilary Blachland. Yet as it was, he regarded himself with entire dissatisfaction and disgust, and the medium through which he so regarded himself was named Lyn Bayfield.

Her memory was ever before him; more, her presence. Asleep or awake, in the thick of the hardest toil and privation of the campaign, even in the midst of the discharge of his most important and responsible duties yet never to their detriment, the sweet, pure, lovely fairness of her face was there. He had come to worship it with a kind of superstitious adoration as though in truth the presence of it constituted a kind of guardian angel.

Was he, after all, in love with Lyn? He supposed that not a man or woman alive, knowing the symptoms, but would pronounce such to be the case, even as one woman had done. But he knew better, knew himself better. The association of anything so gross, so earthly, here, he recoiled from as from an outrage. It was the unalloyed adoration of a strange, a holy and a purifying influence.

In love with her? He, Hilary Blachland, at his time of life, and with his experience of life, in love! Why, the idea was preposterous, grotesque. He recalled the time he had spent beneath the same roof with her, and the daily association. It would be treasured, revered to the utmost limit of his life, as a sacred and an elevating period, but—as an influence, not a passion.

He had exchanged correspondence with Bayfield more than once since leaving, and had received two or three letters from Lyn—expressing—well, simply Lyn. He had answered them, and treasured them secretly as the most priceless of his possessions. From Bayfield he had learned that the disturbing element had refrained from further molestation, and had moreover, taken her own departure from the neighbourhood almost immediately, a piece of intelligence which afforded him indeed the liveliest gratification.

As they drew near to their objective, other kraals near and around Bulawayo itself, were seen to be on fire. But no sign of their recent occupants. For all trace remaining of the latter, the whole Matabele nation might have vanished into thin air.

“That’s extraordinary,” remarked Blachland, taking a long steady look through his glasses. “That’s Sybrandt’s house down there and they haven’t burnt it,” pointing out a collection of buildings about a mile from the site of the great kraal.

“So it is. Wonder if it means a trap though,” said another of the scouts. “By Jingo! There’s some one signalling up there. I’ll bet my bottom dollar it’s a white man by the look of him. And—there are two of ’em.”

Such was in fact the case—and the biggest surprise of all came off when a couple of white traders, well known to most of them, came forward to welcome them to the conquered and now razed capital. There these two had dwelt throughout the campaign, often in peril, but protected by the word of the King. Lo Bengula had burnt his capital and fled, taking with him the bulk of the nation. He, the dreaded and haughty potentate of the North, whose rule had been synonymous with a terror and a scourge, had gone down before a mere handful of whites, he, the dusky barbarian, the cruel despot, according to popular report revelling in bloodshed and suffering, had taken his revenge. He had protected these two white men alone in his power—had left them, safe and sound in

person, unharmed even in their possessions, to welcome the invading conquerors, their countrymen, to the blazing ruins of his once proud home. Such the revenge of this savage.

The Southern Column did not arrive till some days after the first occupation of Bulawayo, and some little time elapsed, resting and waiting for necessary supplies, before the new expedition should start northward, to effect if possible, the capture of the fugitive King. Several up-country going men were here foregathered.

“I say, Blachland,” said old Pemberton, with a jerk of the thumb to the southward, “We didn’t reckon to meet again like this last time when we broke camp yonder on the Matya’mhlope, and old Lo Ben fired you out of the country? Eh?”

“Not much, did we? You going on this new trot, Sybrandt?”

“I believe so. What do you think about this part of the world, West?”

“Here, let’s have another tot all round,” interrupted Pemberton who, by the way, had had just as many as were good for him. “You ain’t going to nobble Lo Ben, Sybrandt, so don’t you think it.”

“Who says so, Pemberton?”

“I say so. Didn’t I say Blachland ’ud never get to Umzilikazi’s grave? Didn’t I? Well, he never did.”

Possibly because the old trader was too far on in his cups the quizzical glance which passed between Blachland and Sybrandt—who was in the know—at this allusion, went unnoticed. Pemberton continued, albeit rather thickly:

“Didn’t I say he’d never get there? Didn’t I? Well, I say the same now. You’ll never get there. You’ll never nobble Lo Ben. See if I ain’t right.”

Chapter Four.

The Retreat of the Patrol.

The patrol held on its retreat.

Wearily on, from day to day, nearly a hundred and a half of hungry, ragged, footsore men—their clothing well-nigh in tatters, their feet bursting out of their boots, in several instances strips of clothing wound round their feet, as a sort of tinkered substitute for what had once been boots, as sole protection against thorns and stony ground, and the blades of the long tambuti grass, which cut like knives—depression at their hearts because of the score and a half of brave staunch comrades whom they had but the faintest hope of ever beholding again—depression too, in their faces, gaunt, haggard and unkempt, yet with it a set fierce look of determination, a dogged, never-say-die expression, still they held on. And ever upon their flanks hovered the savage enemy, wiser now in his generation, wasting his strength no more in fierce rushes, to be mown helplessly down with superior weapons. Under cover of his native bush he could harry the retreating whites from day to day. And he did.

Very different the appearance of this group of weary, half-starved men, fighting its way with indomitable courage and resource, through the thick bush and over donga-seamed ground, and among rough granite hillocks, to that of the smart, light-hearted fellows, repelling each fierce rush of the Matabele impis, in the skilfully constructed waggon laagers. Every rise surmounted revealed but the same heart-breaking stretch of bush and rocks, and dongas through which the precious Maxims had to be hauled at any expenditure of labour and time—to be borne rather, for the carriages of the said guns had been abandoned as superfluous lumber—and all through the steamy heat of the day the roar of the swollen river on the one hand never far from their ears—and, overhead, that of the thunder-burst, which should condemn them to pass a drenched and shivering night. For this expedition, with the great over-weening British self-confidence which has set this restless little island in the forefront of the nations—has started to effect with so many—or rather so few—men, what might or might not have been effected with just four times the number—in a word has started to do the impossible and—has not done it.

“Well, Percy, do you still wish this fun wasn’t going to be over quite so quickly?”

“No. Yet I don’t know. I suppose it’s only right to see some of the rougher side, as well as the smooth,” answered the young fellow pluckily—though truth to tell his weariness and exhaustion were as great as that of anybody else. There was the same hollow, wistful look in his face, the same hardened and brick-dust bronze too, and his hands were not

guiltless of veldt-sores, for he had borne his full share both of the hardships and the fighting and was as thoroughly seasoned by now as any of them.

“I was something of a prophet when I told you the toughest part of the campaign was to come, eh?” said Blachland, filling up his pipe with nearly the last shreds of dust remaining in his pouch.

“Rather. I seem to forget what it feels like not to be shot at every day of my life,” was the answer. “And this beastly horseflesh! Faugh!”

“Man! That’s nothing,” said Sybrandt, his mouth full of the delicacy alluded to, while he replaced a large slice of the same upon the embers to cook a little more. “What price having to eat snake?”

“No. I’d draw the line at that,” answered Percival quickly.

“Would you? Wait until you’re stuck on a little island for three days with your boat drifted away, and a river swarming with crocodiles all round you. You’d scoff snake fast enough, and be glad to get him.”

“Tell us the yarn,” said Percival wearily.

But before the other could comply, a message from the officer in command arrived desiring his presence, and Sybrandt, snatching another great mouthful of his broiling horseflesh, got up and went.

“Another wet night, I’m afraid?” said Blachland philosophically, reaching for a red-hot stick to light his pipe, which the rain dripping from his weather-beaten hat-brim was doing its best to put out. “Here, have a smoke, Spence,” becoming alive to the wistful glance wherewith he whom he had named was regarding the puffs he was emitting.

Spence stretched forth his hand eagerly for the pouch, then thrust it back again.

“No. It’s your last pipe,” he said. “I won’t take it.”

“Take it, man. I expect there’s a good accumulation of ’bacco dust in my old coat pockets. I can fall back on that at a pinch.”

Spence complied, less out of selfishness than an unwillingness to go against the other in any single detail. A curious change had come over him since his rescue—since the man he had wronged, as he thought, had ridden into the very jaws of death to bring him out.

He regarded his rescuer now with feelings akin to veneration. He had at the time, expressed his sorrow and regret in shamefaced tones, but Blachland had met him with the equable reassurance that it didn't matter. And then he had eagerly volunteered for this expedition because Blachland was in it, and once there, he had watched his rescuer with untiring pertinacity to see if there was nothing he could do for him, even if he could risk his life for him. More than once he had striven stealthily to forego his own scanty rations when they were messing together, pretending he loathed food, so that there might be a little more for this man whom he now regarded in the light of a god; but this and other attempts had been seen through by their object, and effectually, though tactfully, frustrated. Hunger and exhaustion, however, are somewhat of an antidote to even the finest of finer feelings, and Justin Spence was destined to experience the truth of this.

The patrol was resting. Thick bush surrounded the position, with long grass and boulders. But the ground had been well scouted in advance: and in rear—well, the strength of the command was distributed in that direction. There were granite kopjes, too, which could be turned to good account.

"Whau!" grunted Ziboza, the fighting induna of the Ingubu regiment. "I think we have them now. They have no more waggons to hide behind, and the izikwakwa are broken down, for did we not find their wheels? These are they who would have captured the Great Great One. We shall see, ah—ah! Now we shall see."

Squirming like snakes through the long grass and bush, the Matabele advance, stopping every now and again to reconnoitre. They can hear the subdued hum of voices in the sorry camp of the whites—and on each face raised to peer forward, there is a ferocious grin of anticipation. In obedience to the signalled orders of their leaders they spread their ranks, so as to be in a position to surround that sorry command with the first order issued. More and more are pressing on from behind—and the bush is alive with swarming savages, creeping, crawling onward. The dreaded izikwakwa are broken now. They have only to fear the ordinary fire of that handful of whites, to surround them, rush in and make an end.

Of a truth the agency that supplied Lo Bengula with firearms was a far-seeing benefactor to its countrymen. For those warriors now in the front line of attack who have rifles, no power on earth can restrain from using them. They now open fire, hot and heavy but wild. No more surprise now, no wild rush of overwhelming numbers with the deadly assegai. The coup-de-main has failed. Like magic the whites are in position, replying with sparing, but deadly and well-directed fire—as the plunge and fall of more than one warrior flitting from bush to bush, testifies. But the forward rush has carried some right among the remaining horses of the patrol, and the assegai is plied with deadly effect, as

the savages slash right and left, burying their reeking blades within the vitals of the poor animals. It is something to kill at any rate, and besides, goes for towards crippling the movements of their human enemies. “Jjí-jjí! Jjí-jjí!” the ferocious death-hiss vibrates amid the trampling and squealing and the fall of the slaughtered animals. And then—what is this? Through and above the discharge of rifles, the sharp, staccato, barking sound so known to them, so dreaded by them—as the Maxims speak. Is there no doing anything with these invulnerable whites? They have left the wheels behind, even as brave Ziboza has just said, but—they have mounted the izikwakwa on sticks, each on three sticks, and the deadly muzzles are sweeping round as usual, pouring in their leaden hail.

“Percy—Spence! Up here, quick!” says Blachland—and in a moment they are within the sheltering boulders of a kopje. Two other men are already there.

“Au! Isipau!” cry some of the Matabele, who have seen and recognised him. And a sharp discharge follows, at least two of the missiles humming unpleasantly near.

“Watch that point!” says Blachland grimly, designating a spot where a bit of bare rock surface, the length of a man, showed out in the bush beneath. And almost with the words his piece went off. A brown, writhing body rolled forward from the cover, the flung away shield and assegais falling with a rattle.

“That scalp yours, Blachland,” observed one of the American scouts who was up there with them. “Oh, snakes!”

The last ejaculation is evoked by an uncomfortably near missile, which grazing the granite slab immediately behind the speaker, hums away at a tangent into space. It is followed by another and another: in fact a settled determination to make it hot for the holders of that particular kopje upon the part of the enemy seems to have followed upon the recognition of Blachland.

“Lie close, you fellows!” warns the latter. “Hallo! That’s Sybrandt signalling me. It’s an old hunting call of ours,” as a peculiar chirping whistle travels over from an adjacent granite pile. “Ah, I thought so.” Quick as thought he has wormed himself behind another stone and now peeps forth. Below, a couple of hundred yards distant, dark forms are crawling. The bush is thinner there, and the object of the savages is to pass this, with a view to extending the surround. Blachland and the American have both taken in this, and the thud and gurgling groans following on the simultaneous crash of their pieces tell that they have taken it in to some purpose. At the same time a cross fire from among the boulders where Sybrandt and some others are lying, throws the Matabele into a momentary but demoralising muddle of consternation.

The rain has ceased, but in the damp air the smoke hangs heavy over the dark heads of the bushes. Down in the camp, the sullen splutter of rifles, and ever and anon the angry, knock-like bark of the Maxims. There is a lull, but again and again the firing bursts forth. With undaunted persistency the savages return to the assault, howling out jeering taunts at those who a short while back they reckoned as sure and easy prey—but with dogged pertinacity the defence is kept up. One man falls dead while serving a Maxim, and several more horses are shot.

At length the firing slackens. The enemy seem to have had enough. Quickly the orders are passed round. Those in the kopjes are to remain there, covering the retreat of the rest of the patrol, until this shall have gained better ground some little way beyond.

Then the very heavens above took part in the fight, and in a trice the deafening, stunning thunder crashes rendered the sputter of the volleys as the noise of mere popguns, and the lurid blinding glare of lightning, pouring down in rivers of sheeting flame, put out the flash of man's puny weapons.

"This is rather more risky than their bullets, eh Hilary?" remarked Percival West, involuntarily shrinking down from one of these awful flashes.

"Gun barrels are a good conductor," was the grimly consolatory reply.

So, too, are assegai blades. In the midst of that stunning awful crash that seems to split open the world, five Matabele warriors are lying, mangled, fused into all shapes—and shapelessness—while nearly twice that number besides are lying stunned, as though smitten with a blow of a knob-kerrie.

"Mamo!" cries Ziboza, who is just outside the limit of this destruction, himself unsteady from the shock. "Lo, the very heavens above are fighting on the side of these whites!"

Chapter Five.

A Sublime Lie.

“Trooper Skelsey missing, sir.”

Such the terse report. The patrol had continued its retreat the night through, taking advantage of the known aversion of the Matabele—in common, by the way, with pretty nearly all other savages—to fighting in the dark. Now it was just daybreak, and the muster had been called—with the above result.

Where had he last been seen? Nobody knew exactly. He had formed one of the party left as a rear-guard. Sybrandt had, however, exchanged a few words with him since they had all rejoined the patrol. Some declared they had seen him since, but, as to time a general mistiness prevailed.

“Well, I can’t send back for him,” pronounced the commanding officer curtly. “He must take his chance. I’m not going to risk other men’s lives for the sake of one, and seriously weaken the patrol into the bargain.”

“If you don’t mind, Major,” said Blachland, who was standing by, “I’ll ride a mile or two back. I believe I can pick him up, and I’ve got the best horse of the few left us.”

“Guess you’ll need him,” interjected the American scout.

“Well, I can’t give you any men, Blachland,” said the Major. “No, not one single man. You go at your own risk.”

“I’ll take that. I’ve been into tighter corners before.”

Here several men volunteered, including Percival West. These were curtly dismissed.

“I don’t want you, Percy,” said Blachland. “In fact I wouldn’t have you at any price—excuse my saying so.” And there was a laugh, in the midst of which the young fellow gave way to the inevitable.

But there was another man who proved less amenable, and that was Justin Spence.

“Do let me go, sir,” he said, stepping forward. “Skelsey and I prospected together once.”

There was a momentary awkwardness, for all knew that since they had been in the field together the missing man had refused to exchange a word with his former chum and partner, whom he declared, had behaved like an utter cad. In short Skelsey had proved more implacable than the man presumably most injured.

“No. Return to your duty at once.”

“I’ll blow my brains out then, and you’ll lose one more man at any rate.”

“Place Corporal Spence under arrest immediately,” said the Major sternly.

“Don’t be a fool, Spence,” said Blachland kindly. “You’d be more hindrance than help to me really—and so would any one except Sybrandt, but we can’t take two scouts away at once.”

The commanding officer thought so too, and was in a correspondingly bad humour. But Blachland was far too valuable a man to gainsay in a matter of this kind, besides, he had a knack of getting his way. Now having got it, he lost no time in preparations or farewells. He simply started.

“His contract’s too big,” said the American, presently. “Guess we’ve nearly seen the last of him.”

“He’ll come through, you’ll see,” rejoined Sybrandt, confidently.

The while Blachland was riding along the backward track: not quite on it, but rather above, where possible; scanning every point with lynx-eyed vigilance. Once a glimpse of something lying across the track caused his pulses to beat quicker. Cautiously he rode down to it. Only an old sack dropped during the march. The spoor of the patrol was plain enough, but he remembered that the missing man suffered from fever, and had been slightly wounded during the earlier stages of the campaign. The possibilities were all that he had been overtaken with sudden faintness and had collapsed, unperceived by the rest—in which case a lonely and desolate end here in the wilds, even if the more merciful assegai of the savage did not cut short his lingerings. And he himself had been too near such an end, deserted and alone, not to know the horror of it.

No blame whatever was due to the commanding officer in refusing to send back—indeed he was perfectly right in so doing. The rules of war, like those of life, are stern and pitiless. For many days the patrol had fought its way through swarming enemies, and in all probability, would have to again. Weakened in strength, in supplies, and at this stage, with ammunition none too plentiful, its leaders could not afford to weaken it still

further, and delay its advance, and risk another conflict, with the ultimate chance of possible massacre, for the sake of one man. That much was certain. And he, Hilary Blachland, who at one time would have endorsed the hard necessity without a qualm, hardened, ruthless, inexorable, why should he run such grave and deadly risk for the sake of one man who was only an acquaintance after all—yet here he was doing so as a matter of course. What had changed him? He knew.

And the risk was great—deadly indeed. The savages had hung upon the rear of the patrol right up to the fall of night, and the subsequent retreat. The bush was full of them, and in unknown numbers. It was to him a marvel and a mystery that he had as yet sighted none. Other sign, too, did not escape his practised understanding. There was no game about, none whatever—and even the birds flitting from spray to spray were abnormally shy and wild. Now he could locate, some way ahead of him, the scene of yesterday's fight.

Then an idea struck him. What if the missing man, confused by the spoor, had made for the river bank, intending to follow it? Deflecting to his right he crossed the track, and rode along it on the farther edge, minutely examining the ground.

Ha! Just as he thought. Footmarks—the imprint of boots—very ragged, half soleless boots—the footprints of one man. These turned out of the spoor, and slightly at right angles took the direction of the river bank. There was no difficulty whatever in following them. In the deep, soft ground, rendered almost boggy in parts by the recent and continuous rains, their imprint was as the face of an open book. Blachland's heart rose exceedingly. He would soon find the wanderer, mount him behind him on his horse and bring him back safely.

Then another thought struck him. Skelsey was no raw Britisher. He was a Natal man, and had been up-country, prospecting, for the last two or three years. Why the deuce then should he be unable to follow a plain broad spoor, for this seemed the only way of accounting for his deflection? Well, he would very soon overtake him now, so it didn't matter.

Didn't it? What was this? And Blachland, pulling in his horse, sat there in his saddle, his face feeling cold and white under its warm bronze. For now there were other footmarks and many of them. And these were the marks of naked feet.

They seemed to have clustered together in a confused pattern, all around the first spoor. It was as plain as the title page of a book. They had struck the two foot marks here and had halted to consult. Then they had gone on again—not along the first spoor, but diagonally from it.

He himself adopted the same course, taking the other side of the single spoor. In this way if the missing man were travelling straight he would reach him first—would reach him and bear him off before the destroyers now pursuing him like hounds should run into him. But it would be a near thing.

The dull hoarse roar of the swollen river sounded close in front. Louder and louder it grew. The missing man could not be far ahead now. Rising in his stirrups he gazed anxiously around. No sign. He dared not shout. The band of Matabele who were in pursuit of Skelsey could not be far distant on his left. He was almost on the river bank, and still no sign of the fugitive. Well, the roar of the water would prevent his voice from reaching far—anyhow he would risk it.

"Skelsey! Where are you?" he called, but not loudly. "Skelsey!"

He listened intently. Was that an answer? Something between a cry and a groan—and—it was behind him.

He turned his horse, and as he did so, the thought occurred to him that he might be walking into a trap—that the savages might already have butchered his comrade, and be lying in wait to take him with the least trouble and risk to themselves. Well, he must chance it, and the chances were about even.

"Skelsey! Where are you, old chap?" he called again in a low tone.

This time an answer came, but faintly.

"Here."

Lying under a bush was the missing man. He raised his head feebly, and gazed with lack-lustre eyes at his would-be rescuer.

"Get up behind me, quick!" said the latter.

"Can't. I've sprained my ankle. Can't stand. I was going to crawl to the river and end it all."

"Well, you've got to ride instead. Come, I'll give you a hand. Quick, man! There are a lot of Matabele after you, I struck their spoors."

The while he had been helping the other to rise. Skelsey groaned and ground his teeth with the pain. He was exhausted too, with starvation.

“Can’t help it. You must pull yourself together,” said Blachland, hoisting him into the saddle and himself mounting behind. “Now stick tight on for all you know how, for we’ve got to run for it.”

“Ping-ping!” A bullet hummed overhead, then another. The horse snorted and plunged forward, nearly falling. The ground was rough, the condition of the animal indifferent, and the double burden considerably too much for his strength. There followed another crash or two of rifles from behind, then no more. The savages reckoned their prey secure. They could easily distance a lean horse, badly overloaded, on such ground as this, without further expenditure of ammunition. Now they streamed forward through the bush to overtake and butcher the two fugitives.

Of the above Blachland was as fully aware as the pursuers themselves. There was no safety for two, not a ghost of a chance of it. For one there was a chance, and it fairly good. Which was that one to be?

“Jjí—Jjí!—Jjí—jjí!” The hideous battle-hiss vibrated upon the air in deep-toned stridency. A glance over his shoulder. He could see the foremost of the savages ranging up nearer and nearer, assegais gripped ready to run in and stab. Which was that one to be?

In the flash of that awful moment a vision of Lyn rose before him—Lyn, in her fair, sweet, golden-haired beauty. Was he never to see her again? Why not? A loosening of his hold of the man in the saddle in front of him, a slight push, and he himself was almost certainly safe. No human eye would witness the deed, least of all would it ever be suspected. On the contrary, all would bear witness how he had ridden back into grave peril to try and rescue a missing comrade, and Lyn would approve—and even a happiness he had hardly as yet dared dream of might still be his. And—it should.

“Can you stick on if I don’t have to hold you, Skelsey?”

“Yes. I think so. I’m sure I can.”

“Well, then, stick on for God’s sake, and go,” was the quick eager rejoinder. “I’m hit in two places—mortally. I’m dead already, but you needn’t be. Good-bye.”

He slid to the ground. The horse, relieved of its double burden, shot forward, its pace accelerated by a stone, lightly hurled by its late owner, which struck it on the

hindquarters. A glance convinced him that his comrade was now in comparative safely, and Hilary Blachland turned to await the onrushing mass of his ruthless foes—single-handed, alone, and—as yet, absolutely unhurt. His temptation had been sharp, searching and fiery. But his triumph was complete.

Chapter Six.

His Triumph.

In uttering that sublime lie, Hilary Blachland had set the seal to his triumph.

But for it his comrade would have refused to leave him, on that point he was sure, whereas to throw away his life for one who was dead already, would be an act of sheer lunacy on Skelsey's part. One must die or both, and he had elected to be that one. Yet the actual horror and sting of the death which now stared him in the face was indescribably terrible.

Instinctively he took cover behind a stone—for the ground here was open and broken. The Matabele, reckoning him a sure prey sooner or later, had stayed their forward rush, and, halting within the bush line, began to parley, and not altogether without reason, for there was something rather formidable in the aspect of this well-armed man, who although but one against their swarming numbers, was manifestly determined to sell his life very dearly indeed. They had some experience as to what that meant—and recently.

"Ho, Isipau!" called out a great voice. "Come now and talk with some of your old friends."

"I think not, Ziboza," came the answer. "For the looks of most of you are not friendly."

"Are you come to capture the Great Great One, Isipau?" jeered another voice, and a shout of derision backed up the words.

"No. I came to find a comrade who was left behind sick. I have found him—and now, amadoda, when I return I can speak more than one good word on behalf of the Great Great One, and of those who suffered me to return when they might have given me some trouble."

"When thou returnest, Isipau!" roared several of the young warriors with a burst of mocking laughter. "When thou returnest! Au! But that will be never."

"Nobody knows. I do not—you do not. But it will be better for all here if I do return."

For a while there was no response, save another burst of laughter. Then Ziboza spoke:

"Come now over to us, Isipau. We will take thee to the Black Elephant."

Blachland pondered. Could he trust them? If they actually meant to take him to the King, then indeed he stood a good chance, for he did not believe that Lo Bengula would allow him to be harmed, and he did believe that once face to face with him he could persuade the fugitive King to surrender. But could he trust them, that was the crux?

Rapidly he ran over the situation within his mind. This Ziboza he knew fairly well as an inveterate hater of the whites, one of those moreover who had perpetually urged upon Lo Bengula the necessity of murdering all white men in his country. He thought too, of the moment, when disarmed and helpless, he should stand at their mercy, and what that "mercy" would mean why more than one act of hideous barbarity which he himself had witnessed, was sufficient to remind him. Moreover, even while thus balancing probabilities, certain scraps of smothered conversation reached his ears. That decided him. He would not place himself within their power. It only remained to sell his life dearly.

If only it were near the close of the day, he could hold them off for a while, and perhaps, under cover of darkness, escape. But it was hardly yet full noon. They could get round him and rake him with a cross fire. Bad marksmen as they were, they could hardly go on missing him all day.

"Come then, Isipau!" called out Ziboza. "Lay down thy weapons and come."

"No. Go ye now away and leave me. Peace is not far distant and many good words will I speak for you because of this day."

A jeering roar, now of rage, now of disappointment, greeted his words. At the same time Blachland sighted one of them kneeling down with his piece levelled, and taking deliberate aim at him. An instinct moved him to drop down behind the stone, and the instinct was a true one, for as he did so a bullet sang through the spot where his head and shoulders had been but a fraction of a second before. Two others hummed over him, but high.

He put his hat up above the stone, holding it by the brim. "Whigge!"—another bullet hummed by, almost grazing it.

"Some devil there can shoot, anyway," he growled to himself. "If only I could get a glint of him. Ah!"

A stratagem had occurred to him. He managed to fix the hat just so that the top of it should project, then creeping to the edge of the boulder, he peered round, his piece sighted and ready. Just as he thought. The head and shoulders of a savage, taking aim at

the hat—and then with the crash of his own rifle that savage was spinning round and turning a convulsive somersault, shot fair and square through the head. His slayer set his teeth, with a growl that was half exulting, half a curse. His foes were going to find that they had cornered a lion indeed—so much he could promise them.

The mutterings of wrath and dismay which arose among them over this neat shot, were drowned in a furious volley. Every man who possessed a firearm seemed animated with a kind of frenzied desire to discharge it as quickly and as often as possible at and around the rock behind which he lay. For a few moments the position was very sultry indeed. It might have been worse but that the moral of that deadly shot rendered his assailants exceedingly unwilling to leave their cover or expose themselves in any way.

On his right the river bank was but a couple of hundred yards, and running up from this was a bush-fringed donga, which might be any or no depth, but which ended at about half that distance. Upon this Blachland had got his eye and was puzzling out as to how he might turn it to account. Now he discovered that the same idea was occurring to his assailants, for although the intervening space was almost devoid of bush, the grass was long and tangled from the bush line to the chasm, and it was shaking and quivering in a very suspicious manner.

“Great minds jump together,” he muttered grimly, all his attention centred on this point, and entirely disregarding a terrific fire which was suddenly opened upon him, with the object, he suspected, of diverting it. “Just as I thought.”

One glimpse only, of the naked, crawling savage, flattened to the earth, but even that was sufficient. The thud of the bullet ploughing through ribs and vitals, was music to his ears as that savage flattened out more completely, beating the earth in his death throes; and a very shout of exultant snarling laughter escaped him—mingling with the roar of rage that went up from his enemies. He was growing terrible now—ferocious, bloodthirsty, as his ruthless foes, yet cool and firm as the rock behind which he lay.

“Two shots, two birds!” he exclaimed. “If I can keep on at this rate it’s good enough.”

The assailants were now mad with rage. They howled out taunts and jeers, and blood-curdling promises of the vengeance they would wreak upon him when they got him into their power. At this he laughed—laughed long and loud.

“That will be never!” he cried. “Ho, Ziboza, thou valiant fighting induna. How many of the King’s hunting dogs does it take to pull down one lion? Are the Ingubu all killed or have they driven thee from their midst to follow a new leader? But I tell thee, Ziboza, thou art a dead man this day. I may be, but thou art surely.”

“Ah—ah—’Sipau!” snarled the chief. “It is easy to boast, but thou art cornered. We have thee now.”

“Not yet. And a cornered animal is a dangerous one. Come and take me.”

To this interchange of amenities succeeded a lull. Clearly they were planning some fresh surprise. And then Blachland started, with a pang of sharp pain. His left hand was streaming blood. Then his spirits rose again. It was only a cut. A splinter of stone, chipped by one of their bullets, had struck him, but the wound was a trivial one. With the discovery, however, came another, and one which was by no means trivial. The bullet had been fired at a different angle from those hitherto. The ground on the left front rose slightly. His enemies were getting round him on that side. Soon he would be exposed to a complete flanking fire.

The worst of it was that in that direction he could see nobody. The cover was too good. He wondered they had not occupied this before, unless it were that they deemed it of the highest importance to cut off all chance of his escape by the river. Yet what chance had he there? A mere choice of deaths, for it was rolling down in flood, and between this and their fire from the bank, why, there was none at all.

And now the sun, which had been shining warm and glowing above this scene of stern and deadly strife, upon the beleaguered man, desperate, fighting to the last, beset by a swarm of persistent and ruthless foes—suddenly grew dark. A shadow had curtained its face, black and lowering. Blachland sent a hasty glance upward. One of those storms, almost of daily occurrence now in the rainy season, would shortly break over them. Would it bring him any advantage, however trifling—was his eager thought? At any rate it could not alter his position for the worse. And the hoarse and sullen boom of thunder mingled with the vengeful spit of the rifles of his enemies, now more frequent and more deadly because taking him from a new and almost unprotected quarter.

Ha! What was this? Under cover of this last diversion his enemies had been stealing up. They were coming on in dozens, in scores, from the first point of attack. Selecting two of the foremost, one behind the other, he fired—and his aim was true, but at the same time his rifle fell from his grasp, and his arm and shoulder felt as though crushed beneath a waggon wheel. With fiendish yells, drowning the gasping cry of the stricken warriors, the whole body of them poured forward. At the same time, those on the rise behind, left their cover, and charged down upon him, rending the air with their ear-splitting whistles.

He saw what had happened. The rifle had been struck by a bullet, and the concussion had for the moment paralysed him. Only for the moment though. Quick as the vivid flash which flamed down upon him from the now darkened heavens, his mind was made up. With a suddenness and a fleetness which took even his enemies by surprise, he had broken from his cover, and was racing headlong for the point of the donga which led down to the river.

In a second he will gain it. They cannot fire, every nerve is strained to overtake him, to head him off. He sees their foremost line. Now it is in front of him. No, not quite! His revolver is out, and the heavy bullet crashes almost point blank through the foremost. Another springs up in front of him, a gigantic warrior, his broad spear upraised. Before it can descend the fugitive is upon him, and the momentum is too great. Grappled together they topple over the edge, and go crashing down, the white man and the savage, into unknown depths.

The bushes close over their heads and they are in almost total darkness. There is a mighty splash of water and both are engulfed—yet, still grappled, they rise to the surface again, and the blue glare of the lightning, darting down, reveals the slanting earth walls of the chasm, reveals to each the face of the other as they rise above the turgid water, gasping and sputtering. The savage has lost his assegai in the fall, and the white man is groping hungrily, eagerly, for his sheath knife.

“Ah, ah! Ziboza! Did I not tell thee thou wert dead?”

“Not yet, dog Makiwa!” growls the other, in the ferocity of desperation striving to bury his great teeth in his adversary’s face. But Blachland is in condition as hard as steel, and far more at home in the water than the Matabele chief, so while gripping the latter by the wrists, he ducks his head beneath the surface, endeavouring to drown him if possible. He dare not let go his hold lest he should be the one grasped, and those above dare not fire down for fear of shooting their chief—even if they could see the contending parties—which they cannot. But the awful reverberations of the thunder-peal boom and shiver within that pit as of hell, and the lightnings gleam upon the brown turgid surface, and the straining faces of the combatants are even as those of striving fiends.

They touch ground now, then lose it again, for the bottom is but a foothold of slippery mud. Nearer, nearer to the main stream their struggles have carried them, until the sombre roar of the flood sounds deafening in their ears, and still the awful strife goes on.

“Ah—ah, Ziboza. I told thee thou shouldst meet death this day. Ha! Nantzia! (that is it) Ha!”

And with each throaty, bloodthirsty gasp he plunges the knife, which he has at last managed to free, into the body of the nearly exhausted chief, drawing it down finally in a terrible ripping stroke. A single gasping groan, and Ziboza sinks, as his adversary throws him from him. And then the said adversary knows no more. The swirl of the flood sweeping into the chasm, seems to rope him out, and the body of Hilary Blachland, together with that of his savage antagonist, is borne down within the raging rush of waters, rolling over and over on its way to the Zambesi and the sea.

Chapter Seven.

"That Irreclaimable Scamp!"

For some while after his departure from Lannercost, their recent guest occupied a very large share in the conversation and thoughts of its inmates. He had been so long with them, had become so much one of themselves in their quiet, rather isolated life, and now his absence had left a very real void.

He had written to them with fair frequency, telling of up-country doings—of the growing aggressiveness of the Matabele, and of the contemplated expedition, with the object of bringing Lo Bengula to book, then of the actual formation of such expedition, by that time on the eve of a start, and how he and young West had volunteered upon the Salisbury Column, and were to serve in the scouting section. Then correspondence had ceased. The expedition had set out.

It was then that Bayfield found himself importuned to increase the circulation of two or three other newspapers, in addition to those regularly sent him, by one subscriber, in order that no chance might be missed of seeing the very latest concerning the Matabele war, and upon such, Lyn and small Fred would fasten every post day.

"I say, Lyn!" cried the latter, disinterring his nose from a newly opened sheet, "but won't Mr Blachland make Lo Bengula scoot, when once he gets at him? Man! but I'd like to be there."

"But he and the King are great friends, Fred."

"Pooh! How can they be friends if they're at war? Nouw ja—but he just will scoot old Lo Ben! I'd like to be there."

"I hope they'll take all sorts of proper precautions against surprises," said Lyn seriously, for she was just old enough to remember the shudder of gloom which ran through the whole country when the disastrous news of Isandhlwana had come upon it like a storm-burst fourteen years previously. It had struck vividly upon her childish imagination then and she had not forgotten it.

"Surprises! I'd like to see them surprise a commando that Mr Blachland's on," returned Fred, magnificent in his whole-souled contempt that any one could even imagine any such possibility. "And these Matabele chaps ain't a patch on the Zulus. I've heard Mr Blachland say so again and again. Ja, he's a fine chap! Won't he make old Lo Ben sit up!"

Lyn would smile at this kind of oft-repeated expression of her young brother's honest and whole-hearted idolatry, in which, although more reticent herself, she secretly shared. And the object of it? He was always in her thoughts. She delighted to think about him—to talk about him. Why not? He was her ideal, this man who had been an inmate of their roof for so long, who had been her daily companion throughout that time and had stored her mind with new thoughts, new ideas, which all unconsciously to herself, had expanded and enlarged it—and not one of which but had improved it. He represented something like perfection to her, this man, no longer young, weather-beaten, somewhat lined, who had come there in the capacity of her father's friend. Strange, you see, but then, life is teeming with eccentricities.

This state of Lyn's mind was not without one interested spectator, and that her father. Half amused, half concerned, he watched it—and put two and two together. That outburst of grief in which he had surprised her had never been repeated, and, watching her with loving care, he failed to descry any symptom of it having been, even in secret. But the girl's clear mind was as open and as honest as a mirror. There was no shadow of hesitation or embarrassment in her manner or speech when they talked of their late guest—even before strangers. George Bayfield was puzzled. But through it all, as an undercurrent, there ran an idea. He recalled the entire pleasure which Blachland had taken in Lyn's society, the frank, open admiration he had never failed to express when she or her doings formed the topic of conversation between them—the excellent and complete understanding between him and the girl. What if—Too old! Not a bit of it. He himself had married very young, and Blachland was quite half a dozen years his junior. Why, he himself was in his prime—and as for the other, apart from that shake of fever, he was as hard as nails.

Now this idea, the more and more it struck root in Bayfield's mind, was anything but distasteful to him. The certainty that he must some day lose Lyn, was the one ever-haunting grief of his life. He had pictured some externally showy, but shallow-pated youth—on the principle that such things go by opposites—who should one day carry off his Lyn, and amid new surroundings and new interests, teach her—unconsciously perhaps, but none the less effectually—to forget her old home, and the father who loved and adored her from the crown of her sweet golden head to her little feet. But here was a man whose experience of the world was greater than his own, a man with an exhaustive knowledge of life, who had immediately seen and appreciated this pearl of great price, a strong man who had lived and done—no mere empty-headed, self-sufficient, egotistical youth; and this man was his friend. He was thoroughbred too, and the worst that could be said of him was that he had sown some wild oats. But apart from the culminating stage in the sowing of that crop—and even there probably there were great extenuating circumstances—nothing mean, nothing dishonourable had ever been laid to Hilary Blachland's charge. Personally, he had an immense liking and regard for him, and, as he

had said to himself before, Lyn's instinct was never at fault. He remembered now that Blachland had declared he could never stand English life again—and—he remembered too, something else, up till now forgotten—how Blachland had half chaffingly commissioned him to find out the lowest terms its owner would accept for a certain farm which adjoined Lannercost, and which was for sale, because he believed he would squat down for a little quiet life when he returned from up-country. All this came back to him now, and with a feeling of thankful relief, for it meant, in the event of his idea proving well-founded, that his little Lyn would not be taken right away from him after all.

So the months went by after Hilary Blachland's departure, but still his memory was kept green and fresh within that household of three.

One day, when Bayfield was outside, indulging in some such speculation as the above, out to him ran Lyn, flourishing one of the newly arrived newspapers. She seemed in a state of quite unwonted excitement, and at her heels came small Fred.

"Father, look, here's news! Look. Read that. Isn't it splendid?"

Bayfield took the paper, but before looking at the paragraph she was trying to point out, he glanced admiringly at the girl, thinking what a sweet picture she made, her golden hair shining in the sun, her blue eyes wide with animation, and a glow of colour suffusing her lovely clear-cut face. Then he read:

"Gallantry of a Scout."

It was just such a paragraph as is sure to occur from time to time in the chronicling of any of the little wars in which the forces of the British Empire are almost unceasingly engaged, in some quarter or other of the same, and it set forth in stereotyped journalese, how Hilary Blachland of the Scouting Section attached to the Salisbury Column, had deliberately turned his horse and ridden back into what looked like certain death, in order to rescue Trooper Spence, whose horse had been killed, and who was left behind dismounted, and at the mercy of a large force of charging Matabele, then but a hundred or two yards distant—and how at immense risk to his rescuer, whose horse was hardly equal to the double load, Spence had been brought back to the laager, unharmed, though closely pursued and fired upon all the way. Bayfield gave a surprised whistle.

"What, father? Isn't it splendid?" cried Lyn, wondering.

"Yes. Of course." What had evoked the outburst of amazement was the name—the identity of the rescued man—but of this to be sure, Lyn knew nothing. So of all others it

was destined to be the man who had played him a scurvy dog's trick that Blachland was destined to imperil his own life to save: true that the said trick had been a very great blessing in disguise, but that feet did not touch the motive thereof. It remained.

"Bah! The swine wasn't worth it," went on Bayfield, unconsciously.

"No, very likely not," assented Lyn. "But that makes it all the more splendid—doesn't it, father?"

"Eh, what? Yes, yes—of course it does," agreed Bayfield, becoming alive to the fact that he had been thinking out loud. "By Jove, Lyn, you'll have to design a new order of merit for him when he gets back. What shall it be?"

"Man, Lyn! Didn't I tell you he'd make old Lo Ben scoot?" said Fred triumphantly, craning over to have another look at the paragraph, which his father was reading over again. It did not give much detail, but from the facts set forth it was evident that the deed had been one of intrepid gallantry. Bayfield, yet deeper in the know, opined that it deserved even an additional name, and his regard and respect for his friend increased tenfold. For the other two—well, there was less chance than ever of Hilary Blachland's name and memory being allowed to grow dim in that household.

"Why, he'll soon be back now," said Lyn. "The war must be nearly over now they've got to Bulawayo."

"Perhaps. But—they haven't got Lo Ben yet," replied her father, unconsciously repeating Blachland's own words. "They'll have to get him. Fancy him blowing up his own place and clearing!"

"Ja. I knew he'd make old Lo Ben scoot," reiterated Fred.

There was another household something over six thousand miles distant from Bayfield's in which the name of Hilary Blachland was held in honour, which is strange, because the last time we glanced within the walls of this establishment, the reverse was the case. "That out and out irreclaimable scamp!" was the definition of the absent one then. It was hard winter around Jerningham Lodge when the news of Spence's rescue arrived there, and it was sprung upon Sir Luke Canterby in precisely the same manner as he had learned the whereabouts of his erring nephew on that occasion—through the daily papers to wit. He had congratulated himself mightily on the success of Percival's mission. The latter's correspondence was full of Hilary, and what great times they were having together up-country. Then the war broke out and the tidings which reached Sir

Luke of his absent nephews were few and far between. Thereupon he waxed testy, and mightily expatiated to his old friend Canon Lenthall.

“They’re ungrateful dogs the pair of them. Yes, sir—Ungrateful dogs I said, and I’ll say it again. What business had they to go running their necks into this noose?”

The Canon suggested that in all probability they couldn’t help themselves, that they couldn’t exactly turn tail and run away. Sir Luke refused to be mollified.

“It was their duty to. Hang it, Canon. What did I send Percy out there for? To bring the other rascal home, didn’t I? And now—and now he stays away himself too. It’s outrageous.”

Then had come the news of the capture and occupation of Bulawayo, and the events incidental to the progress of the column thither, and Sir Luke’s enthusiasm over his favourite nephew’s deed knew no bounds. He became something like a bore on the subject whenever he could buttonhole a listener, indeed to hear him would lead the said listener to suppose that never a deed of self-sacrificing gallantry had been done before, and certainly never would be again, unless perchance by that formerly contemned and now favoured individual hight Hilary Blachland.

“That out and out irreclaimable scamp,” murmured the Canon with a very comic twinkle in his eyes. Then, as his old friend looked rather foolish—“See here, Canterby, I don’t think I gave you bad advice when I recommended you to put that draft behind the fire.”

“Bad advice! No, sir. I’m a fool sometimes—in fact, very often. But—oh hang it, Dick, this is splendid news. Shake hands on it, sir, shake hands on it, and you’ve got to stay and dine with me to-night, and we’ll put up a bottle of the very best to drink his health.”

And the two old friends shook hands very heartily.

Chapter Eight.

A Fearsome Voyage.

On rushed the mighty stream, roaring its swollen course down to the Zambesi, rolling with it the body of dead Ziboza, hacked and ripped, the grand frame of the athletic savage a mere chip when tossed about by the hissing waves of the turbid flood. On, too, rolled the body of his slayer, as yet uninjured and still containing life. And in the noon-tide night, darkened by the black rain-burst which beat down in torrents, and, well-nigh ceaseless, the blue lightning sheeted over the furious boil of brown water and tree trunks and driftwood: and with the awful roar above, even the baffled savages were cowed, for it seemed as though the elements themselves were wrath over the death of a mighty chief.

Strange are the trifles which turn the scale of momentous happenings. Strange, too, and ironical withal, that the body of dead Ziboza should be the means of restoring to life its very nearly dead slayer. For the current, bringing the corpse of the chief against a large uprooted tree, upset the balance of this, causing it to rise half out of the water and turn right over. This in its turn impeded a quantity of driftwood, and the whole mass, coming in violent contact with the bank, threw back a great wave, the swirl of which, catching the body of the still-living man, heaved it into a lateral cleft, then poured forth again to rejoin the momentarily impeded current.

A glimmer of returning consciousness moved Hilary Blachland to grasp a trailing bough which swept down into the cleft, a clearer instinct moved him to hold on to it with all his might and main. Thus he saved himself from being sucked back into the stream again.

For a few minutes thus he crouched, collecting his returning faculties—and the first thing that came home to him was that he was in one of those cavernlike inlets on the river bank similar to that in which his struggle with Ziboza had taken place. Stay! Was it the same? He had a confused recollection of being swept out into stream, but that might have been an illusion. He peered around. The place was very dark but it was not a cave. The overhanging of one side of the cleft, and the interlacing of bushes and trees above, however, rendered it very like one. But this fissure was much smaller than the one he had fallen into with the Matabele chief, nor was it anything like as deep.

Had he been swept far down the river, he wondered? Then he decided such could not have been the case, or he would have been drowned or knocked to pieces among the driftwood, whereas here he was, practically unharmed, only very exhausted. A thrill of exultation ran through his dripping frame as he realised that he was uninjured. But it did not last, for—he realised something further.

He realised that he was weaponless. His rifle had been shot from his hand. He had lost his revolver in his fall, and even the sheath knife, wherewith he had slain Ziboza, he had relaxed his grasp of at the moment of being swept away. He was that most helpless animal of all—an unarmed man.

He realised further that he was in the remotest and most unknown part of little known Matabeleland, that he had formed one of a retreating column, which was fighting its own way out, and which would have given him up as dead long ago: that no further advance was likely to be made in this direction for some time to come, and that meanwhile every human being in the country was simply a ruthless and uncompromising foe. He realised, too, that save for a few scraps of grimy biscuit, now soaked to pulp in his jacket pocket, and plentifully spiced with tobacco dust, he was without food—and entirely without means of procuring any—and that he dared not leave his present shelter until nightfall, if then. In sum he realised that at last, even he, Hilary Blachland, was in very hard and desperate case indeed.

Were his enemies still searching for him, he wondered, or had they concluded he had met his death in the raging waters of the flooded river, as indeed it seemed to him little short of a miracle that he had not? The rain was still pouring down, and the lightning flashes lit up the slippery sides of his hiding-place with a steely glare: however, the fury of the storm seemed to have spent itself, or passed over, but the bellowing, vomiting voice of the flood as it surged past the retreat, was sufficient to drown all other sounds. Then it occurred to him that he could be seen from above by any one peering over. He must get further in.

He was more than knee deep in water. Towards its head, however, the cleft was dry. It terminated in a cavity just large enough for him to crouch within—overhung too, with thorn bush from above. An ideal hiding-place.

The situation reminded him of something. Once he had shot a guinea-fowl on a river bank, and the bird had dropped into just such a cleft as this. After a long and careful search, he had discovered it, crouching, just as he was now crouching. It was only winged, however, and fled further into the cleft. He remembered the fierce eagerness with which he had pursued the wounded bird, fearing to lose it, how he had pounced upon and seized it when it came to the end of the cleft and could get no further. Well, events had a knack of repeating themselves. He was the hunted one now.

Wet through now, he shivered to the very bones. The pangs of hunger were gnawing him. He dived a hand into his pocket. The pulpy biscuit was well-nigh uneatable, and black with tobacco dust. There was no help for it. He swallowed the stuff greedily, and it

produced a horrible nausea. Soaked, chilled through and through, he crouched throughout that long terrible day, and a sort of lightheadedness came over him. Once more he was within Umzilikazi's sepulchre, and the awful coils of the black mamba were waving, over yonder in the gloom, then, with a prolonged hiss, the terror plunged into the flood which was bearing him along. It had seized his legs beneath the surface and was dragging him down—and then it changed to Hermia. She was in the stream with him, and he was striving to save her, and yet fiercely combating a longing to let her drown, but ever around his heart was one yearning, aching pain, an awful, unsatisfied longing for a presence, a glimpse of a face—he hardly realised whose—and it would not come. Had he gone mad—he wondered dully, or was this delirium, the beginning of the end, or the terrible unsatisfied longings of another world? Then even that amount of brain consciousness faded, and he slept. Chilled, soaked, starred—his case desperate—down there in that clay-girt hole, he slept.

When he awoke it was quite dark, and the roar of the flood seemed to have decreased considerably in intensity. Clearly the river had ran down. How long he had been asleep he could form no approximate idea, but the thought moved him to hold his watch to his ear even though he could not see it. But it did not tick. The water had stopped it of course.

Yes, the river had gone down, for no water was left in the cranny now. Moreover, the entrance to his hiding-place was several feet above the surface. The next thing was to get out. Simple it sounds, doesn't it? But the sides of the cleft, wet and slimy from the rain, offered no foothold. There were boughs hanging from above—but on clambering up these, lo, the lip of the cleft was overhung with a complete chevaux-de-frise of haakdoorn, a mass of terrible fishhooks, turned every way, as their manner is, so as to be absolutely impenetrable, save to him who should be armed with a sharp cane knife with abundant room and purchase for plying it. To an enfeebled and exhausted man, obliged to use one if not both hands for holding on to his support and armed with nothing at all, the obstacle was simply unnegotiable. He was at the bottom of a gigantic natural beetle trap—with this difference that there remained one way out: the way by which he had got in—the river to wit.

From this alternative he shrank. The flood had very considerably decreased; yet there was abundance of water still running down, quite enough to tax the full resources of an average strong swimmer—moreover, he knew that the banks were clayey and overhanging for a considerable distance down—and over and above that, the rains would have bordered the said banks, even where shelving, with dangerous quicksands. Yet another peril lay in the fact that the stream was inhabited by the evil-minded, carnivorous crocodile. It was one thing to choose the river as a means to avoid an even surer peril still, it was quite another to take to it in cold blood, for it might mean all the

difference between getting in and getting out again. But a further careful investigation of his prison decided him that it was the only way.

Letting himself cautiously down, so as to drop with as little splash as possible, he was in the river once more, but somehow the water seemed warmer than the atmosphere in his chilled state, as, partly swimming, partly holding on to a log of driftwood, he allowed the stream to carry him down. It was a weird experience, whirled along by the current in the darkness, the high banks bounding a broad riband of stars overhead, but it was one to be got through as quickly as possible, for have we not said that the river was inhabited by crocodiles? Carefully selecting a likely place, the fugitive succeeded in landing.

Many a man in his position, alone, unarmed, and without food, in the heart of a trackless wilderness whose every inhabitant was uncompromisingly hostile, would have lost his head and got turned round indeed. But Hilary Blachland was made of different stuff. He was far too experienced and resourceful an up-country man to lose his head in the smallest degree. He understood how to shape his bearings by the stars, and fortunately the sky was unclouded; and in the daytime by the sun and the trend of the watercourses whether dry or not. So he began his retreat, facing almost due south.

Fortune favoured him, for in the early morning light he espied a large hare sitting up on its haunches, stupidly looking about it. A deft, quick, stone throw, and the too confiding animal lay kicking. Here was a food supply which at a pinch would last him a couple of days. Selecting as shut in a spot as he could find, he built a fire, being careful to avoid unnecessary smoke, and cooked the hare—his matches had been soaked in the river, but he was far too experienced to be without flint and steel.

For four days thus he wandered, without seeing an enemy. A small deserted kraal furnished him with more food, for he knew where to find the grain pits, and then, just as he was beginning to congratulate himself that safety was nearly within his grasp, he ran right into a party of armed Matabele.

There was only one thing to be done and he did it. Advancing with an apparent fearlessness he was far from feeling, he greeted the leader of the party, whom he knew. The demeanour of the savages was sullen rather than overtly hostile, and this was a good sign, still Blachland knew that his life hung upon a hair. There was yet another thing he knew, and it was well he did. This petty chief, Ngeleza, was abnormally imbued with a characteristic common to all savages—acquisitiveness to wit. This was the string upon which to play. So he represented how anxious he was to return to Bulawayo, as soon as possible, ignoring the fact that the war was not over, or indeed that there was any war at all, and that they could not do better than guide him thither. He gave Ngeleza to understand that he would pay well for such a service, and not only that, but that all

who had the smallest share in its rendering, should receive a good reward—this for the enlightenment of the rest of the band, which numbered a round dozen men. It was well, too, that Ngeleza knew him—knew him for a man of substance, and a man of his word.

Chapter Nine.

Conclusion.

The New Year is very young now, and Lannercost is well-nigh hidden in its wealth of leafiness, and very different is the rich languorous midsummer air to the bracing crispness under which we last saw it. Other things are different too, as we, perchance, shall see, but what is not different is the warmth of welcome accorded to Hilary Blachland to that which he expected it to be—for the war in far-away Matabeleland is practically over, and this man who has borne so full a part in it, is enjoying a much-needed and well-earned rest.

The news of his first deed of self-sacrificing daring had hardly had time to cool before it was followed by that of the second, more heroic because more hopeless still, but the fact of him being given up for dead by those who witnessed it, did not transpire until after his return to safety, for, as it happened, he reached Bulawayo at about the same time as the returning patrol.

Of the bare mention of these two deeds, however, he most concerned in them is heartily sick and tired. Skelsey and Spence between them had started the ball and kept it rolling, being enthusiastically aided and abetted therein by Percival West. Here at Lannercost he had stipulated that the subject be absolutely taboo, an understanding however, not always strictly carried out, the greatest offender being small Fred.

“Quite sure you’re not making a mistake in putting off going to England, Blachland?” Bayfield was saying, as the two men, seated together under a tree in front of the stoep, were talking over a transaction just effected.

“Dead cert. I’ve earned a rest, and bucketing off on an infernal sea voyage is anything but that. I’ll go later. Percy can make my peace for me so long, and he’ll do it too, for he’s about as effective a trumpeter as—well, all the rest of you, Bayfield. No. Now I’ve taken on that farm, I’m going to try my hobby, and see how many kinds of up-country animals I can keep there. Shall have to go to England some day, and then I think we’d better all go together.”

“Don’t know. We might. Did you hear that, Lyn? We are all to go to England together.”

The girl had just appeared on the stoep. She was looking exquisitely fair and sweet. There were times when Hilary Blachland could hardly believe that he was wide awake, and not merely dreaming, that the presence which had been with him in spirit

throughout his wanderings, in hardship and direst peril, was actually and really with him now, from day to day, and this was one of them.

“I think it would be rather nice,” she answered, coming over to join them. “But you don’t really mean it, father? When?”

“Ask Blachland,” was the quizzical rejoinder. “It’s his scheme—Eh—What’s up, Jafta?”

For that estimable Hottentot had appeared on the scene with intent to bespeak his master’s presence and attention as to some everyday matter.

“Oh, well, I suppose I must go and see about it,” said Bayfield, getting up.

Over the green gold of the hilltops the summer sunlight swept gloriously—and the valley bottom lay in a hot shimmer, but here in the leafy shade it was only warm enough to convey the idea of restful ease. Bright butterflies flitted amid the flowers, and the hum of bees mingled with the twittering of noisy finks and the piping of spreuws—not having the fear of Fred’s air-gun before their eyes—in the bosky recesses of the garden.

Hilary Blachland, lounging there in his cane chair—the very personification of reposeful ease in his cool white attire—was watching the beautiful face opposite, noting every turn of the sweet golden head. There was a difference in Lyn, he decided. It was difficult to define it exactly, but the difference was there. Was it that something of the old, frank, childlike ingenuousness seemed to have disappeared?

“Do you remember what we were talking about here, Lyn, that evening we got back from the Earles’?” he said. “You were wishing that I and your father were partners.”

“Yes. I remember,” and the lighting up of her face was not lost upon him. “And you predicted we should soon find you a most desperate bore. See how well I remember the very words.”

“Quite right, little Lyn. Well, both predictions are going to be fulfilled.”

“But—how?”

“And—I shall be here always, as you were wishing then. Are you still pleased, little Lyn?”

“Oh, you know I am.”

It came out so spontaneously, so whole-heartedly. He went on:

“You see that beacon away yonder on top of the rand? Well, that’s my boundary. Mine! I’m your next-door neighbour now. Your father and I spent three mortal hours this morning haggling with five generations of Van Aardts, and now that eight thousand morgen is mine. So I shall always be here, as you said then. Now I wonder if you will always be as pleased as you are now.”

So do we, reader, but the conditions of life are desperately uncertain, wherefore who can tell? That it is unsafe to prophesy unless you know, is eke a wise saw, which for present purposes we propose to bear in mind. Nevertheless—

The End.