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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THROUGH VELD AND FOREST: AN AFRICAN STORY ***

Harry Collingwood

"Through Veld and Forest"

Chapter One.

Vague Hints of possible Trouble.

The blazing midsummer sun of South Africa had sunk to within a hand's breadth of the ridge of the southern spur of the Tandjes Berg, softly outlined in blue some forty miles distant on the western horizon, when I, Edward Laurence, having taken a long afternoon ride round the farm to assure myself that the sheep were being properly looked after, arrived within a mile of my home—the long, white, one-storey thatched house picturesquely perched yonder on a mound which formed one of the southern spurs of the Great Winter Berg.

The house—which, together with the farm of two thousand five hundred and sixty acres, was known as Bella Vista—was the property of my father, Henry Laurence, ex-colonel of the —th King's Own Regiment of Dragoon Guards; and he had purchased it some fifteen years prior to the date upon which this story opens, having been so severely wounded during the battle of Waterloo as to necessitate his retirement from the army. His retirement, of course, left him without an occupation; and as he was then still quite a young man, being only thirty-three years of age, as soon as he had recovered from his wounds—so far as recovery then seemed possible—he began to cast about for something to do. It was at this juncture that he made the acquaintance of a Miss Violet McKinnon, the lovely daughter of an impecunious Scottish laird, and fell desperately in love with her; and as my father happened to be a strikingly handsome and attractive man his affection was speedily returned, and marriage quickly followed. To marry under such circumstances was perhaps something of an imprudence, for my father had nothing but his pension, while his bride—sixteen years his junior—had nothing but her trousseau; but the pair turned a deaf ear to all advice and remonstrance, with the result just mentioned, when of course it became more imperatively necessary than ever for the ex-colonel to discover some means of earning a living, especially as I was born within a year of the date of the marriage. The state of his health demanded that the occupation chosen should enable him to live an outdoor life: and farming at once naturally suggested itself.

Then, in the nick of time, he made the acquaintance of a Mr William Arbuckle, a friend of his father-in-law, and a South African sheep farmer, home for a holiday; and this man strongly urged him to emigrate to South Africa and take up sheep farming. The idea powerfully appealed to my father from the very first, and the upshot was that, after due enquiry into details, my parents took the decisive step and—my father having commuted his pension—sailed for South Africa, of course taking me with them. This event occurred early in the year 1818. Arbuckle returned to South Africa in the ship which took us out; and at his urgent invitation we became his guests for a short time upon our arrival at the Cape. But the warm-hearted Scotchman's kindness did not end there; he instituted enquiries, and eventually learned that a certain small farm, known as Rooikop, in the Albany district, was for sale, the Dutchman who owned it being averse to the British rule and intending to move up-country beyond the borders of the colony. This farm Arbuckle and my father visited together, with the result that, upon the urgent advice of his friend, the ex-colonel purchased it, just as it stood, house, stock, and implements, all complete. But he did not buy the furniture, having brought out from England all that he required; also the Dutchman needed it to take up-country with him to the spot where he might ultimately establish his new home: thus both parties were equally satisfied.

The first thing that my father did after entering into possession was to change the name of the farm from Rooikop to Bella Vista, on account of the magnificent prospect obtainable from the stoep of the house, which faced due south, and consequently was in grateful shadow all day. The building stood on a kopje or hill rising out of one of the lower spurs of the Great Winter Berg range of mountains, the bald summits of which towered into the rich blue of the South African sky some seven miles in the rear of the house, their rugged slopes bush-clad for two-thirds of their height. On the left, or toward the east, other spurs of the range gradually lost themselves in a wide expanse of gently rolling, bush-clad plateau extending beyond the blue distance to the sea, one hundred and eighty miles away, where the Great Kei River discharges itself into the Indian Ocean. A similar prospect stretched in front of the house, the ground

growing more rugged toward the right as the spectator's gaze swept westward, until, looking due west from the house, one perceived, in the immediate foreground, a moderately steep declivity running down to a spruit or small stream, having its rise high up toward the summit of the mountains and discharging into the Great Fish River, some seven miles distant. On the far side of the spruit the country was flat enough to enable one to catch a glimpse, here and there, of the Great Fish River itself winding southward through the plain, and, in the extreme distance, the soft blue masses of the Tandjes Berg spurs, on the hither side of which the white houses of Somerset East, some twenty-eight miles away, might sometimes be seen on a clear morning when the sun shone strongly upon them.

Such, very feebly and sketchily described, was the splendid prospect visible from the stoep of our house as I first knew it; and the passage of the years effected little or no change save the gradual disappearance of the nearer clumps of bush, as my father caused them to be cleared away in order to furnish additional grazing ground for our steadily increasing flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and the occasional appearance of a new house somewhere in the distance, as neighbours gradually began to gather in our vicinity. The greatest change of all, however, was that occasioned by the erection of our own new house; for, as time went on, my father's health improved so greatly that he became as strong and robust as ever, with the promise of a ripe old age before him. Moreover, he began to make money rapidly as his flocks and herds increased; and, as the money came in, so his views with regard to the comforts of home life expanded. The house standing on the property when my father purchased it consisted of a sitkamer, or general sitting-room used for all day purposes, and three bedrooms; and this amount of accommodation served our purpose well enough for the first five years of our residence upon the farm. But by that time my father had made a very considerable sum of money by his annual sales of wool and hides; and one of his theories was that money was useful merely as a means by which life might be made more comfortable and enjoyable. He therefore planned a new and much more commodious house, built it of stone quarried from the mountain side within a quarter of a mile of the chosen site, filled it with new and handsome furniture, pictures, and a piano for my mother, all imported from England at great expense, and laid out a beautiful garden of about five acres in extent all round the house, converting the place into a perfect miniature Paradise. Also, the time had arrived when my education must be thought of; and, as at that period there were no schools of any importance nearer than Cape Town, and my mother objected to my being sent so far away—I being an only child—my father decided to secure the services of a private tutor, and in due time Mr John Nesbitt, a Cambridge man, and a very fine fellow in every respect, became a member of our household. To him I hold myself indebted for a most excellent education, and for many other things beside. He continued my education until I attained the age of fifteen years, after which he remained on as a sort of general factotum to my father, while I devoted myself to the management of the farm, relieving my father of all the hard work and so leaving him free to enjoy himself in his own way. Such, briefly stated, was the general condition of affairs at Bella Vista on the afternoon referred to at the beginning of this chapter—on which day, by the way, I attained to the age of seventeen years; except that, after building and furnishing his new house, my father regularly employed all his surplus cash in extending the area of his property, and improving his flocks and herds by the frequent purchase of valuable animals for breeding purposes.

As I have said, on the afternoon that marks the opening of my remarkable story I had arrived within a mile of the gate in the stout picket fence which surrounded our garden as a protection against the invasion of predatory animals, when my horse, Prince, suddenly pricked up his ears, and, looking away to the eastward, whinnied, while at the same moment the rhythmical beat of cantering hoofs came softly to my ear from a considerable distance, floating on the gentle, almost imperceptible, easterly zephyr that happened to be breathing at the moment. Aroused thus from some day-dream into which I had fallen, I glanced up, and, looking in the direction of the sound, became aware of a small cloud of dust gleaming yellow in the afternoon sun, about a mile away to the eastward; and in the midst of it appeared two mounted figures which, even at that distance, I identified without difficulty as Mr Lestrangle, our next-door neighbour at Triannon, some fourteen miles away, and his eleven-year-old daughter Nell. They must have seen and recognised me at the same moment, for a few seconds later a shout from Mr Lestrangle reached me; and, turning Prince's head in their direction and pressing my unarmed heels gently to his sides, I cantered off to meet them. Some three or four minutes later we came together, and, all reining up as I wheeled my horse alongside them, we proceeded toward Bella Vista at a walking pace, as their horses were sweating and it was desirable that they should be allowed to cool off a little before being stabled.

"Many happy returns of the day, Ned!" exclaimed Nell, with a bright smile, as I shook hands with her. "You see I have not forgotten that to-day is your birthday; and—here is my birthday present to you," handing me a small parcel neatly tied up in paper.

"I also wish you many happy returns, Ned," remarked Mr Lestrangle, reaching across in front of his daughter to shake hands with me. "I haven't brought you any present, however, so you must take the will for the deed and accept Nell's present as coming from us jointly. The young minx has been working at them like a Trojan for the last fortnight; so, as a reward for her extraordinary industry, I have allowed her to ride over and present them herself. They are a pair of Berlin-wool slippers, made after the pattern of an old one that Nell surreptitiously begged from your mother when we were last at Bella Vista. And that reminds me to enquire how they all are at the house. Quite well, I hope?"

"Yes, thank you, all quite well," I replied. "I don't need to ask how you and Nell are; I can see for myself that there is nothing the matter with either of you. They will be tremendously glad at home to see you both; we have not had a single visitor since you last came—how long ago was it? It must be quite six weeks."

"More than that," answered Mr Lestrangle; "it is two months ago to-day by the almanac. And I believe you've grown since then," he continued, eyeing me over. "How tall are you? Did you think of measuring yourself this morning to see how tall you are at seventeen years of age?"

"No," I laughed, "but the pater did; and according to him I stand just six feet and a quarter of an inch in my stockings."

"Ay, I dare say you do," he said, "although you scarcely look it, you are so broad across the shoulders. What will you be when you are twenty-one?"

"I am almost afraid to think of it," I replied, rather ruefully. "I ride within four pounds of thirteen stone now. If I go on at this rate until I am twenty-one I shall not be able to find a horse fit to carry me!"

"You will have to get the colonel to breed one specially for you," remarked Lestrangle, with a loud laugh. "By the way," he continued, "talking of horses, I wonder if you happen to have anything that would do for Nell. Punch there is getting old and a little groggy in the fore legs. He came down with her the other day, and the child had rather a nasty spill. I shall not let her ride him any longer than I can help. But I have nothing on my place suitable for her; I don't go in much for breeding horses, you know."

"No," I concurred, "I know you don't. But we have the very thing for her, a two-year-old filly, unbroken, all but thoroughbred, with the makings of a splendid horse in her. If you care to ride down to the vley I will show her to you; it won't take us much more than a mile out of our way, and I should like Nell to have her."

Mr Lestrangle agreeing, we forthwith made off toward the flat where the horses were turned out to graze, and presently I had caught the filly, which was a very gentle creature and quite a pet of mine, and led her up by her long forelock for inspection. She was a bright bay, with very long dark mane and tail, and of course very ragged-looking as to her coat, never having been groomed in her life; but that did not matter, her points were quite unmistakable, and Mr Lestrangle, to say nothing of Nell, fell in love with her on the spot. Then, when the visitors had done admiring the animal, we turned our horses' heads and rode toward the house, on the broad veranda-covered stoep of which we could see my father and mother, the latter waving her handkerchief by way of welcome to Mr Lestrangle and Nell. A quarter of an hour later we had dismounted at the foot of the broad flight of steps leading up to the stoep, which my father and mother had descended in order to extend greeting to the visitors, and the "boys" were leading the horses away to the stable at the back.

The usual interchange of greetings having passed, we learned that Mr Lestrangle and his daughter had come prepared to pass the night with us; and when our guests had been taken to their rooms and had refreshed themselves after their journey we all gathered on the spacious front stoep and chatted until dinner was served. Our subjects of conversation were naturally rather limited, isolated as we were in what was then practically a wilderness, where it sometimes happened that several weeks elapsed between the departure of one visitor and the arrival of another. Like my father, Mr Lestrangle had devoted himself to sheep farming, and the conversation therefore turned chiefly upon the most approved methods of dealing with the several diseases to which the sheep were subject, the best dip to use, how to determine the precise moment for shearing, to secure the best quality of wool, and so on.

Yet it seemed to me that through it all Mr Lestrangle's mind was dwelling upon something else, something that he was anxious to speak about as soon as a favourable opportunity should arrive. That opportunity, however, did not occur until after my mother and Nell had retired for the night, for we Laurences happened to be enthusiasts in the matter of music. My mother was not only a brilliant pianiste, but she also sang exceedingly well. My father possessed a chamber organ, Nesbitt owned a very sweet-toned violin from which he could extract the most wonderful music, and, lastly, I had learned to tootle fairly well upon the flute; therefore whenever we had visitors we were generally required to organise an impromptu concert for their benefit, as was the case on the evening in question. But at length the instruments fell silent, my mother and Nell bade us good night and retired to their rooms, and, a table under the veranda having been set out with decanters, glasses, cigars, and tobacco, we males adjourned to the front stoep for a final gossip before separating. And then it was that Mr Lestrangle found opportunity to broach the matter which, as I conjectured, had been occupying his thoughts all the evening.

Having mixed himself a glass of grog and lighted his pipe, he drew his chair close up to the one occupied by my father, and, lowering his voice to a confidential tone, said:

"Look here, Laurence! The real reason why I rode over here this afternoon was not personally to congratulate Ned upon the occurrence of his birthday, but to ask you how you happen to be off for ammunition. I have been wondering whether you could spare me a little."

"Well," said my father, "I think we can let you have a little, though not very much, for our own stock is growing rather low. How much do you want?"

"Could you let me have, say, twenty pounds of powder and—?" began Lestrangle.

"Twenty pounds!" ejaculated my father in surprise. "No, that I certainly cannot; for I do not think we have more than half that quantity altogether. But I dare say we can let you have four or five pounds to tide you over until you can replenish your stock, if that will be of any use to you."

"Thanks very much," answered Lestrangle; "but it would not be enough, and moreover it would be depriving you. No; I must see if I cannot somehow arrange to send in to Port Elizabeth for a supply. The nuisance of it is that I have nobody about my place whom I can trust upon such an errand—"

"Oh, as to that," interrupted my father, "if you are so hard up as that, Ned shall go in and get it for you! We are not very busy here just now, and a trip to Port Elizabeth will do him no harm. But why do you require such a large quantity? Are you contemplating an up-country jaunt; or what is in the wind?"

"No," answered Lestrangle; "I am certainly not contemplating an up-country expedition of any sort. And as to what is in the wind, I don't know; I very much wish I did. But during the last month I have heard a thing or two with regard to the natives that make me feel just a trifle uneasy, and I thought I ought to mention the matter to you—if it has not already reached your ears."

"No," said my father, "we have heard nothing here. What is it?"

"Well," said Lestrangle, "I have heard nothing very definite, thus far—only enough, in fact, to render me somewhat

uneasy. Just vague hints, more than anything else, you know. But I have been putting two and two together, and therefrom I deduce the fact that the natives are growing a bit restive at the steadily increasing number of whites who are coming into the country—”

My father interrupted with a loud laugh. “Is that all, my dear chap?” he exclaimed. “Why, it has been like that ever since I came here, sixteen years ago. There were rumours then that the natives intended to rise and drive us all into the sea; but nothing has ever come of it, excepting an occasional small raid upon some outlying farm, and the driving off of a few sheep or cattle. Surely you have been here long enough to know that these mysterious hints and rumours should not be taken seriously!”

“Yes, I have,” returned Lestrangle. “But, to my mind, things look a bit different just now. From what I have heard I gather that there is somebody—whether a white man or a native I cannot make out, but it looks rather like a white man—who is going round among the natives, urging the various tribes to combine together for the purpose of attacking and exterminating the whites forthwith; pointing out that, unless this is very speedily done, the whites will get such a footing in the country that it will be impossible to drive them out, with the result that the natives will be robbed of their land and driven into the interior, to perish on the points of the spears of the powerful and ferocious Zulus. Now, that is an exceedingly dangerous doctrine to preach to such ignorant, credulous folk as are the Tembu, the Pondos, and the Griquas; the more so since there is a *soupçon* of truth in it, as is evidenced by the increasing numbers of the Dutch who are pressing over the border in order to escape from British rule: and this time I am really inclined to believe that the agitation may lead to more or less unpleasant consequences. Not, mind you, that I think the disturbance is at all likely to reach as far as here; still, one never knows, and it is wise to be prepared for the worst—which is the reason why I am anxious to replenish my stock of ammunition as quickly as possible.”

“Yes; quite so,” agreed my father. “But,” he continued, “who or what is your authority for the statement that somebody—possibly a white man—is endeavouring to stir up the natives against us? For my own part I can scarcely credit such a thing as possible. Why, assuming for a moment such a thing to be true, the fellow himself would be in the direst peril, for the natives could hardly be expected to discriminate in his favour; he would be just as likely to be wiped out in the convulsion as any of us.”

“I think not,” said Lestrangle, “for I take it that, if such a man exists, he is some schelm devoid of all kith or kin, and fully prepared to throw in his lot with the Kafirs, in the hope of living a safe and easy life with them; or, possibly, he may have some notion that he can persuade them to make him a chief if he should succeed in bringing off a successful rising against the whites. As to my authority—well, one of my Totties, a man named Klaas, who is a rather intelligent fellow, has overheard a good deal of mysterious talk among my ‘boys’ of late, which he has repeated to me; and although nothing has been said of an absolutely definite character, the remarks which he has repeated certainly seem to point pretty conclusively to the fact that something is really brewing. Moreover—and this, in my opinion, is the most sinister indication of all—my native ‘boys’ are all going back home, upon one pretext or another.”

“A-h!” ejaculated my father, “now you are coming to something definite. How long has this been going on?”

“Oh, not very long! Only within these last few days,” answered Lestrangle. “But within that time more than half of them have gone. And they are mostly Pondos or Griquas.”

“By Jove, Pater, there may be something in it, after all!” I exclaimed. “Our ‘boys’ are mostly Totties, as you know, but we have had a few Griquas—about half a dozen—until within the last few days; now they are all gone, two or three of them without waiting to get their pay. I did not think very much of that, however, for they have done the same thing before; but in the light of what Mr Lestrangle has just told us it certainly looks a bit suspicious.”

“Yes, it certainly does,” agreed my father, “although, after all, there may really be nothing in it. At the same time it will be well to be prepared; therefore to-morrow you shall take the wagon and make an errand to Port Elizabeth. I believe some of our stores are running rather low, so there ought to be no difficulty in arranging for the trip without unnecessarily alarming your mother. And you can complete your back load by bringing as much powder and lead as the wagon will conveniently carry. I have no doubt that our friend Lestrangle here will willingly take half of what you bring.”

“Ay, that I will, and be glad to get it,” answered Lestrangle. “And if you will take my advice, Ned, you will not loiter unduly on the way. If a rising is really meditated it may occur at any moment, although I do not believe it is exactly what you may call imminent; were it so, I think we should have heard a little more about it. Still, there is nothing like being prepared in good time; in a case like this it is better to be a couple of months too early than a day too late.”

So it was arranged, and for the next half-hour we were all busy discussing the question of what precisely I should bring out with me, and preparing a detailed list of our various requirements; for a wagon journey to Port Elizabeth was no trifling matter, the distance across the veld and by road being about one hundred and seventy miles, and occupying the best part of nine days each way. By the time that we had finished it was past midnight, and I went to bed and slept soundly, for, to be quite truthful, I had no very profound belief in the threatened rising, despite the ominous departure of the Griquas; such things had happened before—were constantly happening, in fact—and nothing ever came of it, although more or less alarming rumours were continually arising, nobody quite knew how. As a matter of fact I felt quite easy in my mind about it, for I was confident that, even should a rising take place, it would be suppressed very promptly; and in any case I did not believe for a moment that the savages would dare to penetrate so far into the colony as Bella Vista, or even as far as Triannon: while the “scare”, trifling and unfounded as I believed it to be, afforded me an excellent excuse for a trip to Port Elizabeth, which town I had not visited for more than six months, my father having accompanied the wagon on the previous journey; also it justified me in my determination to purchase a new rifle—one of the very newest and most up-to-date weapons that I could possibly procure, the rifle which I had been using for the previous six years being a flintlock affair, and worn out at that. On the following morning we were astir at an even earlier hour than usual, for, the trek oxen not having been worked for some time, I was anxious to make a good start and get well on my way before the heat of the day set in. My mother

expressed some surprise at the apparently hurried character of the expedition; but when it was explained that Mr Lestrangle had run out of ammunition, while our own stock was running low, she was at once satisfied, for at that time hunting was practically the only amusement open to the farmer, and it was also imperatively necessary that he should be amply provided with means to check the increase of the more predatory animals in the neighbourhood of his farm. Also my mother, being a good housewife, was far more inclined to avail herself of the opportunity afforded by the trip to provide herself with an ample stock of such things as could only be procured at Port Elizabeth than she was to search curiously for another and deeper motive for the trip than the one which my father had given her.

The wagon, with a light load of skins and horns, got away early, in charge of Jan, the Hottentot driver, and then we all sat down to breakfast, as merry and jovial a party, probably, as any in South Africa that day, much of our amusement arising from the fact that my mother and Nell were continually thinking of some fresh commission which I was to be sure to execute for them before leaving Port Elizabeth, the pair of them keeping me so busy jotting down their instructions in my notebook that I could scarcely find time to eat or drink. But at length the merry meal came to an end: we all rose from the table and adjourned to the stoep, before which Piet, my after-rider, was walking the horses to and fro, with Thunder and Juno, the two big hounds that always accompanied me everywhere, trailing at their heels and whining with impatience to be off. Arrived there, another commission or two were remembered and had to be jotted down, upon which my father laughingly exclaimed, as I finally closed my notebook and slipped it into my pocket:

“There, that will do, Ned; now you had better mount and ride, or you will not get away at all to-day. Goodbye, boy; remember me very kindly to Mr Henderson and such other friends as you may see at the Bay, and—don’t forget the new rifle!”

This last sally produced quite an explosion of laughter at my expense, for I had announced my determination to treat myself to the best weapon I could find, and the enthusiasm with which I had dwelt upon the achievements that would be in my power when it came into my possession rendered it the most unlikely thing in the world that I should forget to purchase it. Joining in the laugh, I shook hands with Mr Lestrangle, Nesbitt, and my father, kissed Nell and my mother, and ran light-heartedly down the steps, swung myself into the saddle, and, with a final farewell wave of the hand, cantered off down the broad path leading to the gate, with the dogs bounding along ahead and Piet, mounted upon a sturdy grey gelding, bringing up the rear.

It was a glorious morning, such as I think one never finds anywhere but in South Africa; the sky overhead a deep, rich, cloudless blue, shading away on all sides to a soft, warm, delicate, almost colourless grey at the horizon, the air, already warming beneath the ardent rays of the sun, clear and pellucid as crystal and as invigorating as champagne with the fresh, clean smell of the dew-saturated vegetation. Around on every hand stretched a brilliant, sun-kissed picture of rugged mountain slopes, scored deeply by the storms of ages; deep kloofs, precipitous of side, shaggy with their vesture of dense bush, and mysterious with their broad masses of dark shadow; rolling uplands, dotted here and there with clumps of timber and bush or with our grazing flocks of sheep and herds of cattle and horses, sweeping gently down toward the wide-stretching, bush-clad plains, through which wound tiny spruits, like threads of silver, hurrying to lose themselves in the broader waters of the Great Fish River.

Riding at an easy canter, the track across the veld being a very gentle downward slope all the way, I overtook the wagon at a distance of about six miles from the house; when, dismounting, I took my rifle from its slings under the wagon tent, loaded it, slung my powder horn over my shoulder, slipped a few wads and bullets into my pocket, and then, accompanied by the two dogs, walked on ahead of the wagon toward our first outspanning place, my horse Prince following me, as he had been trained to do, with the bridle hanging loose upon his neck. I had of course an ample supply of provisions in the wagon, including the shoulder of a sheep that had been slaughtered that morning; but mutton naturally formed the staple of our fare at Bella Vista when there was no buck meat in the house, and I was very heartily tired of both. I was therefore on the lookout for a pauw or a koraan—the great and small bustards of South Africa—and hoped to get one in time to have it cooked for my luncheon instead of the shoulder of mutton. And presently, when I had got about half a mile ahead of the wagon, I suddenly caught sight of a fine koraan on the ground about three hundred yards to my right front, as it emerged from behind a big clump of melkboem, feeding busily. The bird instantly sighted me and, pausing but the fraction of a second to look straight at me, took to flight, making the air throb with its harsh, discordant cry of alarm as it did so.

It was a long shot for my old rifle, which was only sighted up to one hundred yards; but I had used the piece for six years and knew to a nicety what it would do. Moreover—I am now an old man and may therefore perhaps venture to speak the simple truth without being suspected of boasting—I seem to have been endowed, from my earliest years, with the gift of straight shooting; it was just a knack, I suppose, but I seemed to be able to judge distances accurately by intuition, and to allow the correct elevation and windage under the most diversified conditions, so that I very rarely made use of the sights on my rifle. Nor did I ever need to aim consciously; I just flung the weapon to my shoulder, keeping my eye meanwhile upon my mark, pressed the trigger at precisely the right instant, and—down dropped the quarry: I had in fact by long practice become a dead shot, and could scarcely remember when I had last failed to bring down what I aimed at. Nor did I fail now; as the bird rose it flew straight away from me, and it was still uttering its alarm cry when I pressed the trigger and down it fell, stone-dead, shot clean through the body. At the whip-like crack of the rifle the two dogs dashed forward into the thick clumps of low milk-bush into which the bird had fallen, and presently reappeared, Thunder dragging the bird along the ground by one of its legs, while Juno romped round him uttering low, sharp yells of delight, varied by sudden dashes of pretended threat to snatch the koraan away from him.

Chapter Two.

A tragic Homecoming.

In due time our first outspan was reached—a wide vley with a small spruit meandering lazily through it, and plenty of rich grass for the oxen—and here a halt was called for a couple of hours during the hottest part of the day; then on again to the next outspan, which was reached about an hour before sunset. Here my aversion to mutton again asserted itself; and while the “boys” watered the oxen, built the camp fire, and generally made preparations for the coming night, I took my rifle, and, accompanied as usual by the two dogs, and by Piet, carrying my double-barrelled 12-bore shot gun, I sauntered off in search of something acceptable for supper.

The spot where we had outspanned for the night was the one which I usually chose as the termination of the second stage of my journey when going to Port Elizabeth. It was an extensive flat, dotted here and there with big clumps of bush, and with a wide, shallow depression in the ground, about a mile distant from the wagon. Into this the same spruit alongside which we had outspanned at midday found its way and widened out into a broad, shallow, reed-bordered sheet of water, much frequented by wild duck, widgeon, and geese, and also the favourite drinking place of all the game haunting its immediate neighbourhood. I felt pretty certain, therefore, of getting a shot at something by ambushing myself among the reeds, and to this spot I accordingly made my way. As it happened, we arrived in the very nick of time, for we had scarcely taken up a position among the reeds, in a situation that enabled me to command a view of a good wide stretch of water, when I saw a faint smudge against the clear sky southward, which rapidly resolved itself into a big flight of wild duck heading directly for the end of the pond near where I was ambushed; and I had only time to pass my rifle to Piet and receive from him the shot gun in exchange when, with much quacking, the flight wheeled and proceeded to settle down upon the surface of the water. As they did so I raised my weapon, and, aiming into the “brown”, pressed both triggers, one immediately after the other, with the result that five of the duck dropped dead, while another half-dozen fell wounded, the whole being promptly retrieved by Piet and the dogs, who all dashed into the shallow water and brought them ashore.

Eleven birds constituted an ample supply for our immediate requirements, both for supper that night and for breakfast next morning; and as I made a point of never destroying the wild things except as a matter of necessity, we forthwith returned to the wagon and proceeded to pluck and prepare as many of the duck as we needed for supper, afterward roasting them over the camp fire. By the time the meal was ready for consumption the soft, velvet darkness of the South African starlit night had fallen, and we ate our meal to the accompaniment of the usual night sounds of the veld where water happens to be near—the soft, subdued quacking of drowsy waterfowl, the occasional “honk” of a belated goose, the stealthy splashing of bucks wading warily into the deeper and cleaner water clear of the rushes before venturing to drink, mysterious rustlings among the reeds, the distant call of buck to each other in the bush, the sharp bark of the jackal, the blood-curdling laugh of the prowling hyena, and the occasional roar of the leopard; the whole dominated by the incessant noise of millions of frogs, and the continuous chirr of many more millions of insects.

I slept that night on the cartel, which is a light hardwood frame, closely strung lengthwise and across with rimpi, or thin strips of hide, and which, slung to the framework of the interior of the wagon, under the tent, serves as a bedstead. Upon this, if furnished with a mattress, a pillow, and a pair of blankets—as in my own case—it is possible to enjoy a perfect night’s rest. The next morning we were all astir with the dawn, and while the “boys” prepared breakfast I made my way down to the spruit, bathed, with the dogs for company, and got back to the wagon just in good time for the first meal of the day, with an appetite to which a keen edge had been put by the fresh, clean air of the open veld. Then, immediately after breakfast, the oxen were inspanned, and, pushing forward a little more rapidly than on the first day, we forded the Great Fish River shortly after noon before outspanning for the midday halt.

In this fashion, then, we journeyed, day after day, quietly and uneventfully, toward Port Elizabeth, where we arrived without mishap during the afternoon of the ninth day after leaving Bella Vista. Leaving the wagon outspanned on the outskirts of the town, I rode in and called in the first instance upon a certain Mr Henderson, who was a friend of ours, and from him received, as I fully expected, a very cordial invitation to make his house my home during the period of my sojourn in the town. The following day was a busy day with me, for I had a great many commissions to execute; but by arranging them systematically I contrived to wipe the whole of them off my list before the stores closed, including even the purchase of the new rifle which I had promised myself. This was a very expensive but beautiful weapon, very light compared with my old rifle, for it weighed, all complete and including the shoulder strap, less than six pounds. It had a plain blue cylindrical barrel, gauged to take a half-inch spherical bullet with three drachms of powder, was fitted with a nipple for percussion caps, and provided with a fixed sight for a range of one hundred yards and two flap sights for two hundred and five hundred yards respectively, the latter being regarded in those days as an exceptionally long range. Also, with a normal pull upon the trigger of six ounces, it was fitted with an ingenious arrangement which, by pressing a small lever, converted this into a hair trigger. Lastly, it bore the name of a certain famous London maker, which alone was a guarantee of its excellence. The storekeeper from whom I bought it had other guns by the same maker, and he finally tempted me to buy a very beautiful double-barrel sporting gun as a present for my father, the right hand barrel being a Number 12 smooth-bore, while the left barrel was rifled, this piece also being fitted for use with percussion caps.

The next day, which was the eleventh day from that of my departure from Bella Vista, immediately after breakfast I rode out to the wagon, gave orders to inspan, and accompanied it into the town, where, having unloaded my hides and horns, which I had disposed of at a very good price, I proceeded to load up the powder, lead, and other things that I had been charged to procure, and left Port Elizabeth again on my return journey about mid-afternoon, trekking a distance of ten miles on my homeward way before outspanning for the night.

Of course I was all on fire for an opportunity to try my new rifle, and the chance came that same afternoon. For when about six miles out from Port Elizabeth, I met a Boer who was trekking in from Uitenhage, and who informed me that, about a mile back, he had been obliged to abandon one of his oxen in a dying condition; and, sure enough, a quarter of an hour later we saw the poor beast lying by the side of the road, with the aasvogels, or vultures, already gathered about it. A round dozen or more were squatted on the ground in a circle round the dying ox, while others, mere specks in the deep—blue sky, were winging their way to it from all quarters. The method of these new arrivals was to maintain their lofty flight until they arrived immediately above their destined prey; then they would begin to circle

slowly downward in a wide spiral, finally hovering for some three or four seconds at a height of about twenty yards before awkwardly settling upon the ground. This was my chance; an aasvogel more or less in South Africa mattered nothing, there were plenty of them and to spare, and they were such disgusting creatures that I had no compunction at all about abandoning my usual rule, and shooting one or two of them merely in order to test my new weapon. And a very good test they afforded too, for although their downward sailing upon outstretched, motionless wings was a perfectly steady movement, it was rather deceptive as to speed, and, the movement being a circling one, it was necessary to fire at exactly the right instant, or the range would be wrong and a miss would result.

I decided to begin the test by firing at a descending vulture at what was supposed to be the extreme range of accuracy of the weapon, namely, five hundred yards; and as this was a good long distance—quite far enough to enable the bird to swerve at the flash and so cause me to miss—I came to the conclusion that the right thing to do would be to allow the vulture to sweep past until it was flying away from me, and then pull the trigger. Accordingly I loaded the piece, threw up the five-hundred-yard sight, and then walked forward, choosing a particular bird as I did so, and following it with my eye until I judged it to be at the right distance and position; then I flung up the rifle, pressed it firmly to my shoulder, covered the vulture with the sights, and fired. The next second I saw the feathers fly, the great wings flapped once, convulsively, and as the “smack” of the bullet reached my ears the bird turned a complete somersault in the air and fell to the ground stone-dead, to the accompaniment of loud shouts of wonder and admiration from my Totties.

Needless to say, I was vastly proud of my achievement, for it was far and away the longest shot that I had ever attempted. But instead of being satisfied with my success, I must needs attempt something still more difficult. Flapping down the back sight, and entirely dispensing with its use, I reloaded the weapon and determined to rely upon my eye and my judgment alone, or, in other words, upon that faculty which, by constant use, had become a sort of instinct with me. Accordingly I selected as a mark another vulture which had been in the act of descending, but which, apparently alarmed at the unusual manner in which its predecessor had accomplished the last part of its descent, was now wheeling slowly round at a height of, as I estimated, fully eight hundred yards above the earth. Training my rifle upon it, I followed the movements of the bird until it had wheeled away from me, when, carefully judging the amount of elevation required, I pressed the trigger, and was delighted the next moment again to see the feathers fly, to note the convulsive stroke of the great pinions which indicated a hit, and to see the ponderous bulk of the bird come hurtling earthward. It was a magnificent shot—I felt that I was justified in admitting that much to myself—and it satisfied me that, even now, at the beginning of my acquaintance with my new rifle, I was as much master of it as I was of my old one, and could rely upon it as implicitly. I felt that I had no need to test its capabilities further; but I once more loaded it and, walking to where the dying ox was lying, with the circle of vultures closing in around it, put the foul birds to flight, with many a croak of protest from them at my interference, placed the muzzle of the weapon at the ear of the ox, pulled the trigger, and put the poor beast out of its misery, besides saving it from the possibility of attack by the ravenous birds before the breath had entirely left its body. Three miles farther on we outspanned for the night.

The return journey—until its last stage—was as uneventful as the outward one had been. For the first three days we met, on an average, half a dozen wagons a day, trekking to Port Elizabeth from various farms in the outlying districts; but after that they became less numerous, and after the fifth day we met no more, nor did I call at any farms—which, at that length from the Bay, were few and far between—although we occasionally sighted one in the distance to the right or left of the track we were following.

On the twentieth day after my departure from Bella Vista, about an hour after we had inspanned for the day's trek, which was to end with our arrival home shortly before sunset, as we topped a slight rise the kopje or hill upon which the house stood swung into view for the first time since I had lost sight of it some three weeks earlier; but it was still at such a distance that, with the house turning its shadowed face to me, I could not distinguish it with the naked eye, and it happened that upon that particular occasion I had forgotten to put into the voorkissie, or wagon chest, upon which the driver generally sits, the telescope that I usually carried with me upon such excursions. Nevertheless I knew that my people would be expecting my return on that day; therefore, when we outspanned about midday, instead of lighting only one fire, for the purpose of cooking our midday meal, I caused three to be lighted, at a distance of about one hundred feet apart, which was my usual method of advertising my impending arrival, feeling sure that somebody about the house would be on the lookout, and would see the three sparks of flame and columns of smoke, we being by that time within some ten miles of the place. At this distance I was generally able, in clear weather, to distinguish the long, white front wall of the house standing out against the purple shadows of the Great Winter Berg range, but on this occasion I could not, although the day was as fine and the air as clear as usual at that time of the year. Yet, strangely enough, the circumstance did not strike me as being in the least peculiar or significant, although Piet, my after-rider, made some passing reference to it. Later on in the afternoon, however, when we had again inspanned, and had been trekking for about an hour, it began to dawn upon me that things were not quite as usual at Bella Vista. In the first place, of all our flocks and herds which should have been grazing somewhere on the plain or the foothills ahead, not a horn or a hoof was to be seen. Also, the house looked different: it had the appearance of being not as high as usual; I could not see the grey thatch of its roof; and the walls, instead of being pure white, as they had been when I last saw them, were white only in comparatively small patches, the remainder being brown, and in some places black!

By the time we had approached close enough to distinguish as much as that, we all came to the conclusion that we knew what had happened; and I saddled and mounted my horse and, followed as usual by the two dogs, rode forward at a hand gallop to investigate. There had undoubtedly been a conflagration, which had destroyed the house; and my father and mother, with the house “boys”, had in all probability gone over to Triannon, whither, no doubt, the stock had also been driven. Still, I thought it rather strange that they had not dispatched a “boy” to meet me and explain what had happened, and whither they had gone, or at least left one about the place to afford me full information on my arrival. I finally concluded that they had done the latter, and that the lazy rascal was in his hut fast asleep, instead of keeping a watch for me, as he ought to have been doing. This last thought caused me to look particularly for the huts, and then I understood another thing that had been puzzling me: the huts no longer existed!

Seriously alarmed now—for the destruction of the house by fire by no means necessarily involved the destruction of the huts, which had stood about a quarter of a mile from the former—I pressed my heels into Prince's flanks and urged him up the rise at his best speed, fears—born of Lestrangle's news on that night when he had ridden over to borrow ammunition—at last gripping my heart lest what he had then apprehended as just a very remote possibility might have actually come to pass. And as I at length drew near enough to observe that the massive gate in the high fence which surrounded our extensive garden was off its hinges and lying flat on the ground just inside the opening, those fears increased, and were still further strengthened when, as I rode through the opening, a whiff of tainted air like the odour of carrion reached my nostrils. Then, as I glanced about me, with eyes prepared to behold I knew not what of horror, I perceived that many of the ornamental flowering shrubs on either side of the path leading to the house were beaten down and withered, as though stampeding cattle—or a host of men—had swept over them; while far up the pathway, and even upon the stoep of the house itself, a multitude of aasvogels were squatted motionless, apparently gorged, while others were waddling slowly and heavily to and fro. Half a dozen paces farther on Prince suddenly shied so violently that he almost unseated me, as a loud flapping of wings and a great croaking arose on my right, and some fifteen of the obscene birds rose heavily into the air and winged their way a hundred yards or so farther up the garden before again settling.

The pathway was bordered, from the house to the gateway, with a hedge of flowering shrubs, backed on either side by rows of peach trees; and it was impossible for me to see from the path what lay beyond those peach trees. I therefore dismounted, and, throwing the reins to the ground, so that Prince might not walk away to the stable, forced my way through the hedge and the rows of peach trees into the more open part of the garden; and there I beheld what I was by this time fully prepared to see, but what was nevertheless a sight revolting beyond all possibility of description. I will not enter into unnecessary details, but will simply say that scattered about here and there all over that part of the garden lay the disfigured remains of some sixty or seventy Tembu warriors—they were easily identifiable by the shape of their shields and spears and the general character of their war equipment—who had evidently been shot down during a most determined and pertinacious attack upon the house. The other half of the front portion of the garden presented a similar sight, the whole bearing mute but indubitable testimony not only to the implacable determination of the savages but also to the resolution of the defenders. Yes, the worst had happened: the house had been attacked and finally destroyed, notwithstanding the desperate nature of the defence put up by its inmates; and now—my mother and father, and good old Jack Nesbitt, where were they?

To discover the answer to this momentous question was my next task, and how shall I find words to describe the passion of grief and apprehension with which I set about it? It must go undescribed, for there are certain emotions of the human heart and mind which mere words are powerless to portray. Perhaps it is well that this should be the case, for no one who has not passed through such an experience as mine could possibly understand what I endured as I made my slow way toward the ruined house, subconsciously noting, as I went, the evidences which met me on every hand of the protracted, stubborn implacability of the attack, and the resolute, unyielding character of the defence. The savages had indeed succeeded, but at what a cost! As I made my way up through that shambles of a wrecked garden I acquired a new impression of the invincible courage of the South African native which I have never since had occasion to modify.

In the face of such evidence of deadly resolution on the part of the combatants on both sides as I beheld all round me, I felt that it was hopeless to dream of the possibility that the inmates of the house had made good their escape at the last moment, for clearly the building had been completely surrounded, and the attack simultaneously delivered on all sides. The question was, had they finally met death on the points of the enemy's spears, or had they fallen alive into that enemy's hands? I shuddered with greater horror than ever as the latter possibility occurred to me, for I had not lived nearly sixteen years in South Africa without hearing something of the unspeakable barbarities inflicted by the savages upon those unhappy beings who chanced to be taken alive in battle by them. Better a thousand times—ay, ten thousand times—that my dear ones should perish quickly in the heat and excitement of the fight than that they should survive to be carried off to suffer—! I put the thought from me, for I felt that I should go mad if I permitted my mind to dwell upon it.

Yet it thrust itself persistently upon me again and again as I approached the smoke-blackened walls of the ruined building and gazed with horrified eyes at the constantly accumulating evidences of the desperate character of the attack and defence. I believed I could pretty accurately picture what had happened. My father had evidently not been taken entirely by surprise, or there would not have been so many dead savages lying around the house: he had probably obtained an inkling of what was toward in time to put the building into some sort of state of defence; possibly he had found time to barricade the doors and windows, and from the general aspect of things outside I surmised that he had somehow contrived to get half a dozen or more of the Totties into the house to assist in its defence.

The attack had probably occurred about two or three o'clock in the morning, when the whites might be expected to be sound asleep, and from the appearance of the slain I believed that it had taken place about thirty-six hours before my arrival on the scene. In any case the attack was unwisely planned, from the native point of view, for it was about the time of full moon, and the South African night, with a full moon riding high in the sky, is almost literally as light as day, and the defenders, being doubtless on the qui vive, would perceive the first stealthy approach of the savages and at once open fire upon them. And I knew enough about my father's and Nesbitt's marksmanship to feel assured that every time they pressed a trigger an enemy would fall. But even their deadly skill with the rifle would not account for the many bodies lying round the house, and thus I was brought to the conclusion that some of the Totties, armed with shot guns loaded with loopers, or slugs, must have assisted in the defence. Time after time the enemy must have charged toward the house, and time after time must they have been driven back from those stout stone walls and barricaded doors and windows by the withering volleys of lead poured into them at close range. But the weak point of Bella Vista was its thatched roof, which was the universal form of covering to every farmhouse at that day, on account of its coolness. It was, however, easily capable of being set fire to, and in all probability the Kafirs, after being several times repulsed, had made a concerted rush, in the course of which they had succeeded in hurling several spears, with bunches of burning grass attached to them, into the thatch, where they had remained,

setting the roof on fire. Then, as the house was only a one-storey building, it would quickly fill with smoke, and the inmates would be faced with the alternatives of suffocating, being burnt to death beneath the blazing roof when it should fall in, or yielding themselves to the tender mercies of the ferocious Tembu. I thought I knew which of the alternatives my father would choose, provided, of course, that he survived long enough to avail himself of the choice; but did he? That was the question, and—merciful heaven! if he did not, what had become of my mother?

Frenzied at the thought of what her fate might be if she had fallen alive into the hands of the savages, I dashed up the front steps to the stoep, clubbing my rifle and striking out right and left at the gorged aasvogels congregated there, which seemed disposed to resent my intrusion. And as I mounted to the top step I at once perceived that I had now arrived at the spot where the fight had raged most fiercely and stubbornly, for the ornamental guard rail and one of the veranda posts were broken-down, the climbing roses which had been trained to screen the railing were crushed and trodden into the earth, and the whole stoep was choked with the bodies of Tembu warriors who had evidently met death in a desperate attempt to force their way into the house through the barricaded doors and windows.

But the barricades no longer existed, having evidently been consumed in the conflagration that followed the collapse of the flaming roof, and now only the charred and blackened remnants of the door and window frames remained; beyond them appeared a small heap of white ashes, among which could be detected here and there a few fragments of what had once been picture frames, the metal-work of furniture, or the unconsumed end of a roof timber. With a strong effort of will I compelled myself to pass through one of the window openings, and entered what had been the drawing-room. A strong odour of fire still clung to the place, but there was not much débris, for the room had been by no means crowded with furniture. I was obliged to pick my way with care, for the floor was burned completely through in some places, while in others it was so deeply charred that my feet broke through upon encountering them. I persevered, however, for near the middle of the room I perceived a mound of ashes of exceedingly suggestive shape and dimensions, and I was anxious to ascertain what lay beneath. And, combating the almost invincible repugnance to close investigation which seized me, I presently discovered that the heap concealed, as I had suspected, a half-consumed human body, so dreadfully disfigured that it was only with the utmost difficulty I presently succeeded in identifying it as the remains of a Tottie. The metal blade and shank of a Tembu spear—the wooden shaft of which had been consumed by fire—transfixed the throat, and my father's roer, with its stock deeply charred, was still grasped in what remained of the left hand. It was the only body in the room.

From this room I passed into the hall. This was in a similar condition to that of the drawing-room, except that it contained the remains of two bodies, one close to the doorway and the other at the point where the passage leading from the rear entrance of the building opened upon the hall. The body near the front doorway I identified as that of Nesbitt—by the watch which was lying close beside it, and which, I noticed, had stopped at twenty-three minutes after six—while the other body was quite unrecognisable. There was nothing to show how either of these men had died.

Leaving the hall, I entered the dining-room; and the moment I did so it became apparent that I had arrived upon the scene of the last stand of the little garrison, where the final phase of the stubborn and protracted attack and defence had been fought out. For the room was in a terrible state of confusion, the scattered remains of the heavy furniture showing that the savages had actually succeeded in forcing the barricade and gaining an entrance—this evidence being confirmed by the presence of nine Tembu corpses piled up in the window opening. And within arm's length of them lay another corpse—that of my father, still grasping in his right hand the trusty cavalry sabre that had served him so well in his campaigning days, while his left held a pistol. Three Tembu spearheads in his body, one of which had evidently passed through his heart, told how he had died. A few feet away, right up against the front wall, I noticed a pile of scorched, brittle stuff that, as I cautiously probed it with the barrel of my rifle, proved to be burnt rugs. The three upper layers were burnt to a cinder, but the fourth was only scorched, while the last was scarcely singed; and beneath this lay the body of my mother, the flesh slightly darkened by the smoke of the burnt woollen rugs, but otherwise not disfigured at all. A bullet hole in the very centre of her forehead told me all that I wanted to know; and while I cast myself on my knees in the ashes beside that beloved form, a tempest of dry sobs rending my bosom as I realised for the first time all that I had lost, I felt thankful that my father had found the courage and resolution at the last moment to save her, even though by such dreadful means, from falling alive into the hands of the fiendishly ferocious Tembu.

In the remaining rooms I found seven more corpses, all of them being those of Totties, who had either perished in defending the house or had died of suffocation. And nowhere but in the dining-room had the savages ever succeeded in gaining even a temporary footing, while the general appearance of the ruins showed that they had not entered after the flames had died out; indeed, I doubted whether they had even deferred their departure until then, for they must have known at last that nothing could possibly have survived in that furnace of flame, and with the whites all slain and the house ablaze, there was no reason why they should desire to enter it, for the fire would effectually destroy everything in the shape of plunder. But they had driven off the whole of the live stock, and that alone should have satisfied them.

I do not know how long I remained on my knees beside the corpse of my mother in that fire-seared, bloodstained dining-room, plunged into a very stupor of grief; but I remember that I was at length aroused by the distant sounds of a cracking whip and the screams of Jan, the Hottentot driver, to his oxen, announcing the approach of the wagon; and, looking about me, I discovered that the sun had already set, and that darkness was fast closing down upon the scene. Then I rose to my feet, and, leaving the ruined house, made my way down the path to where Prince still stood patiently awaiting my return, with the dogs Thunder and Juno crouching upon the ground before him; and, flinging the bridle over his head, I climbed into the saddle and rode slowly forth to meet the wagon. I came to it at a distance of about half a mile from the broken-down gate at the garden entrance, and ordered the others to outspan where they were, water the oxen, and turn them loose to graze. Then I briefly acquainted Jan, the driver, and Piet, my after-rider, with what had happened, strictly forbade the former to go up to the house—though there was little need for that, for I doubt whether anything would have induced the fellow to go near the place after nightfall—and ordered Piet to accompany me, as it was my intention to ride on to Mr Lestranger's place, to see whether he and his had

escaped a similar visitation, and, if so, to beg shelter for the night and his presence and help on the following day while I performed the last sad offices for my beloved dead.

I am now an old man, for my age already exceeds the limit allotted by the Psalmist as the length of man's life, but the memory of that night ride, and my heart-breaking burden of grief as I stared out unseeingly upon the fast-darkening landscape, allowing Prince to find his own way and travel his own pace while I dwelt upon the harrowing scenes which I had so recently beheld, and began to realise the full extent of my irreparable loss, will never leave me; it is as fresh to-day as it was at that moment, and so I know it will continue to be until I die. Yet, keenly as I suffered, I frequently found myself wondering why I did not suffer still more keenly; for after I had progressed a mile or two on my way the sky to the eastward brightened, and presently the moon, two days past the full, sailed up over the far-distant horizon, flooding the scene with mystic radiance, and, all unknowingly, I reined up to gaze upon the entrancing scene. Yes, even at that moment, with the dry sobs bursting from my aching bosom; with my dead mother's face floating before my eyes, her lovely features placid and smiling in death, as I had beheld them only one short hour before; with the figure of my dead father lying outstretched among the ashes of his ruined home, his body pierced with the spears of the enemy, his weapons still tightly grasped in his clenched hands, and his sightless eyes still glaring defiance at the foe, I could pause to gaze upon the beauty of a South African moonrise! I could not understand it then; I was surprised and horrified at what I stigmatised as my callous heartlessness: but I know now that a merciful Providence has so ordered matters that when human suffering, whether mental or physical, reaches a certain degree of acuteness, partial insensibility sets in—I have known cases where men have slept while being subjected to the most awful tortures—and such was undoubtedly the case with me on that memorable night. My sensibility had become so benumbed that I had partially lost control of my mental processes, and my thoughts broke away at intervals to dwell for a few moments upon some entirely trivial matter which, one would have supposed, could not possibly have had the slightest interest for me, under the circumstances. Yet so it was; and in that curious, detached, semi-conscious frame of mind I covered the fourteen miles of veld that lay between Bella Vista and Triannon, most of it at a walking pace, coming in sight of the house about nine o'clock at night.

Chapter Three.

Major Henderson becomes confidential and advisory.

The house at Triannon, built in a sort of elbow formed by one of the spurs of the Great Winter Berg, was not visible from the direction in which I approached until one had rounded the kopje concealing it, when one found oneself close upon it. But as I drew near to my destination I became aware of a deep, ominous silence pervading the scene, which caused me to entertain the most gloomy forebodings. True, the hour was rather late, according to our notions of lateness in the country districts, and the sheep and cattle would have long ago been kraaled for the night; yet, even so, it was seldom that the stock settled down to rest so early, seldom that, among so many animals, there were not a few restless ones proclaiming their restlessness by bleat or bellow—and on this particular night there was not a sound of any description to apprise the wayfarer that he was within a quarter of a mile of an opulent farm. As I rounded the extremity of the spur, however, and the house swung into view, a great sigh of relief escaped me, for there, within shouting distance, stood the building to all appearances intact. True, it was in complete darkness; but that of course might very easily arise from the fact that Mr Lestrangle, after a busy day in the open, had retired to rest early.

Yet somehow the darkness seemed to me to be as ominous as the silence, and, urging Prince to a canter, I dashed forward, leaped the fence without pausing to take down the slip rails, and reined up at the steps which gave access to the stoep. Then I perceived that the front door and all the windows were wide-open, which struck me as being peculiar in the extreme, taken in conjunction with the total darkness in which the house was wrapped; for though of course we habitually slept with our bedroom windows wide-open, we usually closed the front doors and the windows giving access to unoccupied rooms the last thing before retiring at night: therefore, moved by the sudden return in full flood of my anxiety, I gave vent to a loud whoop as I swung out of the saddle, and without waiting for a reply rushed up the steps, across the stoep, and into the house, shouting as I went: "Mr Lestrangle! Mr Lestrangle! where are you? It is I, Ned Laurence. Where are you?"

The echo of my voice was, however, the only reply I received; but I had no sooner entered the hall than I perceived that something was very seriously wrong, for the furniture was all disarranged, one of the chairs was overturned, and, so far as I could see in the semi-obscurity, it appeared that Lestrangle's guns were not in their usual places in the rack.

Of course I never went anywhere without carrying in my pocket the means to obtain a light; therefore without waiting for further developments I drew forth my flint and steel, and presently lighted the lamp which hung from the hall ceiling, and which fortunately still contained a fair quantity of oil. Then, removing the lamp from the frame in which it hung, I proceeded forthwith to explore.

Now that I had a light, and could plainly distinguish my surroundings, my worst forebodings were confirmed, for everything in the place was disarranged, the weapons were all gone, as well as the skin rugs which usually covered the floor and several valuable karosses with which the chairs and sofa were wont to be draped, while the various hunting trophies had been torn from the walls, and some were gone. Fearing now, and indeed quite expecting, the worst, after casting a hurried glance about the hall I made my way straight to Mr Lestrangle's bedroom; and there, just inside the wide-open door, lay the poor fellow, clad only in his sleeping garb, with three ghastly assagai wounds in his body, and one through his throat which had severed the jugular vein. This room, too, was in a terrible state of disorder, having evidently been subjected to a thorough search for anything that might appeal to the fancy of a savage. But there had been no fight, that was perfectly clear; the surprise had been complete, and the savages had contrived to gain entrance to the house in time to massacre the inmates before they had a chance to defend themselves.

The inmates! There were none but Mr Lestrangle—who was a widower—and Nell; and where was she? I was sufficiently intimate with the arrangements of the house to know which was Nell's room, and my next dash was thither. The door of the room was wide-open, but I paused in the opening when I reached it, with the feeling strong upon me that I should commit something very like sacrilege by entering. A single glance, however, sufficed to reveal that the shrine of innocent girlhood had already been violated, for it, too, like Mr Lestrangle's, had been turned topsy-turvy by the savages. But Nell—where was she? Instinctively I scanned the floor of the room in search of her dead body, but it was not there; furthermore, I could not find the slightest trace of a bloodstain to indicate that the tragedy had been a double one; only the bed was stripped of its coverings, and when I came to investigate more closely I found her night robe flung carelessly upon the floor, but none of her day garments lying about. And the conclusion to which I was finally driven was that the poor child, instead of having been slain in cold blood, like her father, had been surprised in her sleep, compelled to dress, and been carried off alive and perhaps unhurt by the savages. Poor child! Poor darling little Nell! Oh, if I were right in my reading of the signs, what an unspeakably awful fate was hers! And yet—and yet—perhaps it might not be so very terrible after all. She was but a child—and a sweetly pretty child, too; and I had heard of cases where white girl children had been kidnapped by the blacks and carried off by them to their fastnesses in the wilds, there to become, first the pet, and ultimately the 'nkosikaas or chieftainess of the tribe. True, it was not often that that was done, but there was a kind of legend among the natives that somewhere far up in the interior there was a great and very powerful tribe ruled over by a white 'nkosikaas; while within my own recollection a young girl, the daughter of a Boer farmer, had been carried off by the Bechuanas, and was in like manner said to be still living as the 'nkosikaas of the tribe. If this were true—and there seemed to be no good reason to doubt it—one could only hope that poor little Nell Lestrangle might meet with no worse a fate.

But it was a horrible thing to think of that sweet, lovable little creature being suddenly awakened out of a sound sleep in the middle of the night by a horde of ferocious, bloodthirsty savages, and carried off by them, perhaps in ignorance of her father's fate, and in deadly terror of what was to befall her. I was very fond of Nell—I had grown to regard her almost as a sister; and my first impulse was to set out there and then, seek her until I found her, and never rest until I had effected her rescue from her savage jailers. But a few moments' reflection sufficed to convince me of the utter futility of such a mad project. These two outrages—the attacks upon Lestrangle's and our own farms—clearly indicated that the long-expected rising of the natives had at last taken place, so suddenly that Lestrangle at least had been caught unawares, and no doubt the whole country was at that moment ablaze and being overrun by the blacks in overwhelming numbers. The mystery to me was that I had not heard so much as a hint of the actual rising from any of the folk whom I had met on my return journey from Port Elizabeth; and the fact that I had not done so seemed to indicate that the outbreak, although in a general way expected, had been so skilfully managed that, after all, the settlers had been caught more or less off their guard. And, so far from it being possible for me to undertake singlehanded an expedition for the rescue of Nell, I was liable at any moment to blunder upon a war party of savages and either be slain by them forthwith, or, still worse, be carried off a captive, to suffer death by torture; indeed, the wonder was that something of this kind had not already happened to me, as doubtless it had to many another unsuspecting traveller. No, to attempt alone to rescue Nell would be worse than useless, it would simply be the wanton throwing away of a life that, later on, might be of service to her; and I could only hope that, meanwhile, no worse thing than simple captivity might befall her.

I was aroused from my sombre reflections by the appearance of Piet, my Hottentot after-rider, who, more prudent than myself, had approached the house with a certain measure of circumspection, and now came to report that, as in our own case, all the sheep and cattle had been driven off, and that no trace of any of the native domestics or shepherds had been found, the presumption being that they had all taken the alarm and fled, or, more likely still, had been captured and carried off as prisoners. I went the rounds of the place with him, frequently shouting the name of one or another of the servants without avail, and I finally came to the conclusion that his surmise was probably correct.

And now arose the question, what was I to do? My plight was almost as desperate as it could well be; for not only was I utterly bereft of every one of those who were nearest and dearest to me, but I was likewise homeless, and literally penniless. The house which I called home was destroyed; every horn and hoof of my father's stock had been stolen, and would probably never be recovered; and as to money, there was none, for my father, instead of banking the profits of the farm and allowing them to accumulate, had, as I have already explained, habitually spent them in improving the live stock, or adding to the adornments of the house, and the contents of the wagon which I had brought up from Port Elizabeth represented every penny of spare cash remaining in the house when I left it on my journey. True, I had the wagon and its contents, as well as the team of oxen, upon which I could doubtless realise; also there was the farm—that is to say, the land—itself, which was worth quite a handsome sum of money; but I was most unwilling to part with this for several reasons; and, had I been ever so anxious to sell, it would most probably have proved impossible to find a purchaser at that moment, with the natives in armed revolt against the whites.

But there were other matters of an even more pressing character than those just enumerated demanding my attention, and the first of these was the interment of the body of my unfortunate friend, Nell's father. Therefore, summoning Piet, I bade him seek a shovel; and when he had found one I set him to work to dig a grave at a certain spot about a quarter of a mile from the house, which I knew to be greatly favoured by Nell on account of the beautiful view obtainable from it: and there Piet and I reverently laid the dead man to rest, afterward piling a number of large stones round the grave, and placing a rough wooden cross at its head to mark the spot. Then, recovering our horses, we returned to Bella Vista, and, thoroughly worn out by the fatigue and horror of the past day, I sought rest in the outspanned wagon.

Next morning, with a grief so bitter that even now I cannot look back upon it unmoved, I chose another site for a grave and laid my beloved dead to rest side by side, marking the spot as I had marked the grave of Nell's father; leaving the remains of the savages to be dealt with by the vultures, hyenas, and jackals. And when I had done all that was possible the wagon was inspanned, and with a heavy heart I wended my way, accompanied by my little following, to Somerset East, where I arrived late in the afternoon of the following day without having encountered anything of an untoward character on my way. There was but one farm between Bella Vista and Somerset East,

situate about halfway between the latter and the Great Fish River, and when in the course of my journey the house came in sight, I jumped on Prince's back and galloped forward, with the view of ascertaining what, if anything, had happened there. But upon my arrival I found the farm silent and deserted, with not so much as a dog about the place. The house, however, was undamaged, all the doors and windows were fastened, and upon looking through the latter I perceived that the rooms were empty of furniture; I therefore concluded—which afterwards proved to be the case—that the owner had obtained timely warning of the rising, had hurriedly packed all his belongings into wagons, and, driving his stock before him, had hastily retired to Somerset East.

The town of Somerset East was in a terrible commotion when I reached it, some fifty fugitive families from the outlying districts, with their stock and belongings, having already taken shelter there, while others were hourly arriving; and every man had a story to tell of some farm that had been attacked, its inhabitants murdered, and its stock driven off. Something very nearly approaching to a state of panic prevailed, for the town at that time contained only some three hundred inhabitants, of whom three-quarters were women and children; moreover, it lay quite open and unprotected on every side, and might easily be rushed by a sufficiently strong body of the enemy. But there were a few cool heads among those congregated in the town, one notable being a certain Major Henderson, who, like my father, had held a post in the British army, and who at once naturally came to the front and took the lead in preparing the place to meet successfully a possible attack.

A laager, consisting of wagons interlocked, was constructed at each end of the single street that then ran through the town; the inner ends of the narrow lanes giving off the main street were securely barricaded, thus forming a number of culs-de-sac in which, if the attacking savages dared to venture there, they would be swept out of existence by the defenders behind the barricades; and every back door and window of every house accessible from the veld was strongly protected by heavy timber and loopholed for rifle fire: thus when Henderson's scheme of defence was complete the town presented a very tough nut to crack for an enemy without artillery or firearms. The greatest difficulty, it appeared, was the shortness of ammunition, consequently my arrival with a wagon-load of the commodity was regarded as scarcely less than a special interposition of Providence. Then the male inhabitants voluntarily placed themselves under martial law, under Henderson's command, taking it in turns to perform sentry-go day and night; while the best mounted among us undertook to act as scouts, riding forth from the town daily in various directions in quest of news of the enemy, and returning in the evening with such intelligence as we had been able to gain. This daily scouting service proved to be of the utmost value, for in the first place it prevented the possibility of a surprise attack, and so enabled the stock congregated in the town to be daily driven forth to graze and water; and it also was the means whereby in the course of a few days we were able to gather something like a clear general idea of what had happened and was still happening in the colony.

Thus it soon transpired that, in the eastern provinces, an imaginary line drawn from the mouth of the Great Kei River through Triannon and Bella Vista, and thence northward along the meridian of 26 degrees east longitude to the Zour Bergen, represented the southern limit of the savages' depredations; while beyond the Zour Bergen, to the north and west, we were unable to learn anything definite. On the fifth day after my arrival in Somerset East a detachment consisting of two companies of infantry, accompanied by baggage and ammunition wagons, under the command of a Captain Fletcher, arrived from Port Elizabeth, and encamped within half a mile of the town in an excellent strategic position, which they at once proceeded to entrench strongly; and there they remained nearly a week, awaiting instructions from their general, who was preparing a plan of campaign while moving toward the centre of disturbance the few troops at his disposal, and collecting information.

During the week that followed the arrival of the troops we received intelligence of several attacks upon isolated farms, and even small villages, in the outlying and more sparsely populated districts; from which it speedily became apparent that the regular troops, consisting, as they did, entirely of infantry, and hampered, as they were, by their baggage wagons, were altogether too slow-moving to be effective in overtaking and bringing to action the nimble bodies of savages, who were encumbered with no impedimenta of any description whatsoever excepting their weapons—a shield, knobkerrie, and sheaf of assagais; who slept under the stars, quenched their thirst at every stream or runlet that crossed their path, and eat whatever came to hand, whether it chanced to be buck, bullock, or green mealies.

Therefore it seemed, upon careful consideration of the situation, that if the ravages of the blacks were to be stopped there was only one course to be pursued, and that was to dispatch against them a force of irregular cavalry composed of farmers, hunters, transport riders, and others, men who had lived long enough in the country to become inured to the climate and accustomed to the methods of travel in it, who could move as independently of impedimenta as the savages themselves, and, being mounted, as swiftly, and who, being provided with firearms, might hope to cope successfully with a foe considerably stronger in point of numbers than themselves. And there were plenty of such men to be had—farmers who had fled from their farms to the towns and villages upon the first news of the outbreak, transport riders whose occupation had ceased upon the outbreak of hostilities, hunters who were in like case with the transport riders, and a few who, like myself, had lost everything but life itself at the hands of the savages; and we speedily banded ourselves into troops, in some cases numbering not more than twenty or thirty, in others amounting to a hundred or more, each band under its own elected leader and subordinate officers. The corps to which I attached myself—and which dubbed itself the Somerset East Mounted Rifles—consisted of one hundred and seven men under the command of Major Henderson, divided into two troops of fifty men each—the right troop under the command of "Captain" Henry Jackson, and the left troop under the command of "Captain" Pieter Van Rhyn, with a sergeant in command of each of the two squadrons which composed a troop.

Each man provided his own horse, weapons, and ammunition; we were not in uniform, and were volunteers in the strictest sense of the word, for we drew no pay, and acknowledged allegiance to no man save our own officers, although it was of course fully understood by everybody that we were always to be ready to co-operate with and support the regular troops in the event of our encountering any. This, however, was exceedingly unlikely, at least in the earlier stages of the campaign, for so lightly equipped were we that we could perform forty-mile marches day after day with ease, and were confident that we could not only get into touch with, but could also reduce the enemy to subjection, long before the regulars could arrive at the scene of hostilities. And although we did not substantiate

our boast or achieve our ambition in its entirety, I think I am justified in claiming that the honours of the campaign fell chiefly to the various bodies of irregulars who so self-sacrificingly took the field on that occasion; for it was we, and not the regulars, who followed up and hunted down so relentlessly the marauding bands of savages who swept the colony like a storm wave, causing such a loss of life and property as it took the colonists the best part of a generation to recover from.

It is not my purpose to write a history of the Kafir War of the year 1835, for that has already been done by far abler hands than mine, and with a fullness of detail which leaves nothing to be desired; moreover, I have another and entirely different, although, as I think, equally stirring story to tell. I will therefore dismiss the events connected with my service in the ranks of the Somerset East Mounted Rifles with the bare statement that during the nine months so covered I participated in many deeply stirring episodes, and on several occasions found myself involved in situations so desperate that nothing save the steadfastness and invincible courage of every man present saved us from absolute annihilation. It is not to be supposed that a mere handful of men composed of burghers and farmers, with practically no knowledge of military science, and quite unaccustomed to anything in the nature of military discipline, could pass through so trying an ordeal as that which we cheerfully faced without suffering heavy loss; and, as a matter of fact, by the time that the campaign was so far over that the regular troops were able to cope with the situation, and the Government had therefore no further need of our services, the Somerset East Mounted Rifles had become reduced to less than half their original strength: yet fortune so far favoured me that when at length the corps was disbanded I was one of the very few who escaped without so much as a scratch to show for my nine months' service.

The corps was disbanded where it had originated, in the town of Somerset East; and on the following day I found myself face to face with the exceedingly perplexing problem of the future. I was, it must be remembered, not yet quite eighteen years of age. I was therefore still young enough to be able to start life afresh; but I was without a single relative in the world, and my worldly goods consisted solely of two thousand five hundred and sixty acres of pasture land which, although it was undeniably an exceedingly valuable possession, and likely to increase very greatly in value with the passage of the years, was just then incapable of returning me a single penny of income. True, there was a sum of a little over three hundred pounds sterling standing to my credit in the bank, such being the proceeds of the sale of my wagon, oxen, and the ammunition with which I had trekked into Somerset East upon the outbreak of hostilities, though this was far too insignificant a sum to be of any use in restocking the farm, rebuilding the house, and beginning life afresh as a sheep farmer, on ever so modest a scale: and I also possessed my horse Prince, who had carried me through many a wild and stirring adventure, and, like myself, had emerged unscathed, together with a saddle and bridle, my trusty rifle, and the double-barrelled sporting gun which I had purchased in Port Elizabeth for my father, little dreaming, at the time of the purchase, that he would not live to use it.

I have said that I was without a relative in the world, which was the literal truth; but it was impossible that I should participate in such a campaign as the one I had just passed through without making many staunch friends, both Boers and English: and some of these, middle-aged men who knew perfectly well what they were talking about, strongly advised me to raise money, either by selling a portion of my farm, or by means of a mortgage upon it. But my father had instilled into me a perfect horror of anything that savoured of getting into debt, while the mere idea of selling any portion of the property which he had accumulated, almost acre by acre, was absolutely abhorrent to me; therefore, although I had the greatest respect for the judgment of my friends, and fully believed in the financial soundness of their advice, I determined that only in the last resort would I avail myself of it.

In this resolution I was fully supported by Major Henderson, who was as well qualified to advise in such a matter as anyone, having been in the country for over thirty years, and knowing it a good deal better than most. He had a farm up under the southern slopes of the Tandjes Berg, and upon the dissolution of the corps he was good enough to invite me to take up my quarters at his place while thinking over my affairs and deciding what to do.

It was while we were sitting out on the stoep of his house, one night after dinner, that the conversation occurred that decided my course of action and ultimately launched me upon the great adventure which, while leading me into many strange and terrible perils, was so profoundly to influence the whole of my after life. I remember that I was in a very pessimistic, downcast mood that night, and expressed the opinion that there appeared to be nothing for it but for me to erect a sort of glorified Kafir hut on my land, invest my money in a small flock of sheep, shepherd them myself, and so gradually build up my fortunes afresh from that modest foundation.

"No," said the ex-major, "I would not advise you to do that; certainly not. The process is too slow; and unless you should happen to meet with such a persistent run of good luck as no man has a right to expect you would be a good way past middle age before you could restore Bella Vista to what it was a year ago. What I would advise you to do, Laurence, is this—and, mind you, if I had not watched your behaviour through our recent short but exceedingly arduous campaign, and with my own eyes witnessed your indomitable pluck and resource, I would not advise it; for to undertake and succeed in what I am going to suggest a man must possess courage that will quail at nothing, infinite resource, the ability to decide and act with lightning promptitude in the face of any emergency, a profound knowledge of the ways of the natives, and, lastly, the thews and sinews of a Hercules, and perfect health."

"But, my dear Major," I protested, "I do not possess half of the qualities which you deem essential to success in this enterprise, whatever it may be. It is true that my health at the present moment is all that I could possibly desire; I am fairly strong—well, perhaps unusually strong for my age; and I believe that I understand the natives pretty well: but, apart from that—"

"Yes, apart from that," interrupted my companion, "you possess all the qualities that I have credited you with. Now, don't contradict me, youngster, for I have watched you, and I know! To continue from the point at which I interrupted myself, what I would advise you to do is what I would unhesitatingly do myself were I in your predicament, what I would even join you in doing were I younger by thirty years than I happen to be, and had no wife or family to think about and make me falter and lose courage on the brink of every extra hazardous adventure; and it is this. I would recommend you to draw the whole of your money out of the bank, buy a good wagon and a team of salted oxen,

invest about twenty pounds in beads, copper wire, and Kafir 'truck' generally, lay out the remainder of your money in an elephant gun and ammunition for it, your rifle, and your sporting gun, and—trek right up-country into the interior after ivory and ostrich feathers. By the time that you have completed your preparations the war will be over and the natives will be not only perfectly quiet and peaceful, but more than eager to trade with you upon highly advantageous terms. By so doing, you could, in the course of six months, load your wagon to its utmost capacity with tusks and feathers, get back to the coast, and dispose of your load at a price which would cover all your expenses and leave you a very handsome profit upon your outlay of time and money. But," continued the major, unconsciously dropping his voice to a confidential tone, "I do not advise you to limit your energies to that programme; very far from it. Were I undertaking the expedition I should cache my ivory in comparatively small parcels, at frequent intervals, so that I might not have the trouble of dragging it about the country, but could collect it on my return journey, if I wanted it, and should push on right into the interior, up into Mashonaland, and, possibly, farther still. The Mashonas are queer chaps, I'll allow; but they're all right if you take them the right way, make their headmen a few presents, take care to obtain permission before entering their country, and make it perfectly clear to them that your only object in desiring to enter their territory is sport, and trade with them. I've been up among them, and I know. And, my dear chap, there is gold—plenty of it—up there; and thus far they don't know the value of it! They'll swap you a nugget as big as your fist for a yard of copper wire. Therefore, my advice to you is: Go up there, trade your truck for gold, and bring back as much of the stuff as your wagon will carry.

"And now of course I know exactly what you are going to say. You are going to ask: If I am telling you the truth, why the dickens did I not do as I am advising you to do, and bring back a wagon-load of gold with me? My dear chap, I did! That is to say, I got the gold all right. But, unfortunately for me, I had a partner in the expedition, a Boer named Van Raalte, who was cursed with an outrageously quarrelsome disposition and a vile temper, especially where natives were concerned; and it was he who spoiled everything. Our expedition—which had originally been a hunting trip, pure and simple, you must understand—had been brilliantly successful; we had enjoyed magnificent sport—lion, elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo, giraffe, no end—and had filled our wagon chock-full of ivory, skins, and horns, and had then found out about the gold. Of course we at once threw everything overboard and loaded our wagon afresh with gold, as much of it as the blessed thing would carry or the oxen drag. And then what must that born idiot Van Raalte do but quarrel with one of the indunas about some trumpery thing, and slash the man across the face with his sjambok! Of course the fat was in the fire at once; we were set upon, seized, bound hand and foot with reins, and flung just anyhow into a hut.

"That occurred during the afternoon. About an hour before sunset they came and dragged out Van Raalte, and carried him away, leaving me where I was; and shortly afterward I heard a man start screaming as I wish never again to hear a man scream, so long as I live. The screaming lasted for hours, until past midnight I should think; and all the while I was lying there in that hut, as helpless as a baby, and sweating with horror at the awful, hair-raising sounds that pierced my ears. At length, however, the shrieks grew weaker and more intermittent, and finally they died away altogether. The night seemed endless, for what with the horror that seized me as I lay there listening and trying to imagine what was happening, and the excruciating pain of my tightly bound limbs, sleep was an impossibility; but the morning dawned at last, the village awoke, and an hour or two later I was unbound and led forth. They took me to a place about a quarter of a mile away, and showed me—something which they told me was all that remained of Van Raalte. I will not attempt to describe to you what I saw, but—well, let it pass! It was a full quarter of an hour before I recovered sufficiently from the sickness that followed to permit of intelligible speech on my part, and then they took me back to the village, where the induna was awaiting my return.

"'White man,' he said, 'have you seen?'

"'I have seen,' I replied, and with much difficulty conquered the tendency toward sickness that again came upon me.

"'Good!' said he. 'Now I give you your choice. Either leave this village, now, just as you are, without wagon, oxen, weapons, or goods of any kind, promising never to return; or—'

"'I will leave,' said I. And I did, there and then, more than thankful, I can tell you, that the alternative had been given me.

"I couldn't tell you—there are no words strong enough to describe it—what I endured while making my journey home from Mashonaland. I had no weapons wherewith to procure food, and I was obliged to live upon just what I could pick up, chiefly roots. But twice I was fortunate enough to come upon the partially devoured 'kill' of a lion—once it was a zebra, and the other time it was a giraffe—still comparatively fresh; and if it had not been for them I believe I should not have survived, for I was literally at the end of my tether when I came upon them. And I had no means of making a fire, you will understand. I struggled along, however, as best I could, losing all count of dates, and crazy as a loon more than half the time; and ultimately, a few miles on the other side of the Orange River, I fell in with an elephant hunter named King, who took care of me and finally handed me over to some friends of mine who at that time lived in Cape Town. But although I told King—and a good many other people, for that matter—what happened to me in Mashonaland, and how I came to be in such a terrible plight, I always omitted that part about the gold; and you, Ned, are the first and the only one to whom I have ever mentioned it. And I would not have mentioned it to you if I had not felt convinced that you possess all the qualities necessary to enable you to go up there, get a load, and safely bring it back with you."

Chapter Four.

I start upon my great Adventure.

In the privacy of my own room that night, after I had parted from the major, I gave my most careful consideration to the suggestion which he had thrown out; and despite the gruesome fate of the Dutchman, Van Raalte, at the hands

of the Mashonas, which my host had hinted at rather than described, the project decidedly appealed to me. It is true that I possessed no personal knowledge of the Mashonas, but I had an idea that, in essentials, they would probably resemble pretty closely the Zulus, of whom I knew something; and, if so, I could understand not only their treatment of Van Raalte—and of my friend Henderson too, as Van Raalte's companion and partner—but also that it might be quite possible for a white man possessed of a certain amount of tact and a tolerably comprehensive knowledge of the nature of the South African savage to enter their country and leave it again in safety.

That there was gold in Mashonaland was news to me; for although I had once or twice heard the general opinion casually expressed that South Africa would perhaps some day be found to be rich in minerals, I had never until now heard of the precious metal having actually been found, and I felt sure that, had such a rumour ever gained currency, not even the formidable reputation of the Mashonas would have sufficed to prevent a rush of prospectors into the country. No such rush had ever occurred, for, if it had, the news of it would have spread like wildfire, and every individual in the colony, to its most remote outskirts, would have heard of it. The fact, therefore, that no rush had occurred was conclusive proof that my friend Henderson was the sole repository of the momentous secret, which he had contrived to keep strictly to himself all those years. And now at last he had imparted it to me, and I was free to go up there, if I pleased, and acquire a fortune. True, there was a certain element of risk and danger in the project, for there were a thousand miles or more to be traversed through a roadless, savage country, of which little or nothing was then known except that it was infested by several of the most ferocious species of animals and reptiles, as well as millions of even more ferocious natives. And during a journey of a thousand miles through such a country almost anything was possible. But the spice of danger attaching to the journey appealed to me as an attraction rather than a deterrent; I should enjoy some of the finest sport that the world had to offer, and, with luck, might return a wealthy man. These alone were sufficient inducements; but there was another and still stronger one, which was—Nell Lestrage. She was so young at the time of her abduction, was so young still, that I hoped nothing very terrible had thus far happened to her; but it was unthinkable that a white girl should be permitted to grow up to womanhood among savages, and I was not altogether without the hope that during the progress of my journey I might be able to ascertain her whereabouts and effect her rescue. With so many strong inducements in favour of Henderson's suggestion, and only one—that comprised in the element of danger and uncertainty—against it, it is not to be wondered at that before I slept that night I had definitely decided to act upon the major's advice and undertake the journey.

This decision I duly communicated to my host on the following morning over the breakfast table, and thereupon we proceeded forthwith to discuss details. The major was of opinion that I ought to begin my preparations forthwith, for the season was rapidly advancing; it was then precisely the right time to start upon an up-country trek, for the rainy season was over, the rivers were low and everywhere fordable, and the young spring grass was at its best and richest. On the other hand, the dry season had set in, water would every day be growing more scarce, the grass more parched, and the ground harder; in a word, there was not a moment to lose if I desired to avail myself to the fullest possible extent of all the advantages of the season.

Having agreed upon this, we passed on to the consideration of ways and means, and Henderson proceeded to jot down rapidly a list of the various items which he deemed absolutely indispensable, supplementing it with another and much shorter list of further items which, although not positively necessary, would be highly desirable if the available funds would permit. Then the estimated cost of the several items, both indispensable and desirable, was jotted down, and the conclusion was finally arrived at that, if the various purchases were carefully made, the available money ought just about to suffice for the indispensables, with the possibility that, if luck attended me, one or two desirables might also be included. It is due to my friend the major to say that when the total of his original estimate was ascertained, and found to exceed the amount of my capital, he at once offered to advance me such further funds as might be needed to complete my equipment; but I gratefully yet steadfastly refused to avail myself of his generous offer, feeling that I had no right to risk the property of another. Then we sallied forth and proceeded to make our purchases, beginning with the wagon and team of oxen, and then proceeding with the remainder of the items until the resources of Somerset East were exhausted. The ammunition was the most important item of all, and I had early foreseen that it would be necessary to send down to Port Elizabeth for that. I did so, therefore, instructing the dealer to wrap the one-pound flasks of powder separately in waterproof paper, pack them in half-dozens in soldered-up tins, and enclose the whole in a stout wooden case, by which means I hoped to preserve effectually my entire stock of powder from the ordinary accidents of travel in a country subject at certain seasons to torrential downpours of rain, and intersected at pretty frequent intervals by rivers deep enough to flood a wagon during its passage across. The case of powder, which also contained the necessary complement of wads and percussion caps, arrived at Somerset East exactly a fortnight after the dispatch of the order for it, by which time the remainder of my preparations were completed. Nothing therefore remained but to bid my numerous friends goodbye and make a start forthwith.

I suppose it is hardly necessary to state that, when discussing the forthcoming expedition with my various friends, I carefully abstained from all mention of the word "gold". The major and I let it be understood that I was going to try my hand at elephant hunting as a business, and many were the valuable hints which I received from one and another as to the spots where I should be most likely to find the biggest herds. The last embers of the war were still smouldering in the north-eastern districts of the colony when I was ready to start, but everybody was of opinion that all was quite quiet in the north; therefore, instead of striking eastward and working north along the low land between the Drakensberg range and the sea, as I had at first intended, I decided to strike right away north at once between the Tandjes Berg and Great Winter Berg mountains, across the Zour Bergen, and so over the Orange River and right through the very heart of what is now known as the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal, but was then a practically unknown wilderness.

Behold me, then, trekking out from Somerset East about ten o'clock on a certain glorious mid-October morning, accompanied by a brand-new, well-loaded wagon drawn by a team of sixteen "salted" oxen—that is to say, oxen immune to the terrible lung sickness which is the bane of South Africa—driven by Jan, my former Hottentot driver, who, with Piet, my former after-rider, had contrived to pick up a living in Somerset East during the war, and now—

also with Piet—was more than willing to re-enter my service and accompany me to the uttermost parts of the earth, if so it might please me. The dogs, Thunder and Juno, also formed part of my train, having found a home with Piet during my absence at the war. Also, in addition to Prince, there were two other horses, one being a fine, sturdy iron-grey Basuto cob named Tempest, and the other a very useful chestnut named Punch, which I had purchased chiefly for Piet's use when we should arrive in the elephant country. The remaining member of my retinue was a Bantu boy named 'Ngulubi, about sixteen years of age, who acted as voorlouper, or leader of the front span of oxen of the team.

We trekked at a moderately easy pace to start with, doing, on an average, about twenty miles a day, and contriving, during the first four days of our march, to outspan each night in the vicinity of a farmhouse, where, in accordance with the custom of the country, I obtained hospitality for the night. After that, however, the farms became more widely scattered, and I was obliged to content myself with the cartel in my wagon, which, to be perfectly truthful, I found far more comfortable, because more cleanly, than some of the beds I had slept in. On the evening of the eighth day, about half an hour before sunset, we successfully forded the Orange River and outspanned on its northern bank, by which time the oxen were actually going better than at the start, and were in harder condition.

It was a glorious evening, the sky cloudless, the heat of the day over; and there was just the softest breathing of a cool, refreshing air from upstream. The country, low-lying along the margin of the river and rising very gently as it swept away northward, presented just the combination of rich grass land and bush that seemed to promise an abundance of game, and about a mile upstream from our outspan the river broadened out and was rush-fringed in such a fashion as to suggest almost a certainty of wild duck; therefore, while the "boys" outspanned and attended to the cattle, I took from the wagon the double-barrelled combination of rifle and smooth-bore that I had purchased for my father a year before in Port Elizabeth, and, accompanied by the two dogs, set out for a little walk upstream, partly for the enjoyment of the walk and partly in the hope of securing something a little more appetising than buck meat for supper.

Keeping closely along the river margin, and walking slowly, with the dogs close at heel, I soon became lost



A BATTLE ROYAL

to everything but the entrancing beauty of the evening, its perfect peacefulness and quietude, emphasised rather than broken by the gentle gurgle and ripple of the river along its banks and the soft sigh and rustle of the wind among the reeds; while the swift changes of light and colour flooding the landscape as the sun sank rapidly in the western sky afforded a picture the surpassing loveliness of which there are no words to describe. Unconsciously I halted that I might the better be able to watch the wonderful play of prismatic colour upon the bosom of the river, upon the gently swaying reeds along its margin, upon the broken ground ahead in its emerald mantle of lush grass, dotted here and there with broad clumps of bush, and upon the gently swelling contours of the distant hills, blushing rosy red in the evening sunshine; and for a space of perhaps ten minutes I stood spellbound, conscious of nothing but the surpassing loveliness of God's handiwork as manifested in the scene before me.

Then, suddenly, I was jerked back to a realisation of the more prosaic side of things by an outburst of loud bellowing which seemed to proceed from the farther side of a low ridge about a hundred yards ahead, and, getting into motion again, I hurried forward to ascertain what was the matter. For there was a note of mingled anger and terror in that bellowing which told me plainly enough that some creature was in trouble not far away. It was not one of my own oxen; they were all right in plain view from where I stood, grazing contentedly close to the wagon in charge of the umfaan 'Ngulubi: nor was it a domesticated ox of any kind, for there was no farm anywhere within sight, and no wagon excepting my own; moreover, the sound was too deep and powerful to issue from the lungs of a domestic animal, the obvious inference therefore being that the bellowing proceeded from a wild buffalo. And so indeed it proved, for upon topping the intervening ridge I beheld a splendid buffalo bull some fifty yards away standing breast-deep in the river, struggling violently and uttering bellow after bellow, except when for a moment or two the poor

beast's head was dragged under water.

I saw at once what was the matter; the brute had wandered down to the river to drink, as most animals do, at eventide, and, plunging rather too deeply into the water, had been seized by the muzzle by a crocodile, and was now, despite his frantic struggles, being slowly dragged into deep water, where of course he would presently be drowned and become the prey of the fierce saurian. Now the wild Cape buffalo is a distinctly vicious creature, easily angered, and ready to fight upon the slightest provocation; it is, indeed, with perhaps the exception of the rhinoceros—and many who know both intimately would not even except the latter—the most dangerous animal in Africa, and therefore to be let carefully alone by people who are not looking for trouble: but in the present case my sympathies were all with the buffalo, for the fight did not seem to be a fair one; the advantage was all on the side of the crocodile. Therefore, in order to even matters a little, I decided to take a hand in the game, and forthwith started at a run for the scene of action. And I arrived not a second too soon, for when I reached the spot the buffalo, notwithstanding his immense strength and the desperate resistance which he had offered, had been dragged slowly forward through the yielding mud until he was submerged mid-shoulder-deep, while, his head being held under water, he was already half-drowned and his resistance decreased every moment. Nevertheless he was still making a gallant struggle, occasionally contriving to raise his head above water and secure a gulp of air, notwithstanding the fact that, in order to do so, he had practically to lift the entire weight of the crocodile a foot or more; and of course upon these occasions the crocodile's head was lifted at least partially out of the water, far enough to disclose the brute's merciless eyes. This happened a second or two after my arrival upon the scene, when, quick as light, I tossed my weapon to my shoulder, sighted the reptile's left eye, and pulled the trigger.

It was enough: the bullet penetrated to the creature's brain, the great jaws slowly relaxed their grip, and with a smothered bellow which may or may not have indicated relief, the great bull swerved round, staggered out of the water and up the bank, and fell in a heap just as he reached the crest, where he lay, panting heavily and moaning with pain as the blood gushed from his lacerated muzzle. For a moment, as I stood to reload my rifle, I was more than half-inclined to put a bullet into the poor beast's brain and so end his misery, but upon reflection I decided that it would be rather unsportsmanlike to take advantage of his helplessness. I therefore determined to give him a chance, and went upon my way, leaving him to recover if he could. And when I retraced my steps about an hour later the brute had vanished, though he had probably not gone very far.

Resuming my walk, I reached the spot for which I had been making, just in time to secure a shot at a flight of teal as the birds arrived in what were evidently their night quarters, and was fortunate enough to bag two and a half brace, with which I returned to the wagon, lighted on my way by the rays of the newly risen almost full moon.

On the following evening, after a long and fatiguing day's trek over broken and continuously rising ground, we outspanned close to a Basuto village, the inhabitants of which welcomed our arrival with such extreme cordiality that I felt sure they wanted something from us. And later on, after I had dined, and was thinking of retiring for the night, my suspicion was verified.

As is the custom when the natives are inclined to be friendly, the headman of the village and some half-dozen others came out to fraternise with my "boys", and, incidentally, to share their evening meal, which, as usual, consisted to a large extent of buck meat. Now, at the time of which I write, the Basutos possessed no firearms, therefore they had to depend chiefly upon pitfalls and similar primitive contrivances for their supply of meat, except upon the very rare occasions when they succeeded in working themselves up to such a pitch of extravagance as to slaughter an ox; consequently meals of which flesh formed a part were few and far between. But they knew that the white man and his followers could always get meat in abundance; therefore when a white man passed through their country—which might occur, upon an average, twice a year—they always made a point of inviting themselves to supper, as in the present case, knowing that the white man, understanding their custom, would be sure to provide the wherewithal for an abundant feast. And as they eat they talked, for the Kafir is an inveterate gossip, and in this way the white man might sometimes acquire an item or two of information of real value to him.

Now, I had given my "boys" instructions to avail themselves to the fullest extent of every opportunity that should offer to make cautious enquiry among the natives with whom we might chance to come into contact, with the object of gaining some clue to the whereabouts of Nell LeStrange; for I knew that a white child could not be spirited off into the wilds without a good many natives acquiring an inkling of the direction in which she had gone: therefore upon occasions like the present it was the custom of Piet, my after-rider, ably seconded by Jan, cunningly to lead the conversation round to the subject of the recent war, and then listen intently to all that was said, helping the conversation along, where needful, by an artfully framed question or two. And these tactics they followed on the evening in question.

Having taken a walk out on the veld to enjoy the beauty and silence of the prospect under the silver flooding of the moon, I returned to the wagon with a pleasant sense of coolness and fatigue, and was about to begin my preparations for a night's repose when Piet, my Tottie after-rider, rose from his place among the others round the fire and approached me.

"Baas," he said, "'Ngaga, a Basuto, the headman of the village, would speak with you. Shall I say that your ears are open?"

"Yes," answered I. "Let him come hither and speak freely."

Accordingly, Piet having signified that I was graciously willing to accord an audience, 'Ngaga approached, halted at the distance of six feet from me, flung up his right hand, and sonorously uttered the salute "'Nkos'!" Then he stood motionless, awaiting my pleasure.

"S'a bon' (literally, I see you), 'Ngaga!" I replied. "You would have speech with me? Then say on. My ears are open."

"Baba (Father)," began the savage (he was at least forty years of age, while I was only eighteen), "thy children are in trouble; therefore there was great rejoicing in the village when Mafuta, the nyanga (witch doctor), this morning announced that a white man was on the way and, with his fire weapons, would be with us before nightfall. He said—"

"Stop!" interrupted I. "Before you speak further, tell me how Mafuta came to know that I was on the way? I believed that my entry into Basutoland was unknown, and was wondering whether it would be better for me to see Moshesh in his kraal, or whether it would suffice for me to send a messenger with gifts. Perhaps you can tell me?"

"Doubtless the king will be glad to see thee at his kraal," cautiously answered the man, "especially if the news goes forward that thou hast done us, his children, a service. And if thou wilt do us that service I will see that the news of it does go forward to the king's ear, ensuring thee a welcome."

"Very well," said I. "I will gladly do what may lie in my power. Therefore, say what is thy desire, and I will consider the matter. But thou hast not yet told me how Mafuta came to know of my presence in Basutoland. I saw no man yesterday. But perchance one of you belonging to the village saw my wagon from afar, and hastened to spread the news?"

"Nay," answered 'Ngaga; "no man saw thy wagon, from afar, or brought news of thine approach to the village. Mafuta is a great nyanga, and perchance he saw a vision of thine approach in his magic smoke. How should I know? It is not good for mere ordinary mortals to enquire too curiously into the doings of the nyangas."

This reply at once powerfully aroused my curiosity, for I perceived that 'Ngaga was referring to those strange occult powers with which the witch doctors are credited by the white men who have been thrown into most intimate contact with the natives. I had heard many extraordinary and apparently well-authenticated stories told respecting the alleged power of the nyangas to visualise distant happenings, to foretell coming events, to discover the whereabouts of lost articles, to read the thoughts of men and lay bare their most cherished secrets, and also to inflict upon their enemies loss, suffering, and even death. I had no doubt that many of the strange stories to which I had listened had originated in some very trivial and ordinary circumstance which had been magnified and distorted into a weird and supernatural happening by the superstitious credulity of the original narrator; but there were others of an equally weird and unaccountable character, which had been told by hard-headed, intelligent, unimaginative men as having come within the scope of their own personal experience, that seemed to indicate that the nyangas really possessed powers denied to the great majority of their fellow-men. Moreover, it must be remembered by the sceptical that all who have ever been intimately associated with the African savage are fully agreed that he is gifted with certain strange, uncanny powers quite incomprehensible to the white man, as was indubitably demonstrated during the last Zulu war, when the natives exhibited an intimate knowledge of certain events—notably the disaster to the British troops at Isandhlwana—within an hour or two of their occurrence, and several days before the news became known through the ordinary channels of communication.

Now, taking into consideration such facts as these, which are common knowledge and yet are quite inexplicable by the most profound students of ordinary science, one is inclined to ask, if such things are possible to the ordinary savages, why should not other and still more extraordinary powers be possessed by those among them who have inherited the secrets handed down to them by others who, through many generations, have made it the sole business of their lives to study what we, for want of a better term, are pleased to designate the occult? I confess that I am not of those who will believe only what they are able to understand; upon what principle, therefore, shall I say that I will believe a certain thing although I do not understand it, but will not believe something else for the same reason? Now, I was keenly interested in the subject of the nyanga's alleged powers for a variety of reasons, two of which will, I think, justify me in determining to put them to the test, now that I had the opportunity: one reason being simple curiosity, and the other the desire to obtain information as to the whereabouts of Nell LeStrange. Therefore I said to 'Ngaga:

"Very well; let that matter pass. You were about to tell me that there is trouble in the village, of a kind that I can cure. Was it not so?"

"Even so, 'Nkos'," answered 'Ngaga. "The trouble is this. A leopard has lately taken up his abode yonder," pointing to a spot about half a mile distant, where a great granite kopje towered some sixty feet above the general surface of the ground, forming a hill of about three or four acres in extent. "He haunts a cave in the rock," continued 'Ngaga, "and comes every night to the village, stealing our chickens, killing our dogs and cattle; and last night he even entered a hut and carried off a two-year-old child from its sleeping mother's side. We have tried to kill the beast; but he is too wise for us, for while we are watching for him in one place he goes round by another way, and all our efforts thus far have been in vain. So to-day we consulted Mafuta upon the matter; and after he had heard us, and had shut himself up in the hut for as long as it takes the sun to travel that far through the sky,"—indicating an arc which would represent about half an hour—"he came forth and said that a white man—yourself, 'Nkos'—would arrive at the village to-night, and would undertake to free us of the beast. Will you do this for us, O my father? He is very wary, and will not allow us to approach him within the length of a spear cast; but he cannot escape your fire weapon: and it shall be that if you slay him, I, 'Ngaga, will send forward a messenger to the Great One, Moshesh, announcing thy coming to his kraal, and taking with him a tale that shall cause the Great One's face to smile upon thee."

"Very well," I said; "I am willing to do what I can for thee and thine, O 'Ngaga, and thus will I do it. Thou shalt to-night station two men in a place from which they can watch the path leading from the leopard's den to the village; and it shall be that if the beast shows himself, one man shall hasten hither to the wagon with the news, while the other remains to watch, and if need be follow him. Thus shall we know where to find the leopard, and I will come and slay him with my fire weapon. But if the beast remains in his den all night, then will I go up in the morning and slay him there. Is the plan good?"

"It is good," answered 'Ngaga, "and I will go even now to the village and send out two trustworthy men to watch, and do thy bidding," and the man flung up his hand in farewell salute before turning to leave me. But I stopped him.

"Stay, 'Ngaga," said I; "I have not yet finished speaking with thee. I will slay this beast that despoils the village and carries off its young children; but, in return, the village must do something for me. I am engaged upon a certain quest; and if Mafuta is as great a nyanga as thou believest him to be, it may be that he can help me. Therefore, if I kill the leopard, Mafuta must to-morrow exercise his magic to find out for me what I want to know."

'Ngaga seemed suddenly disconcerted. He stood silent for a full minute or more, apparently plunged in disquieting thought. Then he spoke, deprecatingly.

"'Nkos'," he said, "how shall I answer thee? Mafuta is a strange and wilful man, impatient of authority, and distrustful of strangers; moreover, he loves not white men: therefore it may well be that he will refuse what thou dost ask of him. Yet he seemed not displeased to-day when the knowledge of thy coming was revealed to him, and it may be that he will consent. I know not how he will act. It may be that if I ask him now he will refuse, whereas if I ask him to-morrow, when thou hast slain the leopard, he will consent. What wilt thou have me do, my father?"

"Leave it until the morrow," answered I. "Then, if he refuses thee, I will see him. Perhaps he will not refuse me."

"Good!" agreed 'Ngaga. "Thy decision is a wise one, for Mafuta is of those who like not to bind themselves by promises. I go now to find and send out the watchers. Sala guhli (farewell), 'Nkos'!" and, saluting, the savage swung round upon his heel and strode away. Thereupon I climbed into the wagon, and, having carefully examined my weapons and satisfied myself that they were all loaded and the powder well up in the nipples, retired to rest.

It was about an hour after midnight when Jan awoke me.

"Baas," he murmured, shaking me gently by the shoulder, "there is an 'mfaan (boy) who bids me tell thee that the leopard is abroad and making down toward the village, and that if you will come quickly you will have a good chance to kill the beast."

"All right," I replied drowsily, as I sat up on the cartel and began to feel about for my boots. "Find the tinder box, Jan, and light the lamp."

A minute later the lamp was lighted, and I proceeded hurriedly to get into my clothes. Then, taking my rifle, and instructing Jan to follow me with the double-barrel, I emerged from the wagon, to find a well-grown Basuto lad of about eighteen years of age impatiently waiting to guide me to the scene of action.

"Well, 'mfaan," said I, "so the leopard is abroad. Whereabout is he?"

"He is somewhere on the other side of that ridge, 'Nkos'," answered the lad. "He came out from behind the krantz and, entering the long grass, disappeared. But my brother yonder is watching his movements, and if we hasten we may cut him off before he reaches the village. See, 'Nkos', there is my brother—you can see his head and shoulders above the ridge; he is waving us to hasten."

I looked in the direction toward which the lad pointed. The moon was high in the heavens, almost overhead in fact, and the entire scene was flooded with her white rays. Before us the ground rose slightly to a ridge about one hundred yards distant; past this lay a depression through which a small stream ran, while beyond the stream the ground rose again in a long, bush-clad slope, which swept away into the extreme distance, grey and mysterious, forming the background of the scene. The foreground and nearer distances were brilliantly illuminated by the cold rays of the moon, rendering objects within a quarter of a mile almost as distinct as though it were midday; and, clearly defined against the ghostly grey of the grass-clad ridge, I could see the head and shoulders of a savage, the white moonlight gleaming upon his ebony skin as he waved his arm, signalling to us.

"This way, 'Nkos', this way!" whispered my guide excitedly, leading the way toward the lower edge of the depression; and, walking fast, I followed him, with Jan bringing up the rear. Five minutes of quick wading through the long, dew-saturated grass carried us over the ridge, but much lower down than where the watcher was stationed; and the depression—which was scarcely deep enough to be termed a ravine—lay before us. Here we paused a moment to reconnoitre, but, seeing nothing, moved rapidly forward again, aiming for a small clump of bush that stood solitary at a distance of about fifty yards from a wide-open space which the leopard must needs cross on his way to the village. Behind this we all three posted ourselves, to await the arrival of the brute, for the position was an excellent one in every respect, the bush being between us and the spot where we supposed the leopard to be, while what little wind there was blew from that direction toward us, and in front stretched a wide, open, grassy space, with the stream trickling through its midst.

We had scarcely settled ourselves behind the bush when our Basuto guide gently touched me on the arm and silently pointed between the branches toward a spot where the grass seemed to be swaying a little more strongly than the soft breathing of the wind alone would account for; and, looking intently, I presently perceived that this peculiar swaying motion of the grass was stealthily progressing across the open space, as though something hidden by the tall growth were cautiously moving there. Apart from the peculiar motion of the grass, however, nothing was to be seen, which was not surprising, since the growth down there was breast-high; but a little farther on, where the village herd had been turned out to graze, it was not so long. The oxen were there now, at the far side of the patch of short grass, lying down asleep in charge of a couple of boy herds, and it seemed to me that the mysterious movement in the grass was progressing toward them. Presently one of the oxen suddenly flung up his head, seemed to sniff the air for a few moments, and then, with a low moan, rose to his feet, switching his tail from side to side. The movement aroused the rest of the herd, who in turn scrambled to their feet and stood, switching their tails, and all facing the same way, namely, toward the spot where I had observed the suspicious motion of the grass. But the motion had ceased now, and for nearly a quarter of an hour we all stood there tense, waiting and watching.

Then suddenly I detected anew the curious quivering and swaying of the tufts, though so slight was it that for at least a couple of minutes I could not be sure that my senses were not deceiving me. At length, however, the movement

grew sufficiently pronounced to convince me that the leopard was once more creeping forward, and a few minutes later it reached the spot where the grass had been kept comparatively short by the grazing of the herd. The next instant I caught the merest glimpse through the shortened herbage of a moving something that I knew could only be the back of a crouching animal of some sort sneaking toward the now fully awakened herd; and throwing up my rifle, I tried to imagine the entire animal from the little of it that I saw, aimed for the spot among the grass which I pictured as being just behind the shoulder, and pulled the trigger. The sharp crack of the rifle broke in upon the stillness of the night with startling effect. I heard the thud of the bullet, instantly followed by a savage snarl that ended in a moan, and as the smoke drifted away I caught a momentary glimpse of a great, tawny, black-spotted form writhing convulsively in the air from its death spring and then collapsing inertly where it fell. Jan and the Basuto, uttering yells of delight, instantly started to run in upon the fallen leopard; but I stopped them with the reminder that the beast might not yet be dead, and, exchanging weapons with the Hottentot, proceeded to approach, with all due caution, the spot where it lay. But we need not have been under any apprehension, for when we came to it we saw that the animal—which, by the way, was the biggest leopard that I had ever seen—had been shot clean through the heart, and was stone-dead.

Chapter Five.

Mafuta, the Basuto Witch Doctor.

On the following morning, when I turned out and walked down to the river to bathe, I debouched a little from the direct road in order to take a peep at the dead leopard by daylight, the carcass having been left where it had fallen. As I approached the place I saw that Piet and Jan, my two Hottentots, were already busily engaged upon the task of removing the skin; and I observed that both were looking, as I thought, very much annoyed, and a little apprehensive. I was not long in discovering what was the matter, for as I halted beside them Piet held up first the two front paws and then the two hind paws of the beast, when I instantly saw, to my intense annoyance, that every one of the claws had been removed, and that therefore, as a trophy, the skin was quite useless. Of course I knew that this was a common practice among the Kafirs, the claws of the lion and the leopard being either worn by them as potent amulets, or converted into muti, that is to say, medicine, which is implicitly believed by them to impart the quality of courage to the one who takes it; but I had been foolish enough to think that, having solicited me to destroy their enemy for them, they would have regarded the carcass as sacred from mutilation. They had not done so, however, and that ended the matter, for I knew that it would be quite useless to make a fuss about it: not a soul in the village would ever admit the least knowledge of the theft.

While I was taking breakfast, about an hour later, 'Ngaga came up from the village to express the hearty thanks of himself and the rest of the inhabitants for the service which I had rendered them by destroying the leopard; and when we had chatted for half an hour or so, and 'Ngaga had accepted a present of a yard of brass wire, a handful of parti-coloured beads, and a cotton handkerchief gorgeously emblazoned in red, blue, green, and yellow, he said:

“'Nkos', after I left you last night I went to the hut of Mafuta and was permitted to enter. I told the nyanga that you had undertaken to slay the leopard that had been troubling us, and after I had spoken many words concerning the greatness of the boon you would thus confer upon us, I ventured to mention that you were desirous of consulting him in relation to a certain quest which you have undertaken. I think, 'Nkos', that if you would go now with me to Mafuta's hut, perhaps taking with you as a gift another handkerchief such as this, the nyanga would be willing to grant your request.”

“You think so?” I said. “Then in that case let us go.” And, extracting from the voorkissie a handkerchief distinguished by a particularly startling combination of colours, which I tucked into my belt in such a manner that it could not fail to attract attention, I set out for the village, accompanied by 'Ngaga, who, I understood, proposed to act as a sort of sponsor for me, and to introduce me personally to the great man.

The nyanga's hut was, as is generally the case, built at some little distance—in the present instance about a quarter of a mile—from the village proper, standing quite by itself, close to the stream, and close under the shadow of a great clump of bush. Apart from this circumstance there was nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the huts, it being of the usual beehive shape, constructed of closely interwoven wattles, thickly thatched with reeds and grass, and having an entrance so small that it was necessary to bend double and stoop low in order to pass through it. Also it was windowless, the only illumination of the interior being derived from such light as came through the low door; consequently when one first entered such a hut the contrast between the obscurity of the interior and the glare of the blazing sunlight outside produced an impression of profound darkness, this only passing away as the eye gradually accustomed itself to the gloom, after which one found, somewhat to one's surprise, that there was light enough to see everything with a very tolerable degree of distinctness.

As 'Ngaga preceded me into the hut I heard a low murmur of greeting pass between him and someone else, which told me that the owner was at home; then I followed and stood upright in what was, to my eye, inky blackness.

“S'a bon', 'mlungu (I see you, white man)!” said a deep, resonant voice from the depth of the darkness.

“Yebo (yes), Mafuta,” answered I, that being the usual interchange of salutations between the native and the white when the former esteems himself the equal of the latter; and I stood, blinking and striving to penetrate the obscurity. Gradually the darkness melted into a sort of sombre twilight, which by imperceptible degrees grew stronger, and presently I saw that I was in a hut the sole furniture of which consisted of a pallet, raised about a foot from the floor, and covered with rich karosses or skin rugs—one, I observed, being made entirely of leopard-skins. On one end of this pallet was seated a man of perhaps forty years of age, wearing a keshla, or head ring, and a mucha, or apron, made apparently of monkey skins. The man's shield and sheaf of assagais stood close at hand against the wall of the hut, and a ponderous knobkerrie hung just overhead, slung by a loop of rimpji; but the hut contained nothing to

distinguish it from that of any other native, and I confess that my first feeling was one of disappointment, for I had never before been in the hut of a nyanga, and I had been led to believe by those who had that I should see all sorts of strange and weird-looking objects if I ever happened to penetrate to the interior of a Kafir witch doctor's hut. The owner seemed to read my disappointment in my eyes, for he laughed softly as he waved his hand, indicating the emptiness of the hut.

"I do not need the things for which you are looking, 'mlungu," he said; "my magic is different from that of all other nyangas—and much more potent, as mayhap you shall see for yourself. Be seated," he continued, waving me toward the other end of the couch; "and as for you, 'Ngaga, having brought the 'mlungu hither, your task is accomplished, and you may depart."

So, while I deposited myself upon the pallet, 'Ngaga bade us both a somewhat ceremonious farewell, and vanished through the opening into the blazing sunlight without.

Then Mafuta began to talk to me about my journey and the incidents, such as they were, that had thus far marked it; and I confess that I was astounded at the intimate knowledge of these matters which he displayed. Of course I knew that my "boys" might have, and very possibly had, spoken of them to 'Ngaga and the other Basutos during their gossip round the fire on the previous evening; yet this man, Mafuta, seemed to know more about the details of them than was likely to have transpired during such a conversation, which was probably of an exceedingly desultory and general character. Yet even this was not so surprising as the knowledge he displayed of the twofold object of my journey, which I knew he could not have acquired from my "boys", because even they were ignorant of it, all that they actually knew being that the journey was ostensibly undertaken for the purpose of collecting ivory. But without questioning me at all upon the subject, the nyanga made it clear to me that he was fully aware of the fact that one great object of my journey was to get gold rather than ivory.

"Yet even that," said he, "is not all that you seek upon this journey; important as it is that you should find the yellow metal which the white man values so greatly, you are even more anxious to find something else: is it not so? And so anxious are you to find it that, although you doubt Mafuta's power, you have come to him to see if he can help you."

"It is true," I admitted; "and the fact that you know so much of my most secret desires and intentions inclines me to hope, and almost to believe, that you can help me. Do you think you can?"

"It may be, 'mlungu; it may be," he answered. "The white 'ntombozaan (girl) still lives and is well, for I last night took the trouble to seek for and find her; but where she is I cannot say, for the place is strange to me, I having never seen it with my bodily eyes."

I fairly gasped with amazement, for this was the first time that Nell Lestranger had been mentioned since my arrival in the village, and it was not I who had spoken of her, but a savage to whom even the bare fact of her existence might be supposed to be unknown—unless—unless those who originally carried her off had chanced to pass this way. Yet, even then—

"Tell me," I shouted, seizing the nyanga by the arm, rather roughly, I am afraid, in my excitement, "what do you know of her? How long is it since you saw her? And who are they who carried her off?"

"Gahle (gently), white man! gahle!" returned Mafuta, snatching his arm out of my grasp. "I know nothing of the 'ntombi save what I saw last night. But you came hither to procure my help to find her, and such help as I can give shall be yours. As I told you, I know not where she is, for I never saw the place with my bodily eyes, but I will show it to you, so that if ever you come to the place you may know it. Will that satisfy you?"

"But," I objected, "if you are able to show me the place, surely you can tell me the name of it, and in which direction I should travel to reach it?"

"Nay, 'mlungu, I cannot do that," answered Mafuta. "My power is not so great as that. I can but show you the person whom you desire to see; it must rest with you to note that person's surroundings so carefully that, should you ever arrive at the place, you will recognise it again. Or perhaps by describing it to others you may be able to find someone who has been there and who, recognising it from your description, will be able to tell you its name and where it is."

"Very well, then," said I; "do what you can to help me, Mafuta, and I will be for ever obliged to you."

"Muchli (good)!" exclaimed Mafuta. "Sit where you are, and do exactly as I bid you." He rose from his seat, groped among the thatch of the hut for a moment, and presently produced a small, circular object about the size of an ordinary coat button. It was as brightly burnished as the surface of a mirror, and he placed it upright on the floor of the hut in such a position that, while itself in deep shadow, it strongly reflected the light which entered through the doorway right into my eyes, dazzling them to such an extent that, for a few moments, I could scarcely bear to look at it. Presently, however, that feeling passed away, and I was able to gaze upon it without discomfort.

"Now," said Mafuta, "look steadfastly at that, never removing your eyes from it for a moment, and see what happens." And, thus saying, the man went and squatted himself upon his heels in the centre of the floor, and began to chant, in a low, monotonous voice, certain words the meaning of which I could not comprehend.

For a few minutes nothing particular seemed to happen: the disk continued to shine strongly in the midst of the deep shadow, and Mafuta's low, monotonous song went on. Then, so gradually that I knew not when the change began, I lost consciousness of everything except the gleaming disk and the sound of Mafuta's voice, from which all semblance of words had passed. Then the disk seemed slowly to fade out of sight, Mafuta's voice died away to silence, and I found myself seemingly standing upon gently rising ground, with a native village, of such dimensions that it deserved rather the name of a town, about a quarter of a mile distant on my left front. The first thing that I particularly observed about this place, apart from its exceptional size, was that it was built in the shape of a circle, and was

entirely fenced in with a strong, high palisade. There was a gate in the fence, nearly opposite me, and a number of people, mostly men, were coming and going through the gateway. They were splendid specimens of the South African savage, but, look as I would, I could discover nothing either in their cast of features or in their trappings by which to identify them.

The town was built upon the top of the slope on which I stood, and about a quarter of a mile distant from it I noted a rather remarkable kopje which I thought would surely enable me to recognise the place if ever I should chance to set my bodily eyes upon it. It was perhaps seventy or eighty feet high, and at its summit it measured, as nearly as I could guess, about two hundred yards long. It was hog-backed in shape, and was strewn here and there with great, tumbled masses of dark-coloured rock, among which grew a few straggling bushes. The most remarkable thing about this particular kopje, however, was that, notwithstanding its close proximity to the town, it appeared to be the haunt of innumerable vultures, some forty or fifty of which were perched upon the rocks at that moment. The landscape on which this unknown savage town was set was of the usual South African type, namely, gently undulating, the hills retiring one behind the other into the extreme distance until, toward the west—I got my bearings from the sun, of course—they merged into what might almost be termed mountains, while eastward the land stretched away in a vast plain. The soil was densely covered with long, thick grass, which was already beginning to look bleached and parched here and there for want of rain; and scattered pretty thickly over the country were the usual patches of bush. On my right the land fell away to a spacious flat, a thousand acres or more in extent, upon which vast herds of cattle were grazing, and through which a stream some thirty feet in width gently meandered.

As I stood noting all these details, three young girls emerged from the main gate of the town, two of them being dark-brown, while the third was white—Nell Lestrangle! I recognised the dear child instantly, although she had altered greatly—as I thought, for the better—since I had seen her last. She was talking and laughing gaily with her companions, I was glad to see, for that indicated that she was well and happy; yet, even as this thought flashed through my mind, she fell silent for a moment and a look of sadness clouded her face. She was bareheaded and barefooted, the garment which she wore being a sort of frock apparently modelled from those which she had worn while at Triannon, and made of a peculiar kind of cloth the nature of which I could not recognise. Instinctively I stretched out my hands toward her and strove to call her name, but no sound passed my lips, and, to my intense disappointment, I found that I could not move. The trio passed me about a hundred yards distant, and I distinctly heard their voices, but could not catch the words they spoke, otherwise I might possibly have recognised the language and thus gained a clue to the locality; and although, just as they were passing before me, Nell looked straight in my direction, and even paused for an instant, she immediately went on again, casting a single glance back over her shoulder and then continuing on her way until she disappeared beyond a clump of bush near the river. And with her disappearance the whole scene vanished and I found myself back in Mafuta's hut, with the disk still gleaming brightly out of the deep shadow, and Mafuta still squatting on his heels in the centre of the floor.

"Well, white man," he said, as I came to myself, "have you seen aught?"

"I have," said I, "and I feel bound to admit that you are the possessor of most extraordinary powers, Mafuta. Yes, I saw the 'ntombozaan; and, as you said, she seems to be both happy and in the enjoyment of excellent health. But what I now want to know is where she is. Surely there are not so many big kraals scattered about in Kafirland that the one which you have just shown me should be difficult to find?"

"What did it look like, 'mlungu?" demanded Mafuta.

"What did it look like?" I repeated. "Is not that a quite unnecessary question to ask, Mafuta? You must have seen everything that I saw, otherwise—"

"Nay," interrupted Mafuta, "I saw nothing; nor do I know what you saw, excepting that I willed you to see the 'ntombi. Tell me everything that you beheld, and maybe I can help you to find the place."

Thereupon I proceeded to describe minutely the entire scene as I had beheld it, the big town with its huts, to the number of two thousand or more, symmetrically arranged within its circle of stout, high palings; the kopje close by, with its scattered piles of rock interspersed with straggling clumps of bush, and its vultures; the great plain with its herds of grazing cattle beside the stream—in short, every feature of my vision, as I vividly recalled it. And when I had finished, Mafuta sat for several minutes ruminating deeply. At length, however, he looked up, and, shaking his head, said:

"White man, I have never seen the place you describe, otherwise I am sure that I should recognise it. The kopje with its rocks and its aasvogels would alone suffice for its identification. That kopje is doubtless the place where criminals are executed; the presence of the aasvogels seems to indicate that. And the size and general importance of the place lead me to believe that it is where a king sits; but what king I know not. Of one thing, however, I can assure you; it is not Moshesh's Place."

"Well," said I, "that at least is something to know, for it is one place the less to trouble about. And that is all the help you can give me?"

"That is all the help I can give you," repeated Mafuta.

"But surely it is much, is it not, 'mlungu? You have seen the place with the eyes of your mind, seen it as plainly as if you had beheld it with your bodily eyes; and you will remember what it looks like. You will be able to describe it minutely to others; and as you go upon your way you will have opportunity to speak of it to others, and—yes, it comes to me that eventually you will meet with one who will enable you to find it."

"Thanks, very much," said I. "That is a most comforting thing to know, and, since you say that such a thing will happen, I quite believe it will, after the exhibition of your powers which you have already given me. Will you accept this as a gift from me?" I added, producing the brilliantly marked handkerchief from my belt and offering it to the

nyanga.

"My thanks, 'mlungu," answered the man, taking the handkerchief and depositing it upon the pallet. "And now," he continued, "I think you will do well to proceed without undue delay to Moshesh's kraal. 'Ngaga has already dispatched a messenger apprising the king of your presence in his country, and, if you ask permission to pass through and hunt in it, the Great One will doubtless give it, especially as you have rendered his people the service of slaying the leopard that has been preying upon them. But the king is jealous of his own authority, and is apt to resent intrusion into his country without permission first asked; also he is a little distrustful of the white man, whom he suspects of a desire to steal the black man's land. Therefore present yourself before him as early as may be."

"Thanks, Mafuta, I will do as you say. Farewell, and may all prosperity attend you," said I, as I took my leave.

"Sala guhli (farewell), 'mlungu!" replied the Kafir, following me out and standing by the door of the hut. "I see much trouble and many dangers before thee; but be of good heart, for thou shalt overcome them all."

Two days later I arrived at the king's kraal.

It was near mid-afternoon when I halted the wagon and ordered Jan to outspan at a point about half a mile from the kraal: and I immediately dispatched Piet with a message to the effect that I, Edward Laurence, an Englishman, had arrived at the kraal for the purpose of personally soliciting permission from King Moshesh to hunt in and pass through his country; and that for this purpose, and that I might crave His Majesty's acceptance of certain presents, I might be granted the favour of an early audience. Then I opened the voorkissie and proceeded to select the presents which I would offer for the savage king's acceptance.

Gaudily coloured handkerchiefs, and, more particularly, brilliantly hued articles of costume have from time immemorial strongly appealed to the taste of the untutored savage, and I had kept this fact prominently in mind when purchasing the goods which I intended to use as presents and for the purposes of barter; therefore, among other things, I had bought several cast-off British uniforms of various descriptions, these being designed especially for presentation to the several savage monarchs with whom I expected to be brought into contact. So now, after due consideration, I drew forth a drum-major's scarlet tunic, stiff with tarnished gold braid, minus its regimental buttons, shockingly soiled, and otherwise very much the worse for wear; a pair of ditto blue trousers, with gold braid running down the outer seam; a naval lieutenant's cocked hat, in which I inserted a bunch of cock's tail feathers; an infantryman's white leather belt, with bayonet and sheath; and a small round shaving mirror in a metal frame, which had cost me sixpence, if I remember rightly: and made up the whole into a neat bundle, in readiness for the moment when I should be summoned to the royal presence. Then I proceeded to take particular note of the capital of Basutoland.

It was a place of considerable importance, consisting of about a thousand huts enclosed, like the place of my vision, in a very strong and high palisade, rendered unclimbable by having the upper extremities of the palings trimmed into long sharp points. It was built upon the summit of a low knoll, was rectangular in plan, and covered an area of about twenty acres of ground; and that was about all that I could discover concerning it in the meantime, since the palisading was much too high to permit of my seeing anything inside it.

After an absence of nearly an hour Piet returned with the information that he had been detained at the outer gate of the kraal while my message was conveyed to the king, and that during his detention he had been subjected to a pretty severe cross-examination by an induna or chief, respecting the purpose of my journey, my destination, and so on; that, finally, a message had been returned by the king that when he was ready to see me he would send for me, and meanwhile I was to remain where I was and not attempt to enter the kraal. I confess that I was a trifle disappointed at this reception, which I regarded as distinctly chilly; but Mafuta had afforded me a little insight into the king's character, and I trusted that a personal interview, coupled with a sight of the resplendent drum-major's tunic and the rest of the outfit, would, arouse a feeling of greater geniality in the breast of the savage autocrat. So I hung about the wagon for the remainder of that day, waiting for a summons which did not come. Nevertheless, although the king did not condescend to manifest any undue eagerness to see me, I was not exactly left to pine in solitude, for several of the inhabitants of the town came out to gossip with my "boys", while no less than three indunas suffered their curiosity to overcome their dignity so far as to pay me an informal visit and ask me countless questions—for it must be remembered that, at the time of which I am now writing, it was very unusual for a white man to cross the border of his own territory into the wilds, and one of the men who on that occasion spoke to me had only once before seen such an individual.

It was amusing to note the rapid change of manner in these men as they conversed with me. Upon their first approach they began to question me with a certain curt abruptness which I easily interpreted as being intended to convey the idea that their visit was more or less of an official character; but all the while their eyes were wandering hither and thither, taking in every detail of my dress and equipment, as well as the wagon and its contents, and it was not very long before they began to enquire what was the use of this, that, and the other. Of course I answered all their questions as fully as I could, and not only so, but I also exhibited a few of my gewgaws, hinting that certain of them might become their own property before long, although I did not then offer any presents for their acceptance, it being contrary to savage etiquette to do so before the king had been interviewed and propitiated. They were, of course, intensely interested in my guns, and were full of amazement when I bowled over a carrion crow at a distance of six hundred yards with a rifle bullet; and they did not hesitate to hint plainly that nothing could possibly be more acceptable to the king than the gift of one of my fire weapons. I explained, however, that the fire weapon was very powerful and very dangerous magic, subservient only to the white man, and that I dared not allow any of them even to touch one, lest it should turn upon and slay them. But they were quite as profoundly impressed by my exhibition of the powers of the burning-glass, several of which I had taken the precaution to include in my stock; and when they saw me kindle a fire with its assistance they could find no words in which to express adequately their wonder and admiration.

It is more than probable that, upon their return to the kraal, they found means to convey to the king's ear some impression of the wonders which the white man had revealed to them, for I had scarcely finished my breakfast on the following morning when a messenger arrived at the wagon with the intimation that King Moshesh commanded my immediate presence before him.

I at once arose and, unarmed, accompanied the messenger, with Piet in close attendance, bearing the parcel containing the presents which I designed to offer for His Majesty's acceptance. As I approached the open gate in the palisade a number of people, both men and women, were passing in and out, all of whom regarded me curiously. A few of the men saluted me with upraised right hand and the exclamation "'Nkos!" but for the most part they seemed undecided whether to regard me as a friend or an enemy, and therefore preferred for the moment to maintain an attitude of neutrality. Immediately inside the gate there stood a guard of twenty men, fully armed with shield, assagai, and knobkerrie, under the command of an induna, and here we were stopped, for the induna seemed indisposed to allow Piet to accompany me; but I explained that he was my body servant, and that the bundle which he bore contained presents designed for the king's acceptance, whereupon we were, somewhat reluctantly, permitted to pass on. Naturally, we were no sooner inside the gate than I began to look about me, and the first thing that struck me was the admirable arrangements which had been made for the defence of the place in case of attack. For while the top of the palisade was, on the outside, about fifteen feet above the surface of the ground, on the inside it had been backed up with earth forming a platform about twelve feet wide and just high enough for a man of average height to see between the sharpened points; while at a height of about four feet above the level of the platform there was a continuous row of slits, about eight inches high by two inches wide, and about nine inches apart, the obvious purpose of which was to afford the occupants of the platform an opportunity to thrust with their spears at a foe attempting to scale the palisade from the outside, without unduly exposing themselves. Approach to the summit of the platform was obtained by a continuous flight of rough steps cut in the earth all along its face, and next the foot of the steps was a road of about twelve feet wide. Then came the outer row of huts, between which and the next row was another road, about eight feet wide. There were four rows of huts running entirely round the enclosure, inside of which again was another palisade, equally as strong and as high as the first. And, as in the case of the first palisade, this also had a single gate, guarded by twenty fully armed men under the command of an induna. We were permitted to pass through this second gate unchallenged, and having done this I found myself in an open square of about five acres in extent, near the far side of which were seven huts, or houses, rather, for they were considerably larger and in every way more important than the ordinary Kafir hut. Six of these—square structures built of "wattle-and-daub" and roofed with thatch, the largest of them measuring about twenty feet by twelve, and about seven feet high to the overhanging eaves—were built in a row, with spaces of about six feet between them; while the seventh, which I rightly conjectured to be the itunkulu, or King's House, stood about twelve feet in front of the others, and was about the same size as the largest of them.

We were now upon what may be termed sacred ground, that is to say, ground reserved for the exclusive use of the king himself and the members of his immediate household; nobody being permitted to enter here except persons belonging to the royal family, those especially invited by the king, the chief witch doctor, and the king's own bodyguard, consisting of one hundred specially picked men, under the command of an induna who also filled the office of chief adviser, or prime minister, to the king. At the moment of our entrance not a person but ourselves was visible in the square, except the guard at the gate; but a few seconds later twenty soldiers under the command of a very splendid-looking officer emerged from one of the buildings and took up a position on either side of a chair hewn out of a solid block of wood and draped with a magnificent lion-skin kaross, which stood some half a dozen paces in front of the itunkulu.

These men were the finest-looking body of savage warriors that I had up till then ever seen, every one of them being quite as tall as, and far more firmly knit than myself; while the chief was a truly magnificent man, standing at least six feet two on his bare feet, with the limbs and frame of a Hercules. They were all dressed in leopard-skin muchas, with bracelets, armllets, garters, and anklets of cows' tails; all wore keshlas; and each man carried a long shield and three throwing assagais in his left hand, while in his right he held a stabbing assagai with a terrible double-edged blade about six inches wide and eighteen inches long. Their commanding officer was similarly armed; but in addition to the leopard-skin mucha he wore a leopard-skin cloak, a necklace of lions' teeth and claws, and a headdress made of beads and ostrich feathers. Every man of these twenty-one savage warriors showed upon his person the scars of many wounds, and carried himself with a pride of bearing which forbade him to display the slightest sign of consciousness of our presence.

Chapter Six.

Moshesh, the King of the Basutos.

A minute later the curtain of reed matting that hung in the doorway of the itunkulu was thrust aside, and a man came forth. He was slightly above medium stature, and a trifle lighter in colour than the average Basuto; he was much more simply attired than the officer of the guard, his clothing consisting simply of a leopard-skin mucha and a lion-skin mantle: but the assured dignity of his carriage and the expression of arrogant pride upon his well-formed features would of themselves have sufficed to tell me that the man was none other than Moshesh, the king of the Basuto nation, even had the guard not given him the royal salute by raising their stabbing assagais aloft in their right hands as they thundered out the word "Bayete!" As for me, I had not the remotest notion of the kind of salutation which His Majesty would expect from me; I therefore contented myself by standing at attention in military fashion and giving him a military salute. The action, which is certainly a very expressive one, seemed to meet with the royal approval, for the king acknowledged it by the slightest possible uplifting of the right hand as he seated himself in his chair and the guard formed up behind him. Then, gazing at me steadfastly for a moment, he said:

"S'a bon', umulungu!" Then, without allowing me time to make the stereotyped reply, he continued: "For what purpose have ye come hither into my country?"

"I have business in the far north," said I; "and to reach my destination it is necessary for me to pass through thy country. Therefore have I come hither to offer presents, and to ask thy permission to pass through thy country and hunt therein."

"Au!" commented the king in a tone of displeasure; "I like it not. If I give thee leave to travel and hunt in Basutoland, others of thy countrymen will claim the same privilege, and it will end in so many coming that there will be no room left for me and my people. Was it not this same apprehension that caused the Tembu, the Pondos, and the Griquas to arise and unite in an attempt to drive the white man into the sea?"

"It was," I said. "But the apprehension was quite unjustified: the English had no thought, no desire, no intention to steal the land of the black man; their own land is amply large enough for all their needs. But the Kafirs would not believe it, therefore they treacherously arose and swept down upon the white man's land, attacking isolated farms and murdering their inhabitants—my own parents died upon the spears of the Griquas. And what have the black men gained by their treachery? Nothing! And what have they lost? Everything! Thousands of them have perished in the war of retribution which they have provoked; and the end of it all is that, by way of further punishment—and as a warning to others—the white man has seized their land and driven them out of it."

"Au!" ejaculated the king again. "So have I heard. And I tell thee again, white man, that I like it not. If it be as thou sayest, that thine own land is large enough for thy need, why hast thou not remained there? Why comest thou to my country?"

"Because," answered I, "as I have already said, I have business in the far north, and to get there I must needs pass through Basutoland."

"And what is thy business in the far north?" demanded Moshesh. "I have a right to know, since thou sayest that it necessitates a passage through my country."

"I think not," said I. "Nevertheless I will tell thee, since the matter is no secret. When the southern Kafirs took up their spears to drive the white men into the sea, my father's farm was one of the last which they attacked. They slew my parents, burnt down the house, and drove off all the cattle, leaving me with only sufficient means to buy a wagon and oxen, and weapons to undertake a hunting expedition. The land itself remains, and is mine, but I have not the wherewithal to put fresh stock upon it; therefore nothing remains for me but to hunt ivory and so procure the means to purchase fresh stock. Also I am hoping to find gold; but most of all am I anxious to find a white 'ntombozaan who was captured and carried off by the Kafirs."

"Ou!" ejaculated the king. "Now I begin to understand. At first I feared that thy business was to spy out the nature of the land in this my country, so that, if it were found suitable, thou and other white men might come in and try to take it from me; but since thou dost indeed merely desire to pass through it, I give thee free leave to do so, the more readily that I learn thou didst help my people by slaying a leopard that was troubling them."

"It is well, O king, and I thank thee," said I. "And now, in acknowledgment of thy friendliness, I ask thine acceptance of certain presents," and I beckoned Piet to approach with his parcel, which I forthwith proceeded to open.

The trousers were on the top of the parcel, and as I unfolded them and turned them about, showing off their gold braid, I saw the king's eyes begin to glisten, for finery appeals quite as strongly to the savage as it does to the child. He took the garment in his hands, inspected the gold braid narrowly, and seemed more than half-inclined to insinuate himself into the article there and then; but his dignity rose superior to the strain upon it, heavy as it was, and with a sigh he handed the trousers over to the captain of the guard to hold for him. Then, with a suitable flourish, I displayed the drum-major's tunic in all its bravery of soiled scarlet and tarnished gold lace; and as I turned it about to exhibit its varied splendours even the iron discipline to which the guards were subjected so far broke down as to elicit from them a low "Wao!" of admiration. As for the king, he did not attempt to conceal his delight, even forgetting himself so far as to direct the induna's attention to its beauties; and for several minutes he continued to fondle the coat, seeming quite unable to allow so precious a thing to pass out of his own hands. At length, however, I created a diversion by producing the belt and bayonet, withdrawing the latter from its sheath and explaining that it was used as a sort of rapier. This also received its due meed of appreciation, but the royal glances still clung fondly to the tunic; therefore I produced the cocked hat with its plume of feathers, putting it upon my own head for a moment to show how it ought to be worn, and then handing it to the king, who immediately clapped it upon his own pate, and kept it there. And, finally, I produced the shaving mirror, of which the king at first seemed somewhat afraid, pronouncing it "'mkulu 'mtagati" (great or powerful magic); but when I had succeeded in making him thoroughly understand what it was, he was as delighted as a child, sitting in his chair intently studying his own countenance for several minutes, and then bursting into rapturous laughter.

When the first acute spasm of delight at seeing his own physiognomy reflected in a mirror had passed, I suggested to the king that if he would like to try on his new garments I should be very pleased to instruct him as to the proper method of getting into them, an offer which he instantly accepted; and he would have donned the clothes there and then, in the presence of his guards, if I had not whisperingly hinted that it would be much more effective to get into them in the privacy of his own house and then reappear *en grande tenue*. His Majesty immediately recognised the force of this, and thereupon retreated to the interior of the itunkulu, taking me and the clothes with him; and there, in feverish haste, he proceeded to array himself under my direction. By a miracle the garments fitted him almost as though they had been made for him—for he was at this time still a young man, and had not yet begun to put on flesh. The poor man must have felt horribly hot and uncomfortable in his unaccustomed rig, for the perspiration literally streamed from him; but no matter, he was about to appear before the eyes of his faithful subjects—or at least a portion of his bodyguard, who would not fail to talk about the matter to the rest of the people—apparelled in unimaginable splendour, and such a trifle as a little discomfort from excessive heat was as nothing compared with the sensation which he expected to produce.

And really, when at length he was completely rigged in tunic and trousers, with the cocked hat on his head, the belt about his waist, and the drawn bayonet in his hand, his appearance, although just a trifle incongruous to my critical eye, was well calculated to produce a profound impression upon his unsophisticated subjects, as was evidenced by the note of admiration which rang unmistakably in the ecstatic shout of "Bayete!" with which his guards greeted him upon his reappearance. He strutted up and down the compound for a few minutes, showing off his fine feathers; called his chief induna to him, and instructed the man in my presence that I was to be permitted to go wherever I pleased in Basutoland, stay in the country as long as I pleased, and kill as much game as I chose; and then, dismissing me rather abruptly, retreated to the interior of the itunkulu, and, as I afterwards learned, sent for his wives, that they might behold him in his unaccustomed bravery.

That I had been lucky enough to make an exceedingly favourable impression upon the king was perfectly evident; but by what magic the intelligence should instantaneously become disseminated among the people I know not. Yet so it was; for while upon my approach to the town it had been quite exceptional for a native to salute me, upon my departure from it every man I met punctiliously gave me "'Nkos'!" as I passed him. And in less than an hour after my return to the wagon an induna arrived from the town accompanied by a couple of natives leading a pair of superb Basuto ponies—a stallion and a mare, both unbroken—as a present from the king. And as the Basuto horses are far and away the finest horses in South Africa, and the pair presented to me were exceptionally fine animals of their kind, the gift was an exceedingly valuable one, although, being unbroken, I anticipated plenty of trouble with them before they would be of any use to me. But I may say here that in this anticipation I was very agreeably disappointed, for although they were as wild as deer when first brought to me, I took them in hand forthwith, and by dint of patience and making pets of them I soon had them both so docile that they would come at my call; and within a month I had backed them both. But, after all, valuable as they were for breeding purposes, they were not of very much use to me personally, being scarcely up to my weight. Nevertheless, I frequently rode them for an hour or two, just to keep them in training, and to ease my other horses a little. They were both coal black, and I called them respectively Jack and Jill—not very high—flown names, perhaps, but exceedingly handy.

There was a good deal of singing and dancing going on in the town that night, the rumpus being so great that it was well on into the small hours before it subsided sufficiently to allow me to get to sleep; and on the following morning I learned, through my boy Piet, that so great had been the king's gratification at the result of his interview with me that he had given ten oxen from his own private herd as a feast in celebration of my arrival.

Anxious to press forward upon my journey, and anxious also to get away from Moshesh's kraal while the relations were so exceedingly cordial, I sent a message to the king, early upon the following morning, requesting his permission to depart. But instead of receiving a gracious assent to my request, I was somewhat perturbed to see Moshesh himself, splendidly mounted, and attired in his new rig-out, accompanied by some ten or a dozen indunas and about a thousand of his troops, all mounted, filing out of the gate and heading straight for the wagon—for, to be quite candid, the South African savage is a little uncertain in his moods, and the man who is to-day in high favour may, as likely as not, find himself staked out on an ant-heap to-morrow, to die the awful "death of the ants" in revenge for some unknown and unintended offence. But upon the arrival of the cavalcade I was quickly reassured by the cordial tone of the king's greeting and the respect with which the indunas saluted me; and presently Moshesh, informing me that he was about to hold a review of his own especial regiment of lifeguards, invited me to accompany him and witness the evolutions. This, of course, was a very exceptional display of royal favour, and although I was anxious to press forward upon my journey there was obviously nothing for it but to accept the king's invitation with a good grace and every outward sign of gratification. At the same time I could not avoid a suspicion that there must be something behind such a signal mark of favour, and presently I got an inkling of what it was when, as Piet led up my horse, saddled and ready for me to mount, the king said:

"I am told, white man, that you possess a wonderful fire weapon with which you can slay at a distance far beyond that to which the strongest of my warriors can hurl an assagai. Is that the truth?"

"It is the truth, O King," said I. "Would you like to see it?"

The king intimated that he would, whereupon I directed Piet to bring me my rifle, together with the powder horn—the belt, with pouch containing bullets, wads, and percussion caps, was already buckled round my waist; and upon receiving the weapon I held it up for His Majesty to look at, keeping it, however, in my own hands. But this did not suit Moshesh at all; he must needs handle it himself. Therefore, rather unwillingly, I must confess, I offered the gun to him, first taking care to remove the cap and lower the hammer down on to the nipple, for the piece was loaded, and I was particularly anxious that no accident should happen.

Unobtrusively, however, as the deed was done, my action did not escape the sharp eyes of the king, and he turned upon me quickly with the demand:

"Why did you do that, white man?"

"Because this," said I, holding up the percussion cap, "is very powerful magic, obedient only to the white man. Without it the fire weapon is as harmless as a stick; with it the fire weapon is deadly, and not to be handled with impunity by anyone but its rightful owner. Therefore, since you wish to see my rifle, and take it into your own hands, I must needs remove the magic, else would it turn upon you and do you a serious hurt, possibly slay you."

"Au!" ejaculated the king, regarding the rifle doubtfully, and not offering to take it into his own hands: "I like it not; take it away, I will not touch it; the thing is more dangerous than a she leopard robbed of her cubs! Yet I would fain see what it can do, therefore bring it with thee, white man; it may be that, as we go, we may meet a leopard, or a lion, or a buck for thee to slay."

"Nay," said I, "it is not likely that either of the beasts which thou hast named will show in the open in the presence of so many men and horses. Nevertheless I will take the rifle, for even though no beast should show itself I may be able

to shoot a bird or two." So saying, I swung myself into the saddle, and, accepting the king's invitation to ride beside him, proceeded at a gallop, with the thousand bodyguards thundering along in the rear. And, watching my opportunity, it was not long before I contrived to set my rifle to half-cock and replace the cap on the nipple without attracting the king's attention.

Our way lay along what at the beginning was simply a very shallow depression between two low ridges; but as we proceeded the depression rapidly became deeper and the ridges higher, until, by the time that we had ridden a mile, we were sweeping through a ravine with high, steep, bush-clad slopes rising to right and left of us, these slopes terminating about half a mile farther on in a couple of lofty, perpendicular rocky cliffs, some six hundred feet high, and about three hundred feet apart, forming a sort of natural gateway to a circular basin about three miles in diameter, the floor of which was perfectly level, clothed with long lush grass, still looking quite fresh and green, and with only a few small, widely scattered clumps of bush here and there.

"This," explained the king, as we dashed through the natural gateway at the head of the galloping regiment, "is the exercise ground where I bring my regiments from time to time to exercise them in the tactics of war."

"And a very excellent place it is for such a purpose," I agreed, as my eye took in the wide area of level, unbroken ground. "There is room enough here in which to fight a battle of quite respectable dimensions. But what are those moving objects yonder?" I interrupted myself eagerly, as my gaze was arrested by a group of some ten or a dozen dark dots moving slowly among the long grass at the opposite extremity of the valley. "Surely they must be buffalo, or I am greatly mistaken."

"You are not mistaken, they are buffalo; and you have a marvellously sharp eye, white man," returned the king. Then he flung up his hand, and the galloping regiment came to a sudden halt, reining-in their sweating horses so sharply as to throw the animals back upon their haunches. At the same moment we also reined up. Then the king called his indunas round him, instructing one of them to take fifty men, and with them ride round the outside of the basin until they reached the only other exit from the valley, and block it, so that the buffalo might not escape through it; while a second induna was also to take fifty men and block the exit through which we had just passed, thus rendering escape from the valley an impossibility, for, as the king now informed me, the surrounding cliffs were everywhere vertical, so that no animal, save, perhaps, a baboon, could possibly enter or leave the basin except by one or the other of the two natural gateways in the cliff.

"Now, white man," said the king, turning to me with sparkling eyes and pointing toward the buffalo, "there is your opportunity. Kill me two or three of those with your fire weapon, and then you shall see how the Basuto hunt buffalo."

"Very well," I said; "I will see what I can do. But we shall have to get very much nearer to them than we are at present; for even my fire weapon will not kill at such a distance as that."

"No?" demanded the king. "Then how close must you get before it will kill?"

"Oh," I said, "perhaps one-sixth of the present distance of the buffalo."

The king was evidently disappointed to learn that there was a limit to the range of the rifle, and for the moment seemed inclined to regard it somewhat contemptuously. Without wasting further words upon so very ineffective a weapon, he proceeded to issue his orders to the other indunas, in obedience to which the regiment divided itself into two, one half riding to the left and the other to the right, and stringing themselves out, single file, close in under the shadows of the overhanging cliffs, where they quickly became so inconspicuous as to be practically invisible. Then, accompanied by a body of twenty picked men, who spread themselves out in open order in our rear, the king and I advanced toward the buffalo at a slow walking pace.

It fortunately happened that the wind was blowing across the basin directly from the buffalo toward us, consequently it was a long while before the brutes became aware of our presence; indeed, we had arrived within about three-quarters of a mile of them before they betrayed any sign of uneasiness, and even then it was toward the upper end of the valley, and not toward us, that their attention seemed to be directed.

"It is Bulangu and his party that they scent," said the king, referring to the squadron of men whom he had sent round outside the basin to bar the upper exit; and, sure enough, a minute or two later the whole herd swung round and began to move toward us. But the moment that this occurred they of course caught sight of us and at once came to a halt, tossing their heads impatiently, lashing their flanks with their tails, and emitting low, moaning bellows of annoyance. After a short pause, however, accompanied by the display of many indications of rapidly increasing anger, the herd again began to move toward us, first at a walking pace that rapidly merged into a trot, till finally the whole herd broke into a gallop as the induna Bulangu and his party appeared at the far end of the plain.

"Now," said I to the king as the herd rapidly approached within range, "I will show you what the fire weapon is capable of doing. Watch the old bull who is leading the herd and see what happens. And perhaps you had better dismount, for your horse is unused to fire weapons, and when I shoot he may possibly swerve suddenly and throw you."

"Nay," answered the king, "I will not dismount; for now that you have warned me I shall know what to expect, and shall not be taken unawares." And he gathered in the slack of his single bridle, tightly gripped the animal between his knees, and sat prepared for whatsoever might happen.

The herd, meanwhile, had approached to within about eight hundred yards of us, and were thundering straight in our direction at a somewhat ungainly but nevertheless rapid gallop, with heads down and tails up, giving vent to low, angry bellows as they came. I was riding Prince, upon whom I knew I could absolutely depend; therefore, instead of dismounting, I turned him to the right with a touch of my heel and a slight pressure of the rein, very nearly broadside-on to the approaching herd, and flung the rifle up to my shoulder. It was a rather long shot, and at eight

hundred yards even a buffalo, coming head on, presents but a comparatively small target, especially when the grass happens to be breast-high; nevertheless I got the sights to bear dead upon the centre of the bull's forehead, about halfway between the horns and the eyes, and, watching for the proper moment, pressed the trigger. The flash and report of the piece were immediately followed by sounds of fierce stamping and plunging close at hand, and out of the corner of my eye I saw that the king's high-mettled stallion was fighting hard to break away and make a bolt for it; then, just as the bull stumbled, recovered himself, and finally turned a complete somersault, I heard the loud thud of the bullet on the thick skull, and knew that my shot had got home.

"W-a-a-u!" ejaculated the king, giving vent to a long-drawn expression of amazement; "yena chiele (he is hit)! The fire weapon is indeed 'mkulu 'mtagati (great magic)! The beast fell dead as though smitten by lightning. Can you do that again, white man, or was it merely chance?"

"You shall see," said I, as I rammed a wad down upon a fresh powder charge and slipped a bullet in after it. As I set the trigger to half-cock I saw that the powder was well up in the nipple; therefore, slipping on a cap and setting the trigger to full-cock, I again levelled the piece and bowled over the leading buffalo.

"It is enough!" exclaimed the king soberly. "No wonder that you conquered the tribes who rose against you if you were all armed like that! Now, children," he continued, throwing up his hand as he addressed his little body of immediate followers, "show the white man how the Basuto kills buffalo!"

The herd had originally numbered eleven, nine of which were still upon their feet, and, with the vindictive fearlessness which is the chief characteristic of the Cape buffalo, charging straight down upon our party; at a word, therefore, from the induna who was in command of the contingent, nine of the warriors flung away their shields and casting assagais, and, gripping the single bangwan, or stabbing assagai, with which each of them was also armed, drove their heels into their horses' flanks and dashed forward to meet the bellowing foe. To see those nine men fearlessly charge the rushing herd was a distinctly thrilling sight; for none knew better than they the implacably savage nature of the brutes they were about to contend with, or the deadliness of the peril to which they were so light-heartedly exposing themselves. Yet not one of them manifested the slightest disposition to shirk the encounter: possibly they all knew that to perish upon the horns of a buffalo would be preferable to the punishment that surely awaited them should they disgrace themselves and their king by showing fear in the presence of a white man. But if the riders scorned to exhibit fear, the horses were animated by no such scruples, for when they had approached to within about two hundred feet of the charging buffalo, the low, fierce, grunting bellows, the blazing eyes, and the sharp, threatening horns of the latter seemed to strike such panic into them that suddenly, as though by concerted arrangement, they wheeled sharply round, and, despite their riders' utmost efforts, bolted ignominiously in all directions.

I had by this time succeeded in recharging my rifle, and, slipping on a fresh cap, I raised the piece to my shoulder and held myself ready to shoot upon the instant that I dared do so without the risk of hitting a Basuto, for a tragedy seemed imminent. But Moshesh, who was now with difficulty restraining his own mount from bolting, stopped me.

"Wait, white man, and watch!" he enjoined me; and as the words passed his lips I saw the nine warriors throw themselves very cleverly from the backs of their bolting horses, wheel round as upon a pivot, and dash back until they were immediately in the path of the furious buffalo, which seemed now to have marked down as their destined victims the little body of men of whom the king and I formed a part. In the twinkling of an eye each warrior had selected one buffalo in particular as his own especial foe, and had planted himself with uplifted bangwan square in the brute's path, while the buffalo, promptly accepting the challenge, responded to it with fierce bellows and savage flourishings of the terrible horns. Three breathless seconds later the leading buffalo, with head lowered and slightly turned to allow of a more effective thrust of the sharp, upturned point of its murderous horn, was upon his antagonist, and I caught my breath sharply, fully expecting to see the man impaled, or at least tossed high in the air. But instead I beheld as splendid an exhibition of courage and alertness as I think I have ever witnessed, for the man, firmly standing his ground to the very last fraction of a second, sprang nimbly to one side at the precise moment when, as it seemed, the point of the horn was about to be dashed into his naked body, and then, as the great beast thundered past within reach of his hand, down flashed the formidable, broad-bladed bangwan, with so sure and strong a stroke that the buffalo crashed headlong to the ground dead, with its fierce heart cleft in twain.

And in like manner perished seven of its companions, the ninth buffalo wreaking its revenge for the death of the other eight in a peculiarly ghastly manner. Precisely how the tragedy happened none of us knew, for it chanced that our attention was concentrated elsewhere at the moment; but a sharp, shrill scream of mortal agony sounding out on the hot air apprised us that something untoward was happening. Glancing quickly in the direction from which the sound proceeded, I was horrified to see that one unfortunate warrior had somehow failed to avoid a buffalo's charge, and was now writhing transfixed on one of the horns of the great brute, which the next instant flung the poor fellow high in the air, and then, with a savage bellow, swerved and came thundering straight toward the king and myself, where we sat on our horses close together watching the exciting scene that was being enacted before us. A startled cry from the induna commanding the squad which was at that moment in special charge of the king's person caused the eleven men who had until now sat quiescent upon their horses to fling themselves hastily to the ground and dash forward to protect their monarch. But there was no time for this; the buffalo was within a dozen yards of us, and I could see that he had singled out Moshesh as the particular object of his attack, attracted, no doubt, by His Majesty's scarlet tunic. The king might of course have escaped by promptly wheeling his horse and galloping away; but his pride and self-esteem would have suffered a mortal wound had he been driven to flight in the presence of a white man, although there was a certain quality in his hurried glances to right and left that seemed to tell me that he meditated something of the sort, rather than stand his ground and take his chance. Fortunately I had reloaded my rifle a minute or two earlier, and now I saw my opportunity to render the king an important service by sparing him the ignominy of flight: I therefore flung up my piece and pressed the trigger, and the buffalo—an enormous and most formidable brute—stumbled and fell dead literally at our horses' feet.

"That was well done, 'mlungu," exclaimed the king, with just the faintest suggestion of a feeling of relief in the tones

of his voice; "that was marvellously well done! But for thy quickness and sureness of eye and hand I should have been overthrown, and the Basutos might have been obliged to choose another king. 'Mtala," to the induna, "let them see to yonder clumsy fool who allowed the buffalo to catch him; and if he be not dead let four of thy men make a litter and carry him back to the kraal."

The induna saluted, and, beckoning to four of his men, proceeded in person to examine the unlucky wight who had been gored; but such examination was scarcely necessary, for even from where I sat it was apparent that the unfortunate man's injuries were of such a dreadful character that survival was impossible, and a few minutes later 'Mtala returned to report that the victim was quite dead.

"It is well!" commented the king briefly. "Let the carrion be moved out of the way; and let the regiment form up and be put through its evolutions." Whereupon, at a word from the induna, a man dismounted, and, uncoiling his hobble rope, slipped the noose round one of the ankles of the corpse, attached the other end to his horse's girth, and, mounting, galloped off toward the edge of the plateau, dragging the body after him until it was removed to a sufficient distance to be quite out of the way of the manoeuvring troops, when it was abandoned to become a prey to the jackals and vultures!

Meanwhile the troops were recalled and formed up in the centre of the plain, where the king critically inspected them, while I, at his invitation, rode beside him. And I feel bound to say that seldom have I seen a finer body of men, either savage or civilised, which, after all, is not to be greatly wondered at, seeing that, as the king's own special regiment of bodyguards, they were, naturally, the very pick and flower of the entire nation.

The inspection occupied about a quarter of an hour, and at its conclusion the regiment as a whole was put through a number of movements, which they executed very creditably. Then they were divided into two equal parts, which were marched to the opposite extremities of the plateau, when they faced about, and, charging down upon each other, engaged in a very realistic sham fight, lasting for the best part of an hour, and resulting in quite a number of casualties, several of the men being unhorsed and sustaining more or less serious injuries; after which the regiment re-formed, and we all returned to the kraal at a gallop, a party being detailed to remain behind and bring in the injured at a more sober pace.

I soon found that Moshesh, like all other savages, possessed his full share of vanity, which he was quite unable to conceal; also, it was evident that he was inordinately proud of his regiment, and was not above fishing for compliments upon it: I therefore dutifully did what was manifestly expected of me, and immensely gratified His Majesty by being as complimentary as I possibly could be without unduly straining the truth. But when all was said and done I had a very shrewd suspicion that while Moshesh might perhaps be credited with a genuine desire to show me some honour by inviting me to witness the review of his troops, he was principally animated by a craving for his own glorification, and, incidentally, was glad to seize the occasion as affording him an early opportunity to exhibit himself before his people in all the magnificence of his new "toggerly."

Chapter Seven.

Strange Occurrences in the Wilderness.

About an hour after sunrise on the following morning I again presented myself before the king, with the request that I be permitted to continue my journey. I was very cordially received by His Majesty, who again thanked me for the service which I had rendered him on the preceding day by slaying the buffalo, and so saving him from the ignominy of flight, or the almost equally unpleasant alternative of submitting to be charged by the brute. In the privacy of his itunkulu he was much more expansive than he had been on the previous day in the presence of his indunas, unhesitatingly admitting that, had he been compelled to accept either of the above-mentioned alternatives, he would have suffered serious loss of prestige in the eyes of his own people. He informed me that upon his return to the kraal on the preceding day he had given instructions that a body of men should be dispatched to bring in the carcasses of the slaughtered buffalo, which had been done, and he now made the offer that, if I pleased, he would have the skins carefully dressed, and the skulls and horns preserved, so that I might take the whole back with me to civilisation, as trophies, upon my return. Of course I thanked him for his exceedingly generous offer, which I gladly accepted so far as the three buffalo killed by myself were concerned; and therewith we parted upon the very best of terms, the king according me full permission to go where I pleased in his country, remain in it as long as I chose, and kill all the game that I had a mind to, while I made His Majesty inexpressibly proud and happy by presenting him with a burning-glass and showing him how to kindle a fire by its means. Then, my ceremonial visit being at an end, I returned to the wagon, ordered the oxen to be inspanned, and resumed my journey.

The ensuing fortnight was spent in progressing slowly northward through that part of Basutoland which lies between the Machacha mountain range and what is now known as the Caledon River, hunting all the way. But although the sport, such as it was, was good, enabling me to bag five lions, eight leopards, and three splendid specimens of rhinoceros, and although buck of all kinds, and buffalo, were plentiful enough to have enabled me to fill the wagon with their skins and horns, had I desired to do so, the sport was not the kind that I desired; I was out after elephant, and Basutoland was not elephant country. Therefore, at the end of the fortnight, I crossed the headwaters of the Caledon, and entered what in after years became the Orange Free State, and, still later, the Orange River Colony. Thence, passing between the two mountain ranges which later received the names of Witte and Roode Bergen, we "struck" a wide expanse of level, open country; through this a stream flowed in a northerly direction, along the left bank of which we trekked for a full week, not only for the sake of the water and the richer grass growing in the immediate vicinity of the stream, but also because if there was any game in the neighbourhood it was sure to be found within easy reach of the water. And here I got my first slice of luck, potting a brace of elephants, both of them magnificent tuskers, as well as another rhinoceros, three giraffes, and seven cock ostriches in perfect plumage. Then, crossing the Wilge River, and, two days later, the Klip River, we entered the country now known as the Transvaal, the

Klip River being, as a matter of fact, the headwater of the Vaal.

And now I found myself in a very hunter's paradise, for the country was literally swarming with game of almost every description, consisting of eland, gemsbok, springbok, reitbok, and antelope of all kinds, often in herds numbering several thousands; also that curious-looking beast the gnu, of which I now got my first glimpse; troops of quagga and zebra; giraffes, rhinoceroses, lions, leopards, and ostriches; hippopotami and crocodiles in the rivers; but still very few elephants, and those so shy that it was only with the utmost difficulty I succeeded in securing three within the first fortnight after crossing the Klip River. And during all this time, although I enjoyed some splendid hunting, I did not meet with a single adventure worthy of record, and met very few natives, while those whom I encountered were either very friendly disposed on the one hand, or, on the other, too shy to come near me. But I saw several very curious sights, one or two of which I may perhaps be excused for recording.

For instance, about a week after crossing the Klip River we found ourselves striking northward across a tract of practically level country, dotted here and there with herds of various kinds of game, which took but little notice of us beyond moving leisurely out of our way when we seemed to be approaching them rather too closely for their liking. Piet and I were, as usual, riding forward about a mile ahead of the wagon, on the lookout for ostriches or elephant spoor, when we sighted a troop of the great birds which we were seeking some two miles ahead of us, immediately in line with a range of those curious flat-topped hills which are such a distinctive feature of the South African landscape. Away to our left, about a quarter of a mile distant, was a small kopje, about two hundred feet high, consisting of an outcrop of rock the sides of which, although almost perpendicular, were so rough that I believed they might be easily climbed; and as the summit of the kopje promised to afford an excellent spying place from which to observe the movements of the ostriches, we turned our horses' heads toward it and approached it at a gallop, reining up at its base. Upon arriving at the foot of the kopje I at once saw that it might be scaled without the slightest difficulty, for not only were the rocky projections so bold and rough as almost to amount to steps, but on the southern or shady side of the hill—which was the face that we approached—a multitude of tough, fern-like plants were sprouting from the interstices, affording excellent hold for the hands; therefore, dismounting and handing my horse's bridle to Piet, and bidding him remain where he was, in the shadow of the rock, I took my rifle in one hand, and with the small but very powerful telescope which I always carried when out after game slung over my shoulder, proceeded to scale the kopje.

Reaching its summit without difficulty, I found, as I had expected, that my lofty perch afforded a magnificent outlook over the plain in every direction. The ostriches whose movements I particularly desired to watch were now in plain view, and with the aid of my telescope I could not only distinguish the cocks from the hens, but could also perceive that the plumage of the former was in the very pink of perfection. But, in addition to the ostriches, there were several other exceedingly interesting objects and sights clearly distinguishable from the summit of the kopje, of which no hint was obtainable from the level of the plain below.

For instance, upon removing the telescope from my eye, after an exhaustive study of the movements and behaviour of the great birds, I allowed my gaze to travel over the surface of the grassy plain immediately before me, and presently became aware of a solitary antelope, of a species which was quite new to me, grazing at a distance of some two hundred yards from the base of the kopje. The creature was about the size of a bushbok, was a dirty white in colour, and carried a pair of horns about two and a half feet in length, slightly curved, enormously thick at the base, strongly ridged for about half their length, and thence sweeping smoothly away to points as sharp apparently as those of bayonets. The most curious thing about it, however, was that its coat was long and thick, like that of a goat, but apparently very much finer and more silky; and I was speculating upon the possibility of capturing and domesticating a few specimens, with the view of testing the commercial value of the hair, when suddenly the animal ceased feeding, threw up its head, twitched its long ears nervously to and fro, and proceeded to sniff the air anxiously, turning its head hither and thither as it did so.

Finally it faced right round, almost broadside-on to me, and stood motionless, very erect, and with its body seemingly braced in readiness to bound away upon confirmation of its evident suspicion that an enemy was somewhere in its immediate neighbourhood. I knew that the suspected enemy could not possibly be myself, for I was dead to leeward of the animal, and I therefore proceeded to reconnoitre with the view of ascertaining whether danger was threatening it from some other quarter. And presently I became aware of certain suspicious-looking movements of the long grass, about a hundred yards distant, suggestive of the presence of an animal of some kind approaching the antelope cautiously along a sort of wavering, serpentine course. When I first discovered this movement the creature that caused it was at such a distance that it was completely concealed among the long grass, even from the elevation which I occupied; but a minute later I was able to catch occasional glimpses of a darkish grey body, thickly dotted with irregularly shaped spots of lighter grey, slinking toward the antelope, which still remained perfectly motionless and expectantly watchful. The course pursued by the approaching creature was such as gradually to bring it into full view from where I crouched on the summit of the kopje, and at length I made it out to be also an animal hitherto unknown to me, about the size of a half-grown leopard, and of very similar build and shape, except that its tail was only about a foot long, thick, and of uniform dimensions right to its extremity; its ears were tufted like those of a lynx, and indeed in general appearance it greatly resembled a lynx, excepting that it was very much larger.

It was very interesting to watch the progress of this little drama—was it a tragedy?—which was rapidly unfolding itself almost at my very feet, and I was curious to see what steps the threatened antelope would take to provide for its safety—for it was certain that the creature was fully conscious of the fact that danger threatened it. Why did it not seek safety in flight, as most creatures of the antelope species are wont to do? Or did some subtle instinct warn it that flight could but prolong its agony, and that the superior endurance of its approaching enemy would cause it to be run down and brought to bay sooner or later; and that its best chance lay in facing the danger now, before its strength should be worn out by a prolonged and exhausting flight? Apparently some such instinct or conviction must have possessed it, for the antelope remained standing motionless, as though carved out of stone, the only signs of life which it betrayed being a continuous quivering of its nostrils and an occasional slight twitching of its forward-pointing ears, while its enemy slunk sinuously toward it, foot by foot, like a cat stalking a bird. At length the would-be destroyer arrived within about twenty feet of its quarry—at which distance I suspected that each animal was able to

obtain at least an occasional partial glimpse of the other—when it halted, and seemed to be gathering itself together for a sudden rush, while the antelope still stood as though rooted to the spot.

Why did not the latter take to its heels and run? I wondered. Was it that the creature was paralysed with terror, and so unable to make any effort to save itself? I thought not, for I could detect no sign of terror; all the indications were in favour of the conviction that while the antelope was undoubtedly fully aware of the close proximity of its enemy, and was alertly watchful for the next movement on the part of the latter, its attitude and aspect were in nowise suggestive of a feeling of dismay—on the contrary, the idea conveyed to me was that of reckless temerity. Yet surely the poor, misguided beast could never be so foolish as to imagine that it stood the slightest chance of victory in the event of a fight? I was not allowed very much time to ponder the question, for, after a pause of about half a dozen seconds, the lynx-like creature made a sudden lightning-like dash at the motionless antelope, which I fully expected to see go down instantly, with the formidable fangs of its enemy buried deep in its throat. Not so, however, for as the lithe, spotted form darted through the grass the antelope rose from the ground, as though shot into the air by a powerful spring, descending fair and square upon its enemy's back, its four sharp-pointed hoofs digging viciously through the spotted hide and extorting a scream of mingled rage and pain from the astonished assailant; and then, so quickly that the eye could hardly follow the movement, a second vigorous leap landed the antelope fully twenty feet away, while the power expended in the leap sent the screaming, snarling enemy rolling and sprawling helplessly in the grass.

"Well done, antelope!" thought I. "Now is your chance to make a clean bolt for it, before your enemy has time to recover from his amazement."

But not a bit of it; evidently the very last thing that the antelope contemplated was flight, for no sooner did its hoofs touch the earth than it swung round like lightning, facing toward its adversary, while the latter picked itself up and, with four little streams of blood trickling down its sides, proceeded afresh to the attack. Again it crept up to within a short distance of the waiting antelope, paused, and suddenly dashed in; and again the antelope leaped into the air, alighted upon its enemy's back, inflicting four fresh wounds with its stabbing hoofs, and sprang away, spurning the snarling foe with such violence that once more it was sent sprawling in the grass.

This performance was repeated some eight or ten times, until at length it became quite evident that the antelope was getting very much the better of the fight, for thus far it had not received a single scratch, while its enemy's back was punctured all over with wounds that, although none of them were very deep, were bleeding freely, and in the aggregate were probably very painful. It was clear that matters were fast nearing the point at which the grey-spotted beast would be more than willing to regard the fight as a drawn battle, for every bout left it less willing to continue the fight; but the plucky little antelope evidently disapproved of half-measures, and was determined to press the matter to a definite conclusion, for when his antagonist began to betray a disinclination to continue the fight he no longer waited for the onset, but boldly advanced, leaping hither and thither with astounding rapidity, each leap landing him nearer his enemy, until the latter was compelled, in self-defence, to continue. But at length a moment arrived when the feline lay moaning and snarling, covered with blood, and either unable or unwilling to continue the combat; and then the antelope, after approaching the enemy by the usual bewildering series of leaps and bounds, stood for several seconds meditatively regarding him.

Finally, the plucky little beast seemed to come to the conclusion that the decisive moment had arrived, for, suddenly placing his head between his fore legs, so that his long, powerful horns pointed straight at his opponent's body, he hurled himself violently forward, like a bolt shot from a catapult; the sharp, bayonet-like horns buried themselves deeply in the grey-spotted, blood-smeared body; and as a prolonged yell of agony rent the air the antelope turned a complete somersault over his antagonist and staggered to his feet, bewildered but unhurt, the force with which the final stroke had been delivered having been so tremendous that the horns had disengaged themselves by the simple process of tearing two ghastly slashes in the fearfully lacerated carcass of the now defunct enemy. Then, after satisfying himself, by sight and smell, that nothing further was to be feared from his victim, the conqueror bent his head and resumed his grazing as calmly as though nothing had happened.

The extraordinary combat took some twenty minutes to reach its unexpected conclusion, and then, there being nothing to detain me any longer on the summit of the slope, I descended, rejoined Piet where he was patiently awaiting me within the shadow of the rock, remounted, and rode forward, our appearance at once putting the plucky little victor to precipitate flight. I had a mind to secure the skin of the conquered lynx-like creature, not only as a curiosity and an interesting memento of a rather remarkable occurrence, but also because of its interest to the zoologists upon my return to civilisation; but when we presently found the carcass it proved to be so terribly mauled that I saw it would be impossible to remove the pelt otherwise than in fragments, and so abandoned the idea. But we went after the ostriches, and succeeded in securing the two full-grown cocks of the troop, with the result that I became the richer by about ten pounds' worth of the most magnificent plumes I had ever seen.

A few days later, our route at the time lying through hilly country, it became a question whether we should enter a long ravine which divided a range of hills ahead, trusting to the possibility of our being able to pass through it and emerge at the other end, or whether it would be necessary to make a rather wide détour round one or the other extremity of the range. The route through the ravine would suit us best from every point of view, provided that it did not prove to be a cul de sac, because it led straight in the desired direction, and appeared to be tolerably level, also it would probably save us nearly forty miles; therefore I ordered Jan to outspan upon his arrival at the mouth of the ravine, while Piet and I rode on ahead to reconnoitre, taking our rifles with us, as usual, as well as the two dogs, Thunder and Juno.

The range of hills lying in front of us was about twenty miles in length, running almost due east and west, and the ravine which it was my purpose to explore pierced it as nearly as might be in its middle, running practically north and south; and even at the first glance I was impressed by the remarkable character of the place. For the ravine irresistibly suggested the idea that at some time in the more or less remote past a giant had taken a shovel measuring about a quarter of a mile in width, and with this gigantic tool had cut a gap right through the range. The

most singular feature of the case, however, was that, although the gap was undoubtedly there, and although a vast quantity of material must have been removed in order to create it, there was nothing whatever to show what had become of that material. The floor of the gap was quite smooth and level, unencumbered by boulders or débris of any kind, and its rocky sides were absolutely vertical, rising in the centre to a height of very nearly three thousand feet, which height they maintained for about half a mile before they started to dip toward the far end. Small patches of wait-a-bit and other thorn bushes sparsely dotted the floor of the ravine, or gorge, and about halfway through there was a little grove of mimosa, in the midst of which we caught fleeting, indistinct glimpses of certain moving things which Piet declared were giraffes.

Now, I had not yet shot a giraffe, and was rather anxious to obtain a really good—or it would be nearer the truth to say an exceptionally fine—specimen; therefore, hastily taking cover behind the nearest clump of bush, we proceeded to approach the creatures warily until we had arrived within about half a mile of them. Then, detecting certain signs of growing uneasiness among them, which I attributed to the possibility of their having sighted our moving figures, I dismounted, and, leaving Piet with the dogs and horses well sheltered behind a big clump of bush, took my rifle and set off to complete the stalk through the long grass alone and on foot. I reckoned upon being able to manage this without very much difficulty, for the wind was blowing from the west right across the ravine, while the giraffes were upon the eastern side, and I was to the southward of them; therefore I knew that I ought to be able to get quite close to them before they could wind me, while the grass was tall enough to enable me to approach them unseen. Nevertheless, although I was stalking them with the utmost caution, using the wind to guide me, and only raising my head to reconnoitre at rare intervals and with the exercise of the greatest care, I was annoyed to observe that the uneasiness of my quarries was rapidly increasing; they had ceased to feed, and were standing at attention, with their ears switching quickly to and fro and their heads continually turning this way and that, as though they scented danger of some sort but could not determine its character or, more important still, from which direction it was coming; and I began to fear that before I could get near enough to put in a decisive shot they would stampede and I should lose them altogether. And, sure enough, that was precisely what they did, a great bull giraffe, evidently the leader of the herd, and the animal which I had finally fixed upon as my own particular prey, suddenly tossing up his head and breaking away up the valley in a long, lumbering, ungainly canter, instantly followed by the rest of the herd.

I was not only intensely annoyed but also greatly puzzled at this behaviour on the part of the great, long-legged, long-necked creatures, for I could not believe that the flight had been the result of any carelessness on my part; but while I stood watching them rapidly increasing the distance between themselves and me I became aware of a curious dimming of the atmosphere along the top edge of the cliffs on the western side of the ravine, and while I was still wondering what this might be, a low, murmurous, rumbling sound gradually evolved itself out of the faint sigh of the breeze over the grass and through the foliage of the bush—a sound which, as I listened, rapidly developed into the beat of innumerable hoofs, mingled with the bleatings and barkings of a veritable army of bucks of various descriptions. Then I knew that the dimming of the atmosphere along the summit of the western cliffs was due to a cloud of light, impalpable dust, swept along before a great migrating army of game crossing the mountain range, probably on the march in search of water, and I waited to see what would happen when the vanguard of the army should reach the edge of the cliffs.

I had not very long to wait; the dust cloud rapidly thickened, and the low rumbling beat of hoofs on the hard dry soil of the hill crest quickly increased in volume until it became like the thunderous roar of surf upon a rock-bound shore, mingled with the continuous cries of a countless host of animals all herded together under the influence of some mysterious but powerful influence. And presently the advance guard of the great army appeared against the skyline on the edge of the beetling cliffs, almost immediately opposite where I was standing; first a solitary eland, then three gemsbok, closely followed by seven or eight hartebeeste, then a small troop of quagga, upon the heels of which came a herd of some fifty klipspringers. All these advanced right up to the edge of the cliff, halted abruptly, staring down into the ravine below, and then, wheeling sharply to right and left, threw up their heads and, with characteristic cries of dismay, took to their heels and galloped furiously along the very edge of the cliff, in an evident effort to escape the pressure of the great army in their rear. But as these first arrivals wheeled and sped, terrified, to right and left, others appeared in increasing numbers and, suddenly realising their danger, sought to escape it, some following in the footsteps of the vanguard, while others faced about and strove to retreat along the way by which they had come.

It soon became evident, however, that escape was impossible, for even as I stood watching their efforts the front rank of the main body appeared, a great compact mass of animals extending fully half a mile along the edge of the cliff; and although it was evident that this front rank now realised that danger threatened it in front, and was trying to hang back, the pressure of the vast multitude in its rear was irresistible, and foot by foot it was pushed forward until in a few seconds I was gazing at the awful spectacle of hundreds of helpless animals being thrust over the cliff edge and falling to their death more than two thousand feet below, while the air throbbed and vibrated with their cries of terror. It was a terrible experience to stand there and helplessly watch those unfortunate creatures pouring over the cliff like the waters of a cataract, to listen to their cries as they found themselves being irresistibly thrust forward to their death, and to see the long and rapidly growing pile of the dead stretching along the foot of the cliffs.

There were several varieties of animals in this great migrating army which was being so disastrously wiped out, some of them being of a kind that set me wondering by what extraordinary accident they could have become entangled among such incongruous companions. For example, tightly wedged in among a herd of blesbok I saw a full-grown lion forced over the cliff; and the only way in which I could possibly account for the presence of the beast was upon the assumption that he had been following the herd, and in springing upon some victim had become so closely involved that he had found it impossible to make his way out again.

I have always stoutly maintained that animals possess the power of communicating with each other, and what I witnessed now only tended to confirm me in my belief: for after the thing which I have been attempting to describe had continued for some ten minutes it suddenly came to an end; the remainder of the army had evidently halted, for although the cries from above still created a tremendous volume of sound, indicating that an innumerable multitude

of animals survived up there on the top of the cliff, the thunder of the trampling hoofs had died down to almost nothing, while the animals, instead of being thrust helplessly over the edge, advanced thereto in little groups, gazed down into the ravine, and then retired again. When this had continued for some few minutes the sound of hoofs again became audible; but now the hoofs were retiring instead of advancing, and in the space of ten minutes had become inaudible. The creatures had retired to seek a safer road elsewhere.

Then, emerging into the open, and beckoning Piet, who also had quitted cover, to join me, I walked over to the foot of the fatal cliff to examine more closely the ghastly pile of carcasses that lay there, and by the time that I arrived the air was already darkening with the vast flock of vultures which was gathering to the feast thus bountifully provided for them.

The lion that I had seen come hurtling over the precipice in company with the herd of blesbok happened to be lying in such a position that I could get at him without very much difficulty, and I determined to have his hide if upon examination it should prove worth taking. Accordingly, upon the arrival of Piet, we both clambered up on the mound of dead and dying animals until we reached the spot where the lion lay doubled up in a heap and partially buried beneath the carcasses of the animals that had fallen on top of him. He was quite dead, his spine, and almost every other bone in his body apparently, being broken; but his skin was uninjured, so far as we could see. Piet and I therefore each seized one of his great fore paws, and, with a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, contrived to drag him clear and roll him down to the bottom of the heap, to which we quickly followed him. He proved to be a magnificent beast, quite young but full-grown, in perfect condition, with a most formidable set of claws and fangs, a smooth, glossy hide of a rich deep tawny hue, and a splendid mane, of so deep a tint as to be almost black; altogether he was a specimen well worth having, and we quickly stripped him of his hide, taking also the head, which we deposited in close proximity to an ants' nest in the full assurance that the industrious little creatures would clear the skull of every particle of flesh in the course of a few hours. Then, leaving Piet to clean the skin and prepare it for packing, I sprang into the saddle and, taking my rifle, cantered off down the ravine to explore the remaining portion of it and ascertain whether, as I conjectured, there was a means of egress at the far end.

I found that, as I had anticipated, the ravine, or gorge, passed right through the range of hills, and gave access to the open country beyond; that the route was quite practicable for a wagon throughout its entire length; and that by making use of it I should save a distance of about forty miles, or the equivalent of two days' trek: and having satisfied myself upon these points, I turned my horse's head and proceeded to ride leisurely back to the wagon, intending to pick up Piet and the lion's skin on the way.

I had returned about three miles along the ravine, allowing Prince to proceed at his own pace, with the bridle hanging loose upon his neck, when I was aroused from a reverie into which I had fallen by a low whinny from my horse as he suddenly flung up his head, twitched his ears forward, and directed his glances toward a point some distance ahead and to the left. I knew at once that he had either sighted or scented something, or both; and, glancing in the direction indicated, I became aware that we were approaching an enormous flat boulder, which had attracted my attention some two hours earlier on my outward journey because of its immense size and the impossibility of accounting satisfactorily for its presence just where it was.

But now the boulder was remarkable for quite another reason; for whereas when I first passed it its flat top was perfectly bare, I perceived that in the interim it had become a scene of feverish activity, a troop of quite a hundred monkeys seeming to have taken possession of it. There was of course nothing very extraordinary in that; the strangeness of the matter consisted in the fact that they were all hard at work, apparently in concert with another troop of their brethren down below who seemed to be rushing to and fro between the rock and an adjacent clump of thorn bush. A touch on the bridle brought Prince to a halt, and I then produced my telescope and brought it to bear upon the busy party, when I perceived, to my amazement, that the gang of monkeys who were rushing to and fro between the clump of bush and the boulder were engaged in collecting and dragging to the rock a great number of branches of thorns, which they were passing up to their comrades upon the surface of the rock; and that these, in their turn, as it seemed to me, were constructing a scherm, or hedge of thorns, working in such feverish haste that their lives might have been depending upon its speedy completion.

The behaviour of that active gang of simians was so extraordinary that I determined to wait and see the thing out. I therefore remained where I was, at such a distance that my presence would not be likely to disturb or alarm them, and kept my telescope focused upon them, with the result that I soon began to realise, from their behaviour, that, rapid as were all their movements, the monkeys were nevertheless taking considerable pains to preserve silence. I noticed that none of them attempted to drag the thorns after them through the grass; every branch was carried at arm's length overhead; and when it was passed up to those on the top of the rock it was not permitted to scrape or grate against the surface of the rock, but was carefully held away from it, although it was evident that some of the monkeys got more or less severely pricked during the process. I also observed that those monkeys who were actually engaged in the construction of the scherm laid the bunches of thorns in place with elaborate care and, as it appeared to me, with quite amazing skill and cunning.

Some ten or twelve minutes after I had come to a halt the scherm was finished, and then came an end to the silence which the monkeys had been at such pains to observe during the progress of the work; for, with its completion, the creatures set up a sudden chattering and howling and shrieking which distinctly reached me even at the distance of a good half-mile. And with the outbreak of the clamour, all hands beat a precipitate retreat from the surface of the rock, and arranged themselves in a circle round it down below, at a sufficient distance away to enable them to see anything that might happen on the top of the boulder. But what, I asked myself, could happen up there; why had those monkeys taken the trouble to construct that fine scherm; and why, in the name of fortune, were they exerting themselves to create such a terrific row? The answer was not long in coming; for, as I sat there intently scanning the scene through my telescope, I saw the head and about six feet of the body of an enormous python upreared from inside the scherm, its appearance being greeted by a yell of delight from the monkeys that caused Prince to snort and stamp with excitement. I saw the huge reptile up-rear itself still further and attempt to get out of the scherm; but it could not do so without crawling over the hedge of thorns, and the moment that its body touched these it recoiled,

its immense jaws gaped open, its tongue flickered in and out, and I could in imagination hear its angry hisses as plainly as I could hear the howls of derision and defiance with which the monkeys greeted its appearance.

And then I understood, or believed I understood, the whole thing. The python, doubtless, had its lair somewhere in the immediate vicinity of the boulder, the flat top of which was probably its favourite basking place; the troop of monkeys, perhaps gambolling about on the face of the adjacent cliff, had chanced to see the huge snake lying asleep upon the rock, and, instantly seizing the opportunity to take their enemy at a disadvantage, had, with diabolical ingenuity, hastened to enclose the creature in a circular fence of thorns, from which it now seemed that it would find it impossible to escape—for I saw it make several attempts, at various points around the circumference of the scherm, and upon each occasion, when it essayed to crawl over the thorns, it shrank back, baffled by the innumerable sharp points which everywhere met it. At length, after I had watched its unavailing efforts for about a quarter of an hour, I cantered up to the rock—putting the monkeys to flight amid a chorus of angry protests—and, after a careful survey, proceeded to climb to the top, taking the precaution to carry my rifle with me. I now found that the scherm, constructed of small branches of formidable thorns—each thorn being nearly three inches long, and sharp-pointed as a needle—was about waist high, a yard in thickness, and some ten yards in diameter, completely hemming in the great python, who was now wideawake and rapidly circling the interior of his prison, in an atrociously bad temper, vainly seeking some spot through which he might force his way and escape. But the monkeys had evidently known quite well what they were about; instinct or observation had taught them that, once completely surrounded by a ring of thorns, the creature could not possibly escape, because its every effort would result in the self-infliction of so many severe wounds that it would rather remain a prisoner than persevere. And that was precisely what was happening; the moment that, in attempting to crawl over the barrier, the python's ponderous weight was thrown upon the encircling fence, the long, sharp thorns pierced it in twenty or thirty places, and already, as it circled inside the enclosure, it was leaving a broad trail of blood behind it and emitting a powerful, sickening, musky odour which I only endured with difficulty. The creature glared at me murderously every time it came opposite me in its frantic circling of the scherm, and once made a determined effort to reach me, but the thorns were too much for it; and finally, when I was at length convinced that it could not possibly escape, I levelled my rifle and sent a bullet crashing through its enormous head, instantly thereafter beating a hasty retreat from the top of the rock, in order to avoid the terrific threshing of its convolutions, which now, in its death agonies, sent the thorns flying in all directions.

Chapter Eight.

An Exciting Day.

By the time that Piet and I got back to the wagon it was within an hour of sunset; I therefore decided to remain for the night where we were, the grass being good, and our outspan situated within half a mile of a considerable stream of water with which we should lose touch upon entering the gorge, since the river turned eastward immediately opposite the spot where we were outspanned. But although I decided not to move the wagon until the morrow, I was not disposed to remain personally inactive; for I had observed that about two miles to the eastward the river flowed through a slight depression, which had thus become converted into a water vley, or wide sheet of shallow water, where I thought it not improbable that I might find a few widgeon to afford a welcome change from the buck meat that had now become our almost continuous fare. Moreover, I had begun to break to the saddle the two ponies which Moshesh had given me, and had already advanced so far in the matter of their education that they would both allow me to mount them, and I regarded the present as a favourable opportunity to give Jack, the stallion, a little gentle exercise. Therefore I instructed Piet to shift my saddle from Prince to Jack, and, taking my double-barrelled sporting gun and a few cartridges, I mounted and cantered away along the river bank, with Thunder and Juno, the two dogs, bounding gaily along on either hand, and with Jack pulling hard upon his snaffle and doing his utmost to break away, for he was so fresh as to be almost unmanageable. A good brisk five-mile gallop over the veld to the farther extremity of the vley, however, somewhat calmed his exuberant spirits, and when at length I dismounted, the youngster was placid enough to be quite willing to follow at my heels with the bridle resting loosely upon his neck, or to stand still when it was allowed to trail upon the ground.

The sun had already vanished in a haze of regal purple hanging low along the western horizon when at length I managed to bag three brace of the widgeon that I had been hoping for; and with these neatly strung together by the feet, and slung across Jack's shoulders in front of the saddle, I was just preparing to mount and canter away back to camp when, looming monstrously through the thin, grey mist that was insidiously rising from the veld, I beheld a long procession of enormous forms gradually resolving out of the fog wreaths about half a mile away. Vague and shapeless as were those vast, ghostly objects, I knew at once that they could only be elephants coming over the veld to the great pool to drink and bathe; and I at once determined to ascertain, if possible, how many of them there were, for I estimated that there must already be between twenty and thirty in sight, while others were momentarily emerging into view from out the veil of mist. Therefore, instead of mounting, and thus rendering myself more conspicuous than I was already, I remained on foot, and headed for the nearest clump of bush with Jack and the two dogs following at my heels, my intention being to conceal myself and my following behind that convenient screen and thence observe the movements and note the numbers of the approaching elephants. But I had scarcely advanced thirty paces when there arose a sudden commotion in the long grass almost under my feet, a terrific uproar of angry grunts and squeals rent the evening stillness, and a sounder of hog, consisting of a boar, three sows, and upwards of a score of half-grown young, which had been lying in the grass, rose to their feet and dashed noisily away, the sudden and violent disturbance startling Jack to such an extent and so completely upsetting his equanimity that he flung up his head, swerved away before I could grasp his bridle, and with a squeal of consternation took to his heels and dashed off full pelt in the direction of the distant wagon, while the two dogs, wild with excitement, went off in chase of the pigs, leaving me to my own devices.

To be left like that, alone and on foot, in strange country, a good five miles from the wagon, with the darkness of a moonless and misty night already gathering about me, was just a trifle awkward, perhaps, for I was both hungry and tired, and a five-mile walk through the long grass would be something beyond a joke. But with the river to guide me

on the one hand, and the hills on the other, I could not very well miss my way, while as for the pony, he would probably return to the wagon, and the dogs would certainly find me as soon as they were tired of chasing the pigs; so, shouldering my gun, I stepped out toward the clump of bush for which I was bound, and presently took up a position within its heavy shadow where I should be pretty effectually concealed, while I could at the same time observe the movements of the elephants. Luckily, they were still so far away when the disturbance caused by the pigs occurred that they had taken no notice of it, but came steadily on, led by an enormous tusker; and presently they made their way well into the deepest part of the pool, where, after drinking, they stood for some time spraying their bodies with water spouted from their trunks. I did my best to count them, but before the entire herd had arrived upon the scene it had fallen quite dark, so that what with the darkness, the fog, and the constant movements of the animals, I found the task an utter impossibility. But I came to the conclusion that, from what I could see and hear, there must be nearly or quite a hundred of them.

Then, as I stood motionless and invisible in the deep shadows of the clump of bush, soft swishing sounds in the long grass grew increasingly frequent all round me, and in the misty starlight I caught frequent sudden glimpses of indeterminate forms gliding ghost-like toward the water, which was evidently the recognised drinking place for most of the game in the neighbourhood. And at length, when I had been standing there for about twenty minutes, two pairs of lambent orbs loomed up through the long grass, and Thunder and Juno came wriggling apologetically to my feet, having apparently made their way back to the spot where they had deserted me, and tracked me thence by scent.

I had by this time seen all that I wanted to see, or rather all that it was possible to see; therefore, with a low-murmured call to the two dogs, I set out to walk back through the misty landscape to the wagon, taking the stars for my guide, since the fog had by this time become so thick that it was difficult to distinguish anything beyond a hundred yards distant in any direction. Fortunately I had walked little more than a mile when shouts in Piet's high-pitched voice reached my ears, and presently, guided by my shouts in reply, the Hottentot hove in sight, mounted upon Tempest and leading the errant Jack by the bridle—the latter having galloped straight to the wagon, as I had fully expected he would; and half an hour later we rode into camp without further adventure.

The first thing in order after our arrival was, of course, dinner, which I found quite ready when I rode into camp, the *pièce de résistance* consisting of the widgeon which I had shot, and which Piet had found still hanging across the pony's withers when Master Jack arrived in camp, and had had sense enough to hand over to Jan to prepare. Then, after dinner, the elephant gun and my rifle were brought forth from the wagon and thoroughly cleaned by the light of the camp fire; and while this was being done Piet and I anxiously discussed a programme for the doings of the morrow, finally settled upon a more or less definite plan, and made all the arrangements necessary for carrying it into effect; after which the fire was made up, the oxen were driven in and tethered to the trek tow, as a precaution against possible attack by lions, and all hands turned in.

The night passed uneventfully and quietly, save for the constant barking of the jackals and baboons and the occasional cry of a leopard or roar of a lion; but we had by this time grown quite accustomed to such sounds as these, and were not in the least disturbed by them, even the dogs disdainingly taking the slightest notice of them, except when the authors approached within certain fairly well-defined limits which Thunder and Juno seemed to have mutually agreed were too near; then indeed our guardians would respond with low warning growls which, if the offenders drew still nearer, rapidly merged into a deafening clamour of savage barks that effectually aroused everybody.

But on the night in question the marauders gave the wagon a wide berth; probably there was a sufficiency of game near the water-hole to supply all their wants without the necessity for them to approach the hateful blaze of the camp fire, and our rest was undisturbed. With the appearance of the first gleam of dawn in the eastern sky, however, the three blacks crawled out from underneath the wagon, made up the fire afresh, fetched water from the river, and proceeded to prepare breakfast, for Piet and I had agreed upon the wisdom of getting upon the spoor of the elephants as early as possible, in order that the greater part of the travelling might be done before the heat became oppressive.

It was about a quarter to seven o'clock when, having breakfasted and completed our final preparations, Piet and I swung ourselves into our saddles and started for the water-hole at an easy canter, Jan's instructions being to follow with the wagon until he should reach a certain signal which we would leave behind us, and which was to be the intimation that he had trekked far enough and must outspan until he received further orders. Piet was mounted on Punch, the chestnut, a thoroughly steady and reliable animal, and carried the provisions for the expedition, half the ammunition, and the elephant gun; while I rode Prince, and carried the other half of the ammunition and my rifle, as well as a stout, double-edged hunting knife which I wore in a sheath attached to my belt. Thunder and Juno accompanied us as usual, and, like the sensible animals that they were, trotted quietly along close to the horses' heels, saving their strength for what was possibly to come later, instead of wasting it, as in their younger and less experienced days, by dashing hither and thither, in the exuberance of their spirits, over an utterly unnecessary extent of ground.

Going at an easy pace, we reached the farther extremity of the pool in about three-quarters of an hour, and at once picked up the spoor of the elephants without the least trouble. It was very difficult to form a close estimate of the number of animals in the herd by examining the spoor, but it was certain that the herd was a very large one, and an inspection of the footprints left in the soft soil about the margin of the pool showed that there were several animals of gigantic size in it. The spoor led away to the eastward, in the direction from which I had seen the herd approaching on the previous evening, and the passage of so many heavy animals had trampled the long, parched grass so flat that the trail was as plain as a road to follow, and we proceeded along it at an easy canter.

We had been progressing in this fashion for about three hours, and had covered some twenty miles of perfectly flat country, when we observed that the character of the scenery ahead was changing, the scattered clumps of bush through which we had been riding giving place to forest trees of various descriptions, imparting quite a park-like

aspect to the scene. And here we came to a halt for the purpose of setting up the mark which was to give Jan, my Hottentot driver, the signal to outspan, for Piet was strongly of opinion that the herd of elephant would be found somewhere in the forest ahead, either browsing upon the small and tender shoots of the trees or sheltering from the sun beneath their leafy shade. This done, we looked to our weapons, satisfying ourselves that they were in order for immediate use, and then again proceeded along the trail, this time at a walking pace.

The trail continued to lead straight toward the forest; but when we had proceeded about a mile farther the spoor showed that the herd had gradually scattered, some of the animals seeming to have halted for a time to feed, while others had swerved off to right and left, as though to enter the forest individually, instead of in a compact body. We were thus enabled to pick up the spoor of particular animals, and, coming at length upon that of an elephant of extraordinary size, I determined to follow it, and did so right up to the outskirts of the forest. Here we dismounted, and, leaving our horses, with their bridles trailing on the ground, where we could easily find them again, but where they were not likely to be sighted by the elephants, continued to follow on foot the spoor of the big beast that we were after. It led deviously, with many twists and turnings, toward the deepest part of the forest, and when we had been following it for about three-quarters of an hour we were suddenly halted by the sound of a distant swishing and cracking of branches, which caused us to conceal ourselves hurriedly behind the bole of a big yellow-wood.

Reconnoitring from this coign of vantage, we found that the animal, or animals, by which the sounds were made were still invisible; we therefore continued with the utmost caution to follow up the spoor of the elephant which we were tracking, dodging from one tree to another, pausing behind each as we reached it to take another observation, and being careful to make no sound as we threaded our way through the underscrub, until we finally reached a spot where, peering out from behind the trunk of a big baobab, we were able to catch an occasional glimpse of an enormous grey mass moving slowly among the trees, while the sound of swishing and snapping branches, the



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crackling of the undergrowth as the creature moved from time to time, and an occasional low grunt of satisfaction told us how near we were to our quarry. Luckily, too, for us, the wind was in exactly the right direction—that is to say, it was blowing from the elephant toward us, so that instead of him scenting us we caught an occasional whiff of the peculiar odour which emanated from him. The extreme deliberation with which the animal moved proved conclusively that thus far he had not the slightest suspicion of our presence, but unfortunately the foliage was so dense that it was only occasionally that we could get even a partial glimpse of him, and then it was of such a character that I could not tell with certainty what part of his body I was looking at; therefore, after a very brief and low-whispered consultation with Piet, I decided to make a rather wide circuit toward the part of the forest for which the creature was heading, and, having chosen a favourable spot, patiently to await his approach.

This we accordingly did, the fallen trunk of a tree half-buried in dense undergrowth affording us a perfectly ideal ambush; and we had scarcely settled ourselves comfortably therein when a violent swaying of the underbrush warned us that our quarry was approaching. The next instant the scrub parted right and left, the points of two enormous tusks protruded from the swaying tangle of leaves and creepers, and in the drawing of a breath the head and fore quarters of the biggest bull elephant I had ever seen came into view. For a moment the huge beast stood looking about him, and then his immense trunk swung upward, the point twined itself tightly about an unusually leafy twig, there came a slight snapping and swishing sound as the twig was torn from its parent branch, and the next instant both stem and leaves vanished down a cavernous throat. Then, as the ponderous trunk swung downward again, and the beast uttered a grunt of enjoyment, I pressed the trigger of my elephant gun, the barrel of which I had levelled over the bole of the fallen tree a minute or two earlier: there was a flash, a blinding puff of white smoke, and as the forest resounded with the crashing report, an answering crash close at hand proclaimed the fall of the great beast. Then, as the smoke gradually drifted away, we saw that the animal had flung himself convulsively forward at the impact of the bullet, and now lay stone-dead just on the other side of the prostrate tree behind which we were

crouching.

For several seconds after the echoes of the report died away there was perfect silence in the forest: not a leaf seemed to stir or a bird to twitter; even the very insects ceased their chirring, as though they were wondering what had happened. Then, almost as though at a given signal, the forest resounded with loud trumpeting of alarm and the crashing of heavy bodies through the undergrowth, as the rest of the unseen herd began to move restlessly and angrily hither and thither, seeking the source of the sudden disturbance.

We remained where we were, crouching in our ambush, for a quarter of an hour or more, listening to the gradually subsiding disturbance and waiting for the possible appearance of one of the great pachyderms in the tiny clearing where the dead giant lay; but although several passed us at no great distance we saw none of them, and at length, when silence again reigned, we cautiously emerged from our hiding place and pushed our way up-wind still deeper into the recesses of the forest.

Breathless and perspiring profusely with the exertion of worming our way through the undergrowth, we had progressed about half a mile when, away on our left, and apparently only a few yards distant, we suddenly heard a loud blowing sound, followed by several grunts, and the next instant a big cow elephant, with a calf at her heels, burst through the intervening growth and came charging toward us with blazing eyes and uplifted trunk thrust straight out in front of her. Fortunately we had just stepped out from behind the cover of a big mahogany, and as I doubted whether the beast had actually sighted us, I thrust Piet back behind the tree and instantly followed, working round the bole as the elephant advanced, so as to keep it between her and ourselves. Whether or not she had winded us I cannot say, but I am of opinion that she must have done so; be that as it may, she continued her furious charge, actually grazing the other side of the tree behind which we were hiding as she passed, and in another instant had disappeared again, leaving a broad trail of trampled undergrowth and broken saplings behind her. For the ensuing five minutes we remained where we were, fully expecting the irate beast to return in search of us; but hearing nothing more of her we resumed our way.

About a quarter of a mile farther on we became aware that elephants were not far-distant, for away ahead of us there was a sound of heavy movement, accompanied by a good deal of grunting. Then suddenly an angry squeal pealed out upon the startled air, immediately followed by a violent clashing of tusks, furious trumpeting, and a tremendous commotion generally.

"Olifants fighting, baas!" excitedly whispered Piet in my ear. "Now's de time for us: come on quick, baas, we get close up to 'em and they never see us; then you get 'em bofe."

"Right you are, boy," I returned; "come along; they cannot be very far ahead."

We pushed on, not troubling ourselves very much now as to whether or not we made any noise, for the forest was fairly ringing with the squeals and trumpeting of the contending beasts; and presently we caught an occasional fleeting glimpse, through the interlacing foliage, of their twisting and rushing bodies as they moved hither and thither. But we were not yet near enough to see them distinctly; we therefore forced our way a few yards farther, until, peering through the tangled undergrowth, we obtained a tolerably good view of a little clearing of about an acre and a half in extent, in the midst of which two gigantic tuskers were circling round each other, looking for an opening, and occasionally rushing in with lowered heads to plunge their already ensanguined tusks into each other's bodies.

Kneeling down among the underwood in such a position that I could get a clear view of the amphitheatre without running much risk of being myself seen, I found a gnarled stump of a creeper that afforded a very convenient rest for my heavy double-barrelled elephant gun, and, roughly levelling the weapon, awaited a favourable opportunity to fire. A few minutes later it came, the two huge beasts drawing apart, as by common consent, to recover their breath. Like two immense statues they stood, about twelve feet apart, motionless save for their heaving flanks and their great twitching ears, the trunk of each upraised and thrown back over the head as though to be out of harm's way; and I saw that both were bleeding freely from several ghastly-looking wounds. The moment was as favourable as any that I should be at all likely to get, for both were standing practically broadside-on to me; therefore, glancing quickly from one to the other, to determine the precise position of the vital spot for which I intended to aim, I levelled and sighted the weapon, pressed the trigger, and then, with a lightning movement of the barrel, shifted my aim and again fired. The second report followed the first at an interval of scarcely a second, and I heard the loud *clap clap* of both bullets as they struck; then the thick veil of powder smoke enveloped me, and for a few seconds I could see nothing. While still waiting for the smoke to disperse, I heard a heavy thud which told me that at least one of the animals was down, and a moment or two later, as the smoke gradually thinned, I dimly saw the second standing, with legs wide apart, swaying a little and trembling violently. For a space of time in which one might have slowly counted ten the great brute stood thus; then, as he uttered a low moan, his mighty limbs suddenly collapsed and he too sank to the ground with a thud that seemed to make the very earth tremble. And at that precise moment there again broke forth the same kind of uproar of alarmed trumpeting and swiftly moving heavy bodies that had followed my first shot.

The sounds were this time of such a character as to indicate clearly that the herd had been thoroughly alarmed and effectually stampeded; therefore, after waiting some five minutes or so until the forest was again silent, and it had become quite clear that none of the animals were coming in our direction, we left our hiding place, and, taking careful note of the spot where the two great tuskers lay, proceeded to retrace our steps toward the place where we had left our horses. We found them placidly grazing, and, springing into our saddles, started on the back trail to meet the wagon, which I intended to outspan for the night close to the outskirts of the forest, that we might not have far to carry the ivory when we had cut it out on the morrow.

We proceeded at a foot-pace, since there was no need for hurry, and had travelled a distance of some three miles when, borne faintly to our ears by the gentle breeze that was blowing behind us, we heard a peculiar yapping howl which told us that a pack of wild dogs was in full cry somewhere in our rear. Being curious to learn what kind of animal they were hunting, we looked about us for a spot whence, ourselves unseen, we might witness the chase,

which the increasing loudness of the cries told us was coming our way. Such a spot was found close at hand in the shadow of a big clump of thorn bush, within a few yards of the margin of a small stream, evidently a tributary of the river which flowed a mile or two farther to the westward.

We had scarcely established ourselves in our place of concealment when a beautiful zebra mare, accompanied by her foal, appeared coming toward us at a trot, which circumstance, taken in conjunction with the laboured action of the animals, clearly indicated that both were in the very last stage of exhaustion; and indeed the fugitives had only gone a few yards past us when the mare stumbled heavily, recovered herself with difficulty, and then, with a scream that marked the extremity of her terror and despair, crashed heavily to the ground, where, after an ineffectual effort to scramble to her feet again, she lay flat on her side, panting heavily and with her tongue protruding. And as the mare fell the foal pulled up short beside her and stood, with lowered head and legs wide apart, trembling so violently that the action was visible even to us nearly a hundred yards away.

By this time the yapping sounds had become so loud that we knew the pack must be close at hand, and a moment later they swept into view, some thirty or so in number; and as they sighted the prostrate zebra, with her foal standing beside her, their yapping changed to a howl of exultation, which caused the mare again to make an ineffectual effort to scramble to her feet, while the foal hobbled away a yard or two, but returned to his dam when he saw that she was unable to rise. It was a rather pathetic sight to see those two beautiful animals awaiting destruction at the fangs of the dogs, and, moved suddenly by a sense of pity, I pressed my heels to Prince's flanks, and, calling Piet to follow, rode forward into the open.

At the sight of two mounted figures advancing to bar their progress the pack suddenly pulled up in a bunch and stood panting, with their tongues lolling out and the foam dripping from their jaws, for the wild dog does not love to meet man, especially a white man, at least in daylight. As the pack bunched themselves together, uncertain whether to continue their advance or to retire, but evidently very strongly impelled by the sight of the fallen zebra to do the former, it offered a target so tempting that I was quite unable to resist it; and, leaping lightly from the saddle, I ran forward a pace or two and, sinking upon one knee, levelled my rifle and fired right into the thick of the bunch. The range was only about four hundred yards, and while the sharp, whip-like report of the piece was still echoing along the side of the range of hills in front of me I heard the clap of the bullet, and, as the smoke drifted away, saw that one dog was down, dead, while a second was struggling feebly on the ground, and a third, with a broken leg, was making the welkin ring with his howls of anguish.

At the flash and report of the piece some eight or ten of the dogs in the rear of the pack wheeled sharply round, and, with their tails tucked tightly between their legs, beat a hasty retreat along the back trail, uttering sharp yelps of terror as they went; but the remainder of the pack stood its ground, staring at us as though wondering what new kind of animals we could be who had the power of slaying from a distance. There was one big gaunt brute, however, apparently the leader of the pack, who kept his flaming eyes fixed upon the zebras, and as the smoke of the discharge cleared away I saw him slink out from the rest of the pack in a crouching attitude, with bared fangs, as though meditating a dash at the gasping mare.

"The gun—quick!" I ejaculated to Piet, who retained his saddle and sat motionless as a statue, watching intently; and at the word he held out to me the loaded elephant gun, and received from me the empty rifle in its stead. A moment later the heavy piece roared out its death message, and the big brute who had separated himself from the rest of the pack sprang with a convulsive twist into the air and fell stone-dead.

"Now," said I, as I sprang into the saddle, "unclip one of your stirrups, Piet, and we will see if we cannot beat off the brutes with our stirrup irons!" And as I spoke the words we urged our horses to a gallop, unclipping our off-side stirrups as we went, and charged right down between the pack and the zebras, wheeling upon the dogs as soon as we had cut them off from the mare and foal. Then, swinging the loose stirrups round our heads, we thundered down upon the discomfited pack, uttering loud yells as we went. The brutes stood irresolute for a few seconds longer, but presently, when we wheeled directly toward them, they turned tail and bolted by the way that they had come, yelping with fear as they went. But I was determined to inspire them with a wholesome feeling of terror now that I had begun; therefore as soon as we had overtaken the rearmost members of the flying pack we checked our horses just sufficiently to keep pace with them, and then proceeded to belabour the brutes soundly with our stirrup irons, the howls of anguish to which the belaboured ones gave vent serving to add wings to the feet of the rest. We chased the howling mob a good two miles—by which time its members were crazy with fear—and then drew rein, feeling convinced that they would give us no further trouble. Then we turned and cantered back along the way by which we had come.

As we approached the spot where the zebra mare had fallen we saw, somewhat to our astonishment, that the poor beast still lay where we had left her, with the foal standing over her, smelling at her and licking her face; and it then occurred to me that possibly we might be able to capture the foal. I therefore spoke a word to Piet, and we pulled our horses back to a walk. As the sound of our approaching hoofs reached her ears, the mare made a scrambling effort to rise, and all but succeeded, only to sink again to the earth with a moan, while the foal threw up his head, galloped stiffly away a few yards, and then returned, standing close to his prostrate parent's head and gazing at us with enquiring eyes, his ears pointed forward, his nostrils twitching, and his upper lip slightly raised, revealing his teeth in a somewhat threatening manner.

At a distance of about seven or eight yards we reined up and dismounted, moving slowly and with deliberation, in order that we might frighten the animals as little as possible. Then, throwing our reins to the ground, we walked quietly up to the pair and stood looking down at the mare, who still lay upon her left side, with her limbs stretched stiffly out, her sides heaving with a slow, laboured movement, her tongue hanging from her mouth, her glassy eyes rolling in their sockets, and her breath coming in heavy gasps.

"She's dyin', baas," remarked Piet, "dyin' of tiredness and thirst! She mus' have run a long, long way when she too tired to get up at sight of we."

Yes, there was no doubt about it, the poor beast was at her last gasp; and unless something were quickly done to relieve her she would assuredly die. Piet and I were both wearing soft, wide-brimmed felt hats, of sufficient capacity to contain about three pints of water and to retain it without very much leakage for several minutes, while there was a stream within twenty yards of the spot where we stood. It was possible that we might yet save the beautiful creature's life if we bestirred ourselves.

"Quick, Piet!" I exclaimed. "Come to the river with me and fill your hat with water. We must do what we can for the poor brutes. I should like to capture and tame them both if possible."

"No, baas, you never do that," answered Piet. "Don' you know that a zebra can never be tame?"

"So I have heard; but I don't altogether believe it," said I. "At all events I mean to try; so hurry, you black rascal!"

In less than five minutes we were back with our dripping hats still nearly full of water, and as I knelt down by the head of the mare, and held my hat close to her gaping nostrils, the poor beast smelt the water and uttered a sound that might be best described as a sort of gasping whinny; then, raising her head with an effort, she plunged her muzzle into the hat and sucked up its contents with indescribable eagerness, allowing her head to sink back with something that sounded like a sigh of contentment when both hats had been emptied. Then Piet and I dashed off to the river and procured a second supply, which the zebra also drank. Meanwhile the colt had been making desperate efforts to get a share of the water, but we had kept him off, with some difficulty, the mare being obviously in the greater need. But now that we had given her as much as we deemed good for her, for the moment, we turned our attention to the colt, administering to him two hatfuls of water, which he absorbed with an eagerness that quite equalled that of his mother. Then, perceiving that the little chap's gratification at our ministrations seemed to have quite conquered any fear of us which he might have originally entertained, I walked over to where the horses were standing and detached from Piet's saddle a long rein of twisted raw hide that we usually carried with us for use in case of an emergency, while the Hottentot went off to fetch a further supply of water.

Then, having obtained the rein, I returned to the colt—who stood quite still as I approached him—and, murmuring a caressing word or two to him, quietly lifted my hand and gently patted his neck. He flinched somewhat at my first touch, but did not attempt to run away, and presently, when Piet returned with more water, I seized the opportunity to slip the end of the rein round the little fellow's neck and knot it while he was drinking. He did not much like the feel of the rein round his neck at first, and tried to shake it off, but he no longer shrank from my touch, and allowed me to pat his neck, and even pull his ears gently, an operation which he appeared to enjoy greatly. Then, while I continued to handle the colt, Piet again turned his attention to the mare and gave her a further drink, when, after a few minutes, she made another effort to rise, which was this time successful. But for several minutes she could only stand with difficulty, trembling violently and not attempting to move. At this juncture I chanced to slip my hand into my jacket pocket, when it came into contact with some half-dozen small sweet biscuits for which I had rather a weakness. These I had slipped into my pocket the last thing before leaving the wagon and had then entirely forgotten; and the fancy seized me to offer one of them to the colt. He smelt at it for a moment or two, and then, somewhat hesitatingly, closed his teeth upon it and began to masticate it. Evidently he liked it, for having swallowed it he thrust forward his head, as though asking for more, whereupon I produced a second, which he at once accepted. I then offered a third, holding it far enough from him to compel him to advance a step or two in order to secure it, which he did. I next offered him a fourth in the same way; but as he moved forward so did I, compelling him to follow me a few steps before I let him have it, at the same time putting a gentle strain upon the rein round his neck, and by this means I successfully coaxed the little creature into submitting to be led.

When I had fairly got him going the mare followed, at first moving stiffly and with difficulty, uttering small whinnying sounds, as though entreating the colt not to leave her; but with every yard of progress her movements became less difficult, and by the time that we had traversed a quarter of a mile both animals were walking with comparative ease and following me quite contentedly, especially the colt, who continued to beg for biscuits until he had exhausted my limited supply. Meanwhile Piet, who clearly understood what I was endeavouring to do, returned to where we had left the horses and followed with them, and in this curious fashion we at length met the wagon, and, joining forces, arrived at the spot where I planned to outspan for the night. I had a little trouble with my captives when we first met the wagon, both of them being somewhat startled by the hideous yells and rifle-like whip-crackings wherewith Jan urged forward the oxen; but a few more biscuits, hastily obtained from the wagon, restored the colt's equanimity. And, not to dwell at undue length upon this incident, we had scarcely any further trouble with either of our prizes, the colt very rapidly developing perfect amenability, while the mare, although less tractable, never attempted to desert her offspring, and was becoming quite tame when tragedy unhappily overtook them both.

Chapter Nine.

I arrive in Mashonaland.

The whole of the next morning was devoted by us to the task of cutting out the ivory from the three big tuskers killed in the forest, and the exceptional size of the elephants may be judged from the fact that the weight of ivory taken from them amounted in the aggregate to four hundred and forty-seven pounds. Then, about two o'clock in the afternoon, we inspanned the oxen and trekked in a north-easterly direction, with the range of hills cut through by the curious gorge about a quarter of a mile on our left and the Drakensberg range of mountains towering aloft on our right some fifty miles distant. We trekked until within half an hour of sunset, by which time we had rounded the north-eastern spur of the range of hills, passed the northern extremity of the gorge, and "struck" another river, about one hundred and twenty yards in width, flowing northward, on the right bank of which we outspanned for the night. Two days later, trekking northward along the course of the last-mentioned river, we arrived at its junction with the Limpopo, on the farther side of which lay my goal, Mashonaland; and here we again outspanned, while Piet and I went on a prospecting tour in search of a drift by means of which the wagon might be safely taken across.

Leaving the wagon, our spare horses, and the zebras in charge of Jan, the Hottentot driver, with strict injunctions that he was to take the utmost care of the captives, and treat them with the greatest kindness, Piet and I set out at daybreak—the former mounted upon Punch, while I rode Prince as usual—taking with us the elephant gun and my rifle, with a sufficiency of ammunition for each, and provisions for four days. The dogs Thunder and Juno accompanied us as a matter of course. We were on the right or southern bank of the mighty stream, and this we followed closely, mile after mile, anxiously scrutinising every foot of the turbid flood for signs indicative of a sand bar extensive enough to enable us to transport the wagon to the opposite bank; but although we found no less than four shoals in the course of our first day's search, three of them extended less than halfway across the river, while the fourth proved to be a quicksand in which we narrowly escaped losing both our horses, saving them at last only by the skin of our teeth and after nearly an hour's hard and strenuous labour. This occurred about three o'clock in the afternoon, and when at length we were all once more safe on solid ground we were, horses as well as men, so utterly fagged out that there was nothing for it but to off-saddle for the remainder of the day in order to recover. A good night's rest, however, completely restored us all, and enabled us to resume our search on the following morning.

Our experiences on the morning of this day were simply a repetition of those of the previous day, except that, profiting by experience, we took care not to allow ourselves to be trapped in any more quicksands; and I began to fear that our search was going to be a much more protracted one than I had anticipated. But shortly after midday we arrived at a spot where, on the opposite side of the river, another river, about a hundred yards wide, discharged into the main stream. At this point also the Limpopo widened out until it was fully a quarter of a mile in width, the combined effect of these two circumstances being the formation of numerous eddies and so much slack water that the soil held in suspension by the two streams was here afforded an opportunity to settle and form a shoal extending right across the main river, with a maximum depth of water over it of barely four feet. This shoal we thoroughly tested both on foot and on horseback, with the result that we found it to be an ideal crossing place.

Having satisfied myself as to this, my next business was to arrange for the dispatch of Piet as my ambassador into the Mashona country. I had been considering the matter very carefully during the past two days, recalling to mind all that my friend, Major Henderson, had told me with regard to his experiences among the Mashona, and the advice that he had given me; and I finally determined that my most prudent course would be to send Piet into the country absolutely empty-handed, with a message to the effect that I desired the permission of the king to cross his borders, traverse the country, and visit him at his Place, hunting and trading with his people on the way. I was at first somewhat undecided as to whether or not I should entrust Piet with a present for the king, but I finally decided that it would be better to wait until I should obtain audience with His Majesty and then personally hand him the gift; otherwise, for aught that I could tell to the contrary, the sable monarch might seize the gift and then do away with poor Piet in some horrible manner, while if the Tottie went empty-handed there would be no inducement for the king to destroy him, or rather there would be the prospect of the gift to deter him from doing so. Therefore, upon the following morning, after charging the man with my message, and making him repeat it over and over again to me until there was no possibility of his forgetting it, I sent him across the river on foot with all the provisions that we had left, and then, riding Prince and leading Punch, to whose saddle I had securely strapped the elephant gun and my stock of ammunition, I set out, accompanied by the dogs, on my return to the spot where I had left the wagon.

Upon my arrival I found Jan, my Tottie driver, in great tribulation, it appearing that he had been beset by lions during the second night of my absence, and that the brutes had killed no less than three of the oxen and both zebras, despite the utmost efforts of himself and 'Ngulubi, the Bantu voorlouper; while two other oxen had died through eating tulip, a poisonous plant which he had too late discovered grew in profusion in the immediate neighbourhood of the outspan. Furthermore, it appeared that four of the other oxen had suffered severely from the same poison, but had been saved by the prompt administration of a decoction made from the roots of the plant. This was serious news, because I had promised Piet that he should find us outspanned at the spot where he and I had parted, and I knew not how soon he might return; therefore it was very desirable that we should reach that spot without delay. After considering the matter, therefore, I finally decided to cache all the ivory which I had with me, abandon the pelts, and go forward to the rendezvous with nothing in the wagon save the "truck" which I had brought up with me as presents and for trading, the ammunition, and the remains of our stock of provisions, which by this time was becoming pretty well depleted. And this I did, arriving at the arranged meeting place three days later, without suffering any further loss.

It was well on in the afternoon of the tenth day after Piet's departure when he turned up again, dusty, leg-weary, and somewhat footsore, but otherwise not very much the worse for wear. He reported that the country was pretty densely populated, the kraals being very extensive, and dotted over the country at intervals of, in some cases, not more than twenty miles apart, the first kraal at which he arrived being within ten miles of the river bank. He described the Mashona as being a very fine race of people, almost if not quite equal in physique to the Zulus, but of a much more suspicious and unreliable character than the latter, and apparently exceedingly averse to the intrusion of strangers. Nevertheless, upon stating the nature of his mission, he had been passed on from kraal to kraal until finally he had arrived at Gwanda, the Place (or town) of King Lomalindela, which, it appeared, was situated among a rather curious group of mountains, five days' march from the river. Lomalindela, it seemed, had received my envoy with a very considerable display of austerity, and had submitted him to a most rigorous cross-questioning; but, luckily, the Tottie had nothing to conceal, and was therefore able to tell a perfectly straightforward story, which, as Piet believed, had not only allayed the monarch's suspicions, but had also aroused in him a very lively curiosity to see the white man and his wonderful fire tubes which slew from afar. The result of the mission was therefore, on the whole, quite satisfactory, the king having not only accorded me permission to enter his country and kill game in it, but also entrusted my messenger with an invitation to me to visit him at Gwanda, and remain there as long as I pleased. This being the case, and the river having fallen nearly a foot since Piet and I had first arrived at the ford, I seized the favourable opportunity, and safely transferred the wagon and all my other belongings to the Mashona side of the river upon the afternoon of the day of Piet's return; and, following the course of the stream to which I attributed the formation of the ford—and which, Piet informed me, led direct to Gwanda—outspanned for the night some six miles to the northward of the Limpopo.

The next day we continued our trek, and shortly before noon arrived at the first Mashona village on the route. It was a place of some importance, containing about a thousand huts of the usual beehive shape, but somewhat larger than those usually built by the Zulus, and with entrances large enough to enable a man to pass through by merely bending his body instead of having to go down upon his knees. The village was circular in plan, and was protected by a solidly constructed stockade, built of stout tree trunks driven deeply into the ground, with a slight outward slope; the stockade being about sixteen feet high on the outside, with the tops of the piles sharpened to render it unclimbable. There were four gateways in the stockade, giving access to the two principal streets, which crossed each other at right angles, intersecting in the centre of the village, at which point there was a spacious open square, where the public business of the village was transacted and where the village sports were held. We did not enter the village, but outspanned at a distance of about half a mile from its eastern gate.

The cattle had scarcely been turned loose to graze, under the guardianship of 'Ngulubi, the voorlouper, when the headman of the village, accompanied by some half a dozen minor dignitaries, and followed by ten women bearing baskets containing preternaturally skinny fowls, eggs, green mealie cobs, sugar cane, and calabashes of milk, emerged from the village and advanced upon the wagon. The men were unarmed, and the presence of the women with the baskets—the contents of which were of course a present to us—showed that the visit was to be one of ceremony and compliment; therefore with Piet's assistance I at once proceeded to unpack one of my bales of "truck", and withdrew therefrom the articles which I proposed to present in turn. I had hardly completed my preparations when the little party arrived, and I had an opportunity to study the first Mashonas I had ever seen.

Both men and women were finely built and well proportioned, but their best friends could not conscientiously pronounce them handsome; and their unattractiveness was further increased by the expression of their countenances which seemed to be compounded of suspicion, craftiness, greed, and cruelty. They saluted me respectfully enough, however, offered their presents, and then sat down, at my invitation, squatting upon their heels in the usual native fashion, while I sorted out the gifts which I intended to give them. These consisted of a bandana handkerchief or two, a few yards of gaudily printed calico, a few yards of copper wire, and a handful of mixed beads to each of the women; and from the grins of appreciation of the recipients I concluded that they were all well satisfied. Then, with the inquisitiveness of the lower type of savage, they began to question me, not in a straightforward fashion, but covertly and by roundabout processes, with the view of discovering my motive for journeying so far from my own people; whereupon I told them frankly that I was a hunter and trader, seeking for ivory and gold. They did not seem to understand what I meant by "gold" until I spoke of it as the yellow metal that shines when polished, and showed them the ring that I wore; whereupon they nodded their heads in comprehension, and shortly afterward rose and returned to the village. But about half an hour later the headman and three others came back to the wagon, bringing with them a number of rough-shaped nuggets of a dull, ruddy-yellow gold, which looked as though they might have been crudely smelted out of the quarried ore, and wanted to trade them with me for beads and printed calico. The quantity which they brought amounted to about twelve pounds avoirdupois altogether, which I estimated to be worth between six and seven hundred pounds sterling; but they fixed such an exorbitant value upon the metal that had I acceded to their demands my stock of trade stuff would soon have been exhausted. Of course the gold was worth far more than my entire stock of "truck", but when I purchased the latter I had quite reckoned upon being able to obtain for it as much gold as I could possibly load upon the wagon, and still have "notions" enough left to supply all the presents that I should probably find it necessary to make; therefore as soon as my visitors pointed out to me what they required in exchange for their gold I laughed at them, waved them away, and proceeded—not too hurriedly—to repack my treasures. The result was what I had anticipated and intended; they refused to leave the wagon, and gradually reduced their demands until finally I obtained the whole of the gold for about two yards of calico, a bandana handkerchief, four yards of copper wire, and a handful of beads; and even these prices, I explained, were far higher than I could possibly afford to give in future!

I fully anticipated that the result of this transaction would be to bring out the remainder of the villagers with proposals to barter such gold as they might possess; but although so many of them turned out that by sunset I estimated that every man, woman, and child in the village must have visited the wagon, I saw no more gold that day. And for a very good reason; for it afterwards appeared that the headman had spent a busy afternoon going round the village, buying up every particle of gold he could lay hands upon, doubtless with much profit to himself: and on the following morning, while we were inspanning the oxen, he turned up, accompanied by a couple of women bearing between them nearly sixty pounds of gold, and detained me more than two hours while he haggled with me over the sale of it. But I had by this time come fully to understand that gold possessed absolutely no value for these people, except as a plaything for the children; and the result was that when at length I bade the man goodbye, and gave the order to trek, the fellow was glad to let me have the whole at my own price, and I secured it upon very favourable terms.

I was now in high feather, for I had already secured, from one village alone, more than seventy pounds of gold, which I estimated must be worth close upon four thousand pounds sterling; and if I could do so well at only one village, what might not I achieve by the time that I had traded away all my "truck"? Already, in imagination, I saw myself back at Bella Vista, with the house rebuilt and furnished in luxurious style, the land amply restocked, and plenty of money in the bank as well! Alas, I little guessed what lay before me; and it was just as well, perhaps, that I did not; otherwise— But I must not get ahead of my story.

With my head full of pleasant visions, and my imagination busily employed in the construction of *châteaux en Espagne*, we proceeded upon our journey, travelling over undulating country which ahead manifested a disposition to become hilly, and still closely following the course of the stream, until, about noon, we arrived in the midst of what in the distance had appeared to be a cluster of curiously shaped kopjes, but now proved, to my great surprise, to be ruins, thickly overgrown with vegetation. Here, my curiosity being powerfully aroused at so unexpected a sight, and it being also time to outspan, I called a halt; and while Piet busied himself in the preparation of my midday meal, I took my rifle and sauntered off to examine the ruins.

They proved to be very much more extensive than I had imagined, for when I came to inspect them at close quarters I found that the structures which had at first attracted my attention formed but a very small part of the whole, the

greater portion of the buildings having been razed to the level of the ground, large heaps of rubbish and the foundations being all that now remained, with the exception of the ruins above-mentioned, of a town or village that had originally covered more than a hundred acres of ground.

But it was to the ruins which had originally arrested my attention that I now chiefly devoted myself, entirely forgetful of the fact that a meal was awaiting me at the wagon. And these remains I found to be extraordinarily interesting, for I had not been among them ten minutes before I became convinced that they were the work of a people of far higher intelligence than the Mashonas—that they must indeed have been built by a race having some pretensions to civilisation. For, while the walls were for the most part built of dry rubble masonry, the lintels and doorposts were of dressed stone, and—most remarkable circumstance of all—were in many cases adorned with sculptures in low relief, of a character strongly resembling those which I had seen portrayed in pictures of Egyptian ruins. For example, there were figures of men ploughing with oxen, driving laden asses, leading by the horns antelopes which were perfectly recognisable as the oryx and springbok, others leading baboons, leopards, giraffes, dogs, lions, and elephants, human figures with heads of birds, lions, and rams, and figures of sphynxes with human heads, or the heads of rams. And these figures were not by any means the rough efforts of uncultured savages; on the contrary, they were distinguished by a precision of line, a delicacy yet firmness of touch, and an artistic beauty that could only have resulted from a very high state of civilisation and culture.

The buildings appeared to be mostly circular in plan, ranging from about thirty to fifty feet in diameter, with walls averaging three feet in thickness, one or more of these being surrounded by an outer wall, approximately elliptical in plan, of some five feet in thickness. There were five of these structures still standing in a sufficient state of preservation to render them recognisable at a distance as buildings, and a great many more—the precise number I did not trouble to ascertain—of which nothing but the foundations remained. I prowled about among these intensely interesting remains for several hours, until close upon sunset in fact, examining them and striving to puzzle out their origin, and then made my way back to the wagon, where I found Piet and Jan rapidly working themselves into a fever of anxiety about my prolonged absence, and earnestly debating the propriety of instituting a search for me.

So profound were the interest and curiosity aroused within me by these remarkable and mysterious relics of a lost and forgotten civilisation that when Piet awakened me on the following morning with my early cup of coffee and the enquiry whether it was my pleasure that the oxen should be inspanned, I determined to devote at least a few hours to their further examination, and issued my instructions accordingly. Then, as soon as we had all breakfasted, I ordered Piet to take the sporting double-barrel while I carried my rifle, and, with the two dogs accompanying us, set out to complete my inspection. But, beyond the finding of an elaborately sculptured stone sarcophagus, which we took the liberty of breaking open, and which contained a mummified human body and several earthenware utensils decorated with exquisite paintings—one of which I appropriated and carried away—we discovered nothing further that was worthy of particular mention; and about two o'clock in the afternoon we inspanned and resumed our journey.

An hour later, however, at a distance of some three miles from the ruins, we arrived opposite a hill of solid rock some four hundred feet in height and about a mile long, in the face of which I observed what I at first took to be the mouth of a cave; but, looking at it more closely, I presently perceived alongside it a great mass of débris. My curiosity again got the better of me, and, calling a halt, I walked over to it and proceeded to examine it at close quarters, with the result that I soon convinced myself that the "cave" and its accompanying mound of débris could be nothing else than an ancient working; while upon entering the opening, which extended inward and downward for a distance of nearly half a mile, I discovered evidence enough to prove that the working was that of an extraordinarily rich gold mine, visible gold showing everywhere in the worked face of the rock! And at once the idea seized me that if I could but contrive to ingratiate myself sufficiently with Lomalindela, His Majesty might be induced to grant me a concession to work the mine, and so place me in possession of wealth "beyond the dreams of avarice". I thought at first that possibly this might be the identical mine from which the gold in my wagon had come, but a close examination of the working at length convinced me that the rock had remained untouched for ages; and then it occurred to me that perhaps the dead and forgotten inhabitants of the ruined village which I had so recently left might have been the miners.

And now, with every mile of our progress, the country became more broken and hilly, and at the same time more open and park-like, the great masses of bush and scrub with which we had so long been familiar giving place to trees of handsome appearance and noble proportions, growing for the most part singly, but occasionally in clumps of from three or four to a dozen or two, while occasionally the clumps magnified themselves sufficiently to justify the term of a wood, or even a small forest; moreover, the grass was in places profusely dotted with beautiful flowers, while where the trees grew most thickly they were often enwreathed with parasitic growths which, if they were not actually orchids, very strongly resembled them, the blooms they abundantly bore being of the most remarkable and often most beautiful shapes and colours. Thus the broken character of the country, with its accompanying features of swelling hills, scarred here and there with foaming rivulets, ravines, and gorges hemmed in and overhung by lofty trees garlanded with flowering parasites, and intermingled in places with luxuriant shrubs—some of which bore leaves of such curious shapes and brilliant colours that they might easily have been mistaken for flowers—and with birds of strange forms and gaudy plumage flitting hither and thither, was a most agreeable change from the characteristic scenery of South Africa. It was a beautiful and very fertile country, taken as a whole, and the nearer that we drew to Gwanda the more forcibly was this fact borne in upon me, as also was the further fact that the Mashonas were a very powerful nation, so far at least as numbers were concerned; for every kraal at which we arrived was bigger and more important in every way than the one that preceded it.

The evening of the sixth day after we had crossed the Limpopo found us outspanned upon the left bank of the stream which we had been closely following from the moment of our passage of the river, with a lofty, flat-topped mountain range, some fifty miles long, on our left hand, springing from the plain close to the opposite margin of the stream, and on our right two enormous mountains, some twenty miles apart from peak to peak, and remarkable for their exceptional height—which I estimated at fully fourteen thousand feet—as well as from the fact that they were identical not only in shape, but also apparently in size and altitude. In shape they were almost hemispherical, and to

add to their similarity each bore on its very summit a protuberance very much resembling in appearance a beehive-shaped Kafir hut, but much larger, being probably quite two hundred feet in height. The tops of these remarkable mountains were covered with snow for a distance of about two thousand feet from the summit, and very beautiful they looked, blushing a soft, delicate pink in the last rays of the setting sun. The ground between the two mountains—which I took to be a pair of long-extinct volcanoes—and the range on our left rose steadily, and therefore somewhat retarded our progress when we continued our trek on the following day; but about two o'clock in the afternoon we reached the summit of the slope and saw before us a valley or basin, roughly circular in shape and some twenty miles in diameter, hemmed in on all sides by hills, some of which were lofty enough to be snow-capped on their summits; and in the very centre of this valley lay Gwanda, the Kraal or Place of Lomalindela, the king of the Mashona nation.

It was an immense place, far exceeding in dimensions the biggest native kraal that I had ever yet seen. It was circular in plan, like the other Mashona kraals that I had passed on my way, and, also like them, it was intersected by two main roads or streets, crossing each other at right angles in the centre of the kraal, one road running due north and south, while the other ran east and west. Each of these roads was about two and a half miles long, with a great gate at either extremity, pierced in the high and strong circular palisade which completely surrounded the kraal; and at the point where these two main roads intersected in the centre of the kraal each was widened in such a manner as to form a great square about one hundred and sixty acres in extent, this doubtless being the spot where all business of a ceremonial character was conducted.

That some such business was impending we shortly afterward became aware, for during the descent of the wagon into the valley we were overtaken and passed by regiment after regiment of warriors, all decorated in full war paraphernalia; and the induna of one of these informed me that a general muster was proceeding, in preparation for the annual festival, which was to be held on the day after the morrow. During the remainder of that day we beheld an almost continuous stream of armed men converging upon the town, not only by way of the road along which we were travelling, but also from passes in the mountains all round the valley.

When the wagon had arrived within about a mile of the southern gate of the town I was met by an official, who bore me a formal message of welcome from the king, with an intimation that His Majesty would see me on the morrow. The officer also indicated a certain spot, about half a mile outside the south gate and near the bank of the stream, where he suggested I should outspan the wagon, explaining that the king was of opinion that I would be more comfortable out there, in comparative seclusion, than in the overcrowded town, an opinion with which my own completely coincided. And this opinion was strengthened to absolute conviction when, as the sun sank behind the western mountains and the soft, tropical night settled down upon the valley, our ears were assailed by a perfect babel of sound emanating from the town, which, even at the distance of half a mile, rendered sleep almost impossible. What it would have been like to be lodged in the midst of the storm focus I trembled to think.

The din above hinted at was kept up until such a preposterously late hour that it was not until early in the morning of the following day that I finally fell asleep, with the result that I rather overslept myself; and when Piet brought me my usual cup of coffee he at the same time brought me an intimation that envoys had already arrived from Gwanda with a message from the king, to the effect that His Majesty was now prepared to grant me an interview. I did not hurry, however, but rose and dressed with more deliberation than usual, for my experience is that a savage—even although that savage happens to be a king—respects a white man in direct proportion to the time that the latter keeps him waiting; therefore I directed Piet to inform the messengers that I was not yet ready to receive them, but would do so as soon as I had partaken of breakfast. I kept the men—it required six of them, it appeared, to bring the king's message—about an hour, and then condescended to interview them, sending them back with an intimation that I was about to select from among my treasures certain articles which I intended to offer as gifts to His Majesty, and that when I had done so I would so far honour him as to call and make the presentation in person.

I delivered this message with all the aloofness and dignity of manner that I could muster, and was gratified to observe that it was not without its effect upon the king's envoys, who accorded me the salute of "Nkos'!" upon their departure. Then, as soon as they were gone, I unpacked my bales and proceeded to sort out and set aside the gifts which I intended to offer for His Majesty's acceptance. By dint of a little artful questioning I had contrived to gain the information that King Lomalindela was a man of about my own stature and build, and I kept this information in mind when selecting my gifts. I assumed that, as in the case of King Moshesh, a military uniform would prove the most acceptable gift that I could possibly offer a savage monarch; and upon examining my stock in trade I discovered that I possessed the complete uniform of a sergeant of hussars—tunic, pelisse, trousers and boots combined, shako with red and white horsehair plume complete, and a sabre—which, upon trial, seemed to fit me pretty well, if perhaps just a shade tight. I therefore decided upon this, together with a length of some two and a half feet of brass chain, the ends of which I united by a split ring, to which I attached one of my small circular shaving mirrors; and to this I added a dozen little brass boxes full of mixed beads, these last being intended as gifts for the king's favourite wives. Then, putting the whole in a parcel which I entrusted to Piet's care, I mounted Prince, and, accompanied by my trusty Hottentot henchman on foot, set out to traverse the short distance between the wagon and Gwanda.

The arrival of a white man in the Mashona country was evidently a quite unique event, exciting the utmost curiosity in the minds of the inhabitants—indeed, I subsequently learned that such a thing had never happened since the memorable visit of my friend Major Henderson and his partner, Van Raalte, consequently it was only a very few of the older men who had ever beheld a white man before; for as I rode along at a foot-pace, with Piet respectfully walking in my rear, the whole way was lined on either side by thousands of men, women, and children, who had turned out for the express purpose of beholding such an astonishing spectacle, this, it appeared, being rendered all the more extraordinary by the fact that horses were unknown to the Mashonas, and not one of them, save the half-dozen or so elders above-mentioned, had ever so much as heard of a mounted man! Therefore my slow progress was marked by a continuous volley of "Au's!" uttered with the hand held over the mouth, indicative of the utmost astonishment and awe. The same sort of thing, only in a very much more marked degree, prevailed inside the town, every one of the inhabitants of which appeared to have made a point of turning out to witness my arrival. I rode right up through the main street of the town as far as the great square of which I have spoken as occupying its centre, and there, finding

that the entire square was lined with troops in full panoply of war—from which I surmised that my visit was intended to be regarded as a state function—I dismounted, and, still carrying my trusty rifle, turned my horse over to the care of a savage who seemed to be more than half-afraid of the animal. Then, with Piet following close at my heels, I passed through a gap which had been hastily made in the line of troops, and found myself in the great square—and in the presence of King Lomalindela.

Chapter Ten.

I find myself in an exceedingly awkward Dilemma.

The king—as to whose identity there could be no possible mistake—was seated in the very centre of the great square upon some sort of throne, the precise shape and material of which I could not make out, for it was entirely hidden by an immense and magnificent kaross of lions' skins; and formed up in a semicircle behind and around him were about a hundred warriors, the arms and accoutrements of whom were of so elaborate and splendid a character that I at once judged them—rightly, as it afterward turned out—to be chiefs.

But since the king was seated in the exact centre of the great square, there was still a space of nearly four hundred and fifty yards separating us when I passed through the line of warriors; therefore, for the moment, I could only take in the general effect of the group, and very imposing it was. For, with the exception of some half a dozen elders, every one of those chiefs was in the very prime of life, ringed of course, standing fully six feet in height, each one of them bearing the scars of many battles—as I perceived when I drew near—and evidently men who knew not the meaning of the word fear. And in every respect worthy of them was their king, whom, as I approached, I saw to be a man apparently of about thirty-five to forty years of age, splendidly proportioned, and probably quite as tall as the tallest of his chiefs, although I could only judge his height approximately, since he was sitting down. Unlike his warriors, however, he was naked, save for the usual mucha or apron of monkeys' tails round his loins, and a superb leopard-skin kaross over his shoulders; and he was also unarmed, save for a bangwan or stabbing spear with an enormous blade, which he held carelessly across his knees as I approached. But I did not like the expression of his countenance, or indeed that of any of the Mashona, which seemed to me to be compounded of craftiness, treachery, and ferocious cruelty. Moreover, His Majesty seemed to be in anything but a good humour—perhaps I had kept him waiting rather too long; for as I approached near enough to note the expression upon his features I observed that his brows were contracted into a heavy frown, and there was a certain glitter in his eyes that I by no means liked. However, if he chanced to be striving to daunt me by his scowling looks it was important that he should be made to understand that he had by no means succeeded; therefore, walking slowly and with all the dignity I could assume, I marched straight up to him, and, looking him fearlessly in the eyes, halted about ten feet from him, and, giving him a military salute, remarked, in the Bantu tongue:

“Greeting, Lomalindela, King and Lord of the Mashona! I, Edward Laurence, one of the mighty English race, salute thee!”

“I see thee, white man of the unpronounceable name,” answered the king somewhat ungraciously. “Ye desired audience of me, and I have given it you; say now, therefore, why have ye come into my country, and what want ye now that I have permitted you to enter it?”

“Nay, O King,” I retorted, “beyond what you have already given me—namely, permission to hunt in your country—I want little or nothing, except permission to trade with your people. There is gold in Mashonaland, which is a metal that, so far as I have thus seen, ye have little use for; but among my own people it possesses a certain value: therefore have I come hither, bringing with me goods which I am prepared to barter for gold among your people, if they will. But if not, it matters not; I can buy ivory with those goods on my way back to mine own land. Also, I am seeking a young white 'ntombozaan who was stolen from among us some twenty-two moons ago, and carried off into the interior, whither I know not. I think she cannot have been brought so far as this; yet, who knows? Have you heard or seen aught of such an 'ntombozaan, O King?”

“I have not, white man, nor is she in Mashonaland, for otherwise I should have heard of it and seen her,” answered Lomalindela. “The few strangers who enter my country are brought to me, and I deal with them as I will. No, she has not been here; therefore that part of your errand is soon disposed of. And as to the other part of it, I will consider the matter at my leisure. Have ye aught else to say to me?”

“Merely to ask Your Majesty's acceptance of certain gifts which I have brought with me. Is it the king's pleasure that I produce them?” I blandly enquired.

An expression of covetousness flashed into the king's eyes as he nodded and replied briefly:

“Yes, you may produce them.”

I beckoned to Piet, who, as my supposed body servant, had been permitted to enter the great square with me, and he at once stepped forward with the bundle containing the presents, which he laid at my feet. Then deliberately, and with as much ceremony as I could infuse into so commonplace an act, I unfastened the bundle, extracted the items of uniform one by one, unfolded them, and held them up for inspection. The king regarded each garment attentively and somewhat wonderingly as I held it up, but did not appear to be very profoundly impressed; and I began to fear that my great coup was about to miss fire. When, however, I came to the sword, drew it from its scabbard, flourished the glittering blade round my head, and made several cuts and points at an imaginary enemy, His Majesty sat upright in his chair and began to manifest a little more interest.

“Is that one of the white man's fighting weapons?” he demanded, stretching forth his hand for it.

"It is," answered I, as I handed it to him. And forthwith I proceeded to explain to him how it was used. He examined the weapon with much curiosity, ran his thumb along the edge, remarked that it was not very sharp, and then, to my unutterable dismay, handed it back to me, saying:

"Good! Thou shalt show me how it is used. One of my warriors, armed with spear and shield, shall fight thee!"

For a second or two I was too dumbfounded to speak. I knew that savages were subject to queer and unexpected turns of thought, but this was a development that I had never foreseen even in my most fantastic imaginings, and I was utterly at a loss as to how I was to deal with such an extraordinary situation. It was not that I was exactly afraid to meet a savage in mortal combat, for I had often done so before; but that was on the field of battle, when my opponents were the enemies of my race, thirsting for the white man's blood, and when my only choice lay between killing and being killed. But to deliberately engage in a cold-blooded duel with a man against whom I had no grudge, and to incur the obligation of killing or being killed merely to gratify the whim of a savage monarch, was quite another matter, and one that, to confess the simple truth, I had no fancy for. Yet how to escape the dilemma I knew not, though it was forcibly borne in upon me that it would never do for me to betray the slightest hesitation, for savage kings are kittle cattle to deal with, and to cross even their lightest mood may often result in a ghastly tragedy. Therefore, more in the hope of gaining time than for any other reason, I said:

"Nay, O King, it were mere waste of good material to slay one of thy warriors in order to show thee how this weapon is used, nor is it necessary; I can make the matter quite clear to thee without killing a man, and will do so in due time. Let me now proceed to display the remainder of my gifts;" and hastily diving into the parcel I produced the length of brass chain with the shaving mirror attached, held it up for an instant that all might see, and then placed it round my own neck, to show how it was to be worn. And at that moment what seemed to me to be a brilliant inspiration seized me, and I began to talk somewhat hurriedly, in the hope of diverting the king's mind from the idea of the suggested duel.

"This," said I, removing the chain and mirror from my neck and offering it to His Majesty, "is great magic, for it enables a man to see himself. Behold!" And I held it up so that Lomalindela might see the reflection of his own visage in it. He took it doubtingly and hesitatingly in his hand—for there is nothing a South African savage dreads so much as magic or witchcraft—and a low, awestricken ejaculation of "Au!" escaped him at what he beheld.

"And that is not all," I continued. "This magic disk enables its owner to see what is happening behind him. As thus:" and I slightly turned the mirror in his hand as he held it, in such a fashion that he could see the faces of the various chiefs who stood behind him.

"Finally," I proceeded, "it has the power of temporarily blinding an enemy, and so giving its possessor power over him—thus:" and, as I spoke, I turned the mirror in such a fashion that it flashed the rays of the sun right into the eyes of several of the soldiers lining the square, who, despite the awful breach of discipline involved in the action, incontinently raised their shields as the dazzling reflection struck their eyes.

"Au!" ejaculated Lomalindela in awestruck tones, as he handled the mirror doubtfully; "it is great and good magic, for it enables a man to see the enemy who comes creeping up behind him, and to blind the enemy who assails him in front. I thank thee, white man. Thou shalt show me how to use it too."

"Certainly," I replied hastily. "All in good time. And now, lastly, behold! here are boxes of beads for thy favourite wives, wherewith they may adorn themselves."

The king took the brass boxes, one by one, in his hands, turned them over and looked at them, and then calmly drew from the lobe of his right ear an ivory snuffbox about the same size, and substituted therefor one of the other boxes, amid low murmurs of admiration from the chiefs in his rear.

"It is good; and again I thank thee, white man," he remarked, as he placed the remaining brass boxes in the hands of one of the chiefs, with a low-murmured order, the purport of which I could not catch. "Yes, it is good," he repeated, turning to me. "But what are these things good for?" he enquired, pointing to the little pile of clothes which I had replaced in the bundle.

"Listen, O King, and I will tell thee," I replied. "In the land where the white men live there are kings even as there are in this land; and—also as in this land—they are men undistinguishable from other men, save by their clothing. Also, as in Mashonaland, the king is a soldier, the chief and general of all his troops; and he is distinguishable from all others by the magnificence of his clothing. Therefore, when I decided to visit Mashonaland, and the matter of suitable presents arose in my mind, I decided that I could not possibly offer anything more suitable and acceptable to the King of Mashona than the garb of a soldier such as a king wears. And, behold, there it is!"

"Au!" ejaculated Lomalindela, regarding the little heap with new interest. "Is that, then, the garb that the king of the white men wears?"

"Even so," I answered, straining the truth a little. "It is the garb of a soldier, and that is the kind of garb which a white king wears upon state occasions, such as a review of his troops, or upon the occasion of some very great and important ceremonial."

"Good!" ejaculated the king. "Thy gift comes most opportunely. To-morrow is the day of the great annual festival in Mashonaland, when I review all my soldiers, and when the witch doctors smell out those who are my secret enemies. I will wear it then. But thou, white man, must show me how each thing is used, for I have never before seen anything like them."

"Assuredly I will," said I. "Shall it be now?" The king considered for a moment, and then answered in the affirmative, at the same time beckoning to a certain chief, an elderly, grey-headed man, and giving him an order; whereupon the

chief—whom I assumed to be deep in his monarch's confidence—left his place in the semicircular cordon behind the throne, and, advancing to where the bundle lay at my feet, lifted it reverentially and bore it away to a large, rectangular hut—which I took to be the *itunkulu*, or king's house—at the far corner of the square, whither Lomalindela and I forthwith followed him. This hut, which was about fifty feet long by about forty feet broad, and some seven feet high to the eaves of the roof, was built of what is known in Cape Colony as "wattle and daub"; that is to say, the walls had been constructed of interlaced wattle-work plastered over with mud and allowed to dry in the heat of the sun, after which they and the roof had been thickly thatched with palm leaves. This effectually turned the heavy tropical rain to which the country is subject at certain seasons of the year, and was also a pretty effectual protection against the scorching rays of the sun; consequently the interior temperature of such a structure, stifling though it frequently was, was not nearly so great as that of the outer air. In this particular case, too, the doorway, unlike that of the usual Kafir hut, was high enough to permit a full-grown man to enter without stooping; but, like other Kafir huts, this was entirely destitute of windows, the only light, during the daytime at least, being what entered by the doorway. A minute or two, however, sufficed for the eye to become accustomed to the change of light, and when mine had done so I perceived that the interior of this particular hut was divided by wattle partitions into apparently three apartments, two in the front half and the other—which I surmised to be sacred to the king's *emposeni*, or harem—occupying the rear half. The apartment which we first entered was probably the king's sitting-room, for it contained nothing but a low divan-like arrangement running all round the walls and covered with rich *karosses*, while through the doorway leading to the other apartment I caught an indistinct glimpse of what looked like a rough imitation of a couch or bed, also heaped high with *karosses*.

The king lost no time in coming to the point. He signed to the attendant chief to place the bundle on the divan, then turned to me and said:

"Now, white man, teach me how to array myself in the garb of the white kings."

"Then," said I, taking up the booted trousers, "this is the first garment which Your Majesty must don." And I explained as best I could how he was to clothe himself. The fact that the boots were attached to the trousers made the assumption of the garment somewhat awkward, but luckily the boots were ample in size, and the monarch managed to get his feet into them without much difficulty. Then I explained how he must tuck the *mucha* inside, and when this was done, and the garment drawn up round his waist, I passed the braces over his shoulders and showed him how to button them. The trousers were scarlet—just a little off colour with wear, I am afraid—with a broad stripe of yellow braid down the outer seam, and the effect was evidently satisfactory to the king, who walked up and down the room several times admiring himself. Then I took up the tunic, and after I had explained how it was worn the *induna* and I assisted His Majesty to get into it, and I buttoned it down the front. Next I attached the fur-trimmed *pelisse* to one shoulder, adjusted the shoulder belt, threw the brass chain with mirror attached round his neck, placed the plumed *shako* on his head, girded the sword about his waist, and there he stood, a most grotesque yet withal not unkingly figure, fully attired in the uniform of a hussar.

The effect upon the *induna* was tremendous; he stood for several seconds gazing open-mouthed upon the awe-inspiring apparition of his king in the new and strange attire, and then, flinging himself prone upon the ground with his hands over his eyes, exclaimed:

"It is too much; mine eyes are not strong enough to gaze upon so much splendour! Bayete! Bayete!! Bayete!!!"

As for the king, his gratification and pride were unbounded: never before, I suppose, had he beheld any man so completely overpowered with admiration as this old *induna*; and if such was the effect of his appearance upon a man with whom he was, comparatively speaking, familiar, what might he not expect to be the result when he exhibited himself in his kingly attire to his troops? He swelled visibly with gratified vanity—for vanity and fear of witchcraft are the two overmastering emotions of the savage—grinned from ear to ear as he took the mirror in his hand and gazed admiringly at the reflected image of himself crowned with the smart *shako* and its nodding horsehair plume, and finally turned to me with the question:

"Say now, white man, what think ye? Do I look like a white king?"

"In every respect, Your Majesty," answered I, with several mental reservations.

"Au! it is good; it is very good indeed!" he exclaimed. "Now am I a white king, and when my enemies behold me they shall tremble, and their hearts shall melt within them as the snow upon the mountain tops melts when the glory of the sun shines upon it. Their courage shall fail and their spirit shall wither at the sight of me, even as the grass withers and shrivels at the breath of fire. I am the king!"

A silence of a few minutes followed this rhapsody, then he turned to the still prostrate *induna*, and, kicking him gently in the ribs with his booted foot, exclaimed:

"Rise, *Mapela*, and behold me! You must grow accustomed to the sight of me in my kingly garb, for now that I have it I shall often delight the eyes of my people by wearing it. Say, now, shall I go forth this instant and make glad the hearts of the soldiers who are gathered in the great square by showing myself to them?"

Mapela revolved this very important question in his mind for nearly a minute; then he raised his head and answered:

"If, O Great, Great One, the words of the humblest of thy servants carry weight with thee I would say, show not thyself in thy glorious garb until to-morrow. There are but a few warriors in the square to-day, so few that they are altogether unworthy of so great an honour as that which thou dost suggest; moreover, they would go away and babble to others of what they had seen, and much of the glory and splendour of thy first appearance in those magnificent garments would be wasted. Wait until to-morrow, O Elephant whose tread causes the earth to tremble with fear, and then—when the whole army is gathered together, and all can see thee at the same moment—thou shalt reveal thyself in all thy magnificent splendour, and—and—words fail me to predict the result."

"Perhaps thou art right, Mapela the Wise One," answered the king, kindly overlooking—or perhaps not noticing—the rather lame and impotent conclusion of the induna's high-flown speech. "Yes; perhaps thou art right," (this rather regretfully). "But there is no reason why I should not at once show myself to my wives; and, by the bones of my royal father, I will! There be those among them who of late have shown a tendency to make light of my words and hold me of small account. I will see what they will say and how they will act when they behold me as I now am!"

And therewith, Lomalindela, autocrat of the Mashona nation, lord of life and death over nearly a million people, stalked across the room with his sword clanking at his heels, drew aside a curtain, and disappeared behind it. There followed a breathless silence for the space of perhaps half a minute, a silence deep, pregnant, and almost awe-inspiring; and then there floated out from the other side of the kaross curtain a little shriek in an unmistakable feminine tone of voice, a shriek expressive of mingled astonishment, awestruck wonder, and delight, immediately followed by a perfectly deafening clamour of exclamations and laughter from at least fifty women—if their number might be gauged by the volume of sound that they created—amid which might be imperfectly caught, at intervals, the deep tones of Lomalindela's voice, raised apparently in remonstrance, entreaty, and indignation.

Mapela, the Wise One, and I glanced enquiringly at each other, and methought that even in the semi-obscurity of that darkened interior I could detect the ghost of a twinkle of amusement in the old induna's eyes; for my own part, I remember that I was grinning from ear to ear as my imagination conjured up a picture of the scene which was enacting behind that curtain. The shouts, exclamations, laughter, and remonstrances increased rather than diminished as the moments sped, and presently Mapela came to me, took me by the arm, and gently led me from the itunkulu, saying as he did so:

"Come, 'mlungu; let us go. A king is but a man, after all, among his women folk, and it is not seemly that you and I should linger and hear more of what is passing yonder."

Once safely away from the itunkulu, and beyond reach of the unseemly sounds which issued therefrom, Mapela conducted me to the group of chiefs still gathered round the royal chair and introduced me to them severally and individually; then, discreetly and with a certain air of mystery, he hinted to his fellow indunas that the investiture of the Great, Great One had been successfully accomplished, with such amazing and magnificently splendid results that it would be well for them all to spend the night in preparing to be astonished, for on the morrow they should find themselves overwhelmed with wonder and admiration. And finally, he threw out a cautious feeler with the object of ascertaining whether perchance it had occurred to me that it might be politic on my part to confirm the excellent impression which I had already made by bestowing upon him and his fellow indunas a small—a very small—modicum of the inestimable treasures which they all knew my wagon must still contain. To this I replied that the idea was at that moment the one uppermost in my mind, and that I gladly availed myself of the opportunity afforded by the king's temporary absence to invite them to call upon me in a body as soon as possible, to receive my largesse.

Then I, in turn, took up my parable, and, in humble emulation of Mapela's engaging frankness, hinted that if by any chance the king—or anybody else—should feel moved to display a feeling of friendliness to the extent of bestowing upon me a return present, I wanted nothing of actual value—such as spears, shields, and the like—but would gladly accept as much of that useless stuff, gold, as people might desire to force upon me, the accumulation of gold being one of my chief hobbies; eccentric, amusing, perhaps even ridiculous, but—well, there it was. And I accompanied my final statement with a shrug of the shoulders which I intended should express deprecation of my own folly. I intercepted a glance and nod of intelligence and amusement which passed round the circle at this naïve confession of folly on my part, and at that moment the king, shorn of his temporary glories, and with a distinct frown of annoyance upon his royal brow, emerged from the itunkulu and stalked towards us. Also, to my secret discomfiture, I observed that he carried in his hand the sword which I had just presented to him, and in the use of which he had expressed a desire to be instructed. I began to think that I had permitted my passion for harmony and completeness to carry me rather too far when I included the sword with the other items of the uniform which I had selected for presentation to King Lomalindela; and I resolved, there and then, never again to include lethal weapons of any description among my gifts to savages.

The king flung himself down into his throne with much of the petulance of manner that is observable in the demeanour of a spoilt child when its temper has been ruffled, from which I surmised that the impression produced upon the ladies of his harem by His Majesty's martial garb had fallen short in some respects of what he had anticipated; that in fact, and not to put too fine a point upon it, His Majesty's vanity had been taken down a peg or two—for the which I was rather sorry, because I somehow had a premonition that the resulting soreness of temper would recoil upon me. And, for once in a way, my premonition was promptly verified; for after scowling round for a minute or two upon all and sundry, maintaining meanwhile an ominous silence, the king straightened himself up and said sharply:

"Now, white man, we have wasted enough time in folly; let us proceed with the matter which I was discussing when you interrupted me. You were about to show me how this thing which you call a 'sword' should be used. You shall show me now. Mapela, choose you a skilled warrior from your regiment, that he may fight this white man, and that I may thus be able to judge the real value of the white man's gift. The white man shall be armed only with the sword, and the Mashona's weapons shall be his shield and stabbing spear."

Saluting, Mapela strode across the square to where his regiment was drawn up, and moved slowly along the ranks, critically eyeing each man over as he did so. I believed that I had succeeded in producing a tolerably good impression upon Mapela; moreover, it was to his interest that I should not be killed, for if I should chance to be slain he might bid goodbye to his hopes of obtaining a present from me: and I began to wonder whether "the Wise One" possessed enough mental acuteness and alertness to conceive the idea of quietly warning the warrior whom he might choose that there was no need for him to put up a real fight, and that every purpose would be served if the warrior, while feigning to use his best endeavours to kill me, should skilfully permit me to disarm him. Unfortunately, however, Mapela could not know what was passing in my mind, and I had missed the only opportunity that had presented itself for discussing the matter with him—which was while the king was displaying his fine feathers to his ladies; and it

might very well happen that the old induna, animated by the best intentions in the world toward me, might select a foeman whom he might deem well worthy of my steel, for the purpose of enabling me to display my skill before the king. It was a most annoying dilemma for a peaceably disposed young fellow like myself, with a natural aversion to unnecessary strife and bloodshed, to find himself in, and for the life of me I could see no way out of it. The king was clearly in no mood to listen to argument; indeed, he was evidently very much ruffled in temper, and in just that frame of mind which would impel him to insist the more strongly on having his own way should I attempt anything in the nature of dissuasion: therefore all I could see for it was to submit to his whim, and do my best to disarm my antagonist without hurting him.

By the time that I had thus far considered the matter, Mapela had made his choice, and now approached us, accompanied by a fine, stalwart young Mashona warrior of some five or six and twenty years of age, a ringed man, whose smooth, dark skin was already seamed here and there with scars that told of more than one hard-fought fight, and whose lithe and easy movements indicated that he was in the very pink of fighting condition. Halting within a pace or two of where I stood, near the king, Mapela saluted, and said:

"Behold, O Great, Great One, I have chosen a warrior, even as you bade me. He is named 'Mfuni, and is the son of Matanga, one of our most skilled and cunning fighters, who has carefully trained his son in all the arts of warfare. Is my choice approved?"

I looked at my proposed antagonist, and a single glance into his eyes, aglow with pride and resolution, convinced me that whatever hope I might have cherished regarding Mapela's supposed desire for my escape from the ordeal to which I was about to be subjected had been utterly misplaced. His cupidity in respect of possible gifts, if indeed he had been animated by any such feeling, had evidently been swamped by his sense of duty to his king, and he had as evidently picked a warrior well calculated, in his opinion, to uphold and maintain the honourable traditions of the Mashona army. 'Mfuni's every look and movement clearly proclaimed that he regarded himself as the chosen champion of the entire Mashona nation, and that he was fully prepared to lay down his life in the endeavour to uphold its prestige. It was clear that I should have to look well to myself if I desired to see the light of another day.

Moved by a sudden impulse to avoid, if possible, a combat that, however it might end, could be of no possible advantage to me, I turned to the king and said:

"Surely Your Majesty is not in earnest in insisting that I should fight the man in order to demonstrate the way in which the sword that I have given thee should be used? I can show thee all that there is to show, without the slightest need for bloodshed, as thus—permit me!" and I took the sword from the king's hand, unsheathed it, and, laying the scabbard at the king's feet, approached 'Mfuni, smiling into the man's eyes to show him that I meant him no harm.

"Now, 'Mfuni," said I, as I halted within striking distance of him, "raise thy spear, as though thou wert about to strike it through my heart."

The man looked doubtfully at me, and then flung a lightning glance of enquiry at the king. But the latter made no sign; therefore, after a moment's pause, 'Mfuni raised his spear as I had bade him.

"Now," I continued, in a low voice, intended only for his ear, "when I say 'Strike', thrust at me—not too quickly, but just quick enough to make the blow look real. Strike!"

Prompt at the word, the man struck, exactly as I had told him to do; and without the least difficulty I parried the blow, shearing the head of the spear from its haft, and leaving the latter in the astonished savage's hand.

"You see, O Great One?" I said, stepping back and turning to the king. "The thing is quite simple; a mere turn of the wrist does it—thus,"—and I illustrated my meaning by parrying an imaginary thrust. "The head of your adversary's spear is shorn off, and he is disarmed and at your mercy, to be slain or not, as you may choose. And that is all there is in it. No need to fight in order to show how the sword should be used."

The king glowered at me for several seconds in silence. Then, with a scornful laugh, he exclaimed:

"Pah! that was nothing; a boy of six years could have done as much. And 'Mfuni made no effort to slay thee, else thou wouldst not be alive now. I begin to have my doubts of thee, white man. Dost thou desire my death, that thou hast given me a weapon of no use in the time of battle?"

"But it is of use," I insisted hotly. "For nearly twelve moons I, with others, fought the Tembu, the Pondos, and the Griquas, using a similar weapon to this, and I am alive this day."

"Then," retorted Lomalindela, with a malicious grin, "if thou art so sure of the effectiveness of the weapon, let me see thee use it in a real fight. Mapela, give 'Mfuni thy spear. And, hark ye, 'Mfuni, if thou canst slay the white man, or even disable him, thou shalt choose twenty head of cattle from mine own herd, and they shall be thine. But if the white man proves to be the victor in the fight, and there is still life in thee when it is over, I swear, by the bones of my royal father, that thou shalt be given to the ants! Thou hearest?"

"I hear, O Great, Great One, Calf of the Black Bull, Elephant whose tread shakes the earth. Bayete!" answered 'Mfuni, lifting on high the haft of the spear from which I had shorn the head.

So I was in for it, with no ghost of a chance of escape; and the very gift—or, rather, one item of it—upon which I had so confidently relied to win me the favour and goodwill of the king had, through that monarch's capricious and suspicious nature, been the instrument by means of which I had become involved in a duel that must almost inevitably end in a ghastly tragedy. For, after what the king had said to my antagonist, there was no doubt that the fellow would do his utmost to kill me; while I, in pure self-defence, and also for his sake, must do my best to kill him. I fully understood, the meaning of the king's horrible threat to give the poor fellow to the ants; and, rather than see

him condemned to so dreadful a fate, I would slay him with my own hand!

Chapter Eleven.

I fight the Champion of the Mashona Army.

In obedience to the king's command, Mapela left his place among his fellow indunas, and, stalking across the intervening space, handed his bangwan—a spear with a stout haft about three and a half feet long, to which was attached a head some eighteen inches long by seven and a half inches wide, the two edges of which were almost razor keen—to 'Mfuni. And while he was doing this, and whispering a few hurried words to my prospective antagonist, I divested myself of my jacket, and handing it and my rifle to Piet, who all this while had stood motionless as a statue, said:

"Take these and hold them for me, Piet. And if I should be killed, make your way at once to the place where I have left my horse, shooting any man who may attempt to stop you—the rifle is loaded—and mount and ride for your life to the wagon. And if you are fortunate enough to reach it alive, you, with Jan and 'Ngulubi, had better take all the horses, all the guns, and as much ammunition as you may have time to lay your hands on, and ride for your lives back to the Limpopo, on the other side of which you will be reasonably safe. After which, you must do the best you can for yourselves. And if you should be lucky enough to get back home, find Major Henderson and tell him all that has happened and—how I died."

"All right, baas," answered Piet cheerfully, as he took my coat and rifle from me; "I'll remember all that you say. But I ain't afraid, baas; you're not goin' to die just yet. You'll beat that black nigger all right." (The fellow was himself as black as the ace of spades.) "All you got to do, baas, is to take care that he don' work roun' you so's to get the sun in your eyes, that's all."

By this time 'Mfuni was once more armed, while Mapela had left him and was wending his way back to his place among his fellow indunas, whose eyes, like those of the king, and indeed every man in the square, were now intently watching every movement of their champion and myself. As I walked leisurely toward 'Mfuni, rolling up my right shirt sleeve the while, I saw that the fellow was watching me keenly as a cat watches a mouse, and, despite my apparent unconcern, I kept an equally wary eye upon him, knowing, from his tense attitude, that he might attack me at any moment. As I now approached him, the sun was immediately behind me, and, mindful of Piet's advice, I was determined to keep it there, if possible; although there was this disadvantage about the arrangement, that the king, with his group of indunas, was far enough forward on my left front to be just within my range of vision, and any sudden movement upon the part of any of them was liable to attract my attention from my antagonist and leave me open to his attack. But I quickly made up my mind to dismiss them altogether from my thoughts; and at the instant when I came to this resolution 'Mfuni, with a sudden spring, leapt within arm's length of me, with his spear upraised in the act of striking.

Instantly I threw up my blade in position, ready to parry; but beyond this, and coming to a halt, I took no notice of my antagonist's movement, for I had already made my plans for the fight, these consisting simply in acting upon the defensive until a favourable opportunity should reveal itself—and keeping my back to the sun. But 'Mfuni was as quick as myself to recognise the advantage that the latter would give me, and did his utmost to deprive me of it by springing first to one side and then to the other, hoping no doubt that I should be tempted to turn and face him, until, by repeated turns, he should contrive to get the sun in my eyes. I defeated this amiable project, however, by keeping my eyes steadfastly fixed upon his, and thus reading and forestalling his intentions—for I have found that the eye is the one feature of the human countenance that will not lend itself to deception; and thus for several minutes we danced hither and thither, right and left, my opponent continually flashing his spear before my eyes and making feints, while I simply held myself ready to parry his stroke the moment that I should see it coming. And presently it came in good earnest, for the patience of the savage is soon worn down—came with the quickness of a lightning flash. But, quick as it was, I intercepted it; the moment I saw that it was really coming, round whirled my blade, and down fell the point of the spear, shorn clean off at its junction with the haft, and 'Mfuni stood disarmed before me.

For the fraction of a second he stood gazing with dilated eyes, apparently unable to realise that he was beaten; then, to my amazement, he stooped swiftly and snatched the severed spearhead from the ground. Unprepared as I was for the action, I yet had enough presence of mind to spring back and away from him; and well was



A TICKLISH MOMENT

it for me that I did so, for almost before I could recover from my astonishment the man was upon me, stabbing furiously at me with the spearhead in one hand, while with his shield in the other he covered his body. So sudden and furious was the onslaught that, in spite of myself, I was driven back some half a dozen paces, while a low murmur from the onlookers rapidly strengthened to a deafening roar of applause and encouragement; then, in parrying an unusually vicious stab, I unwittingly slashed the poor fellow across the right hand so severely that he incontinently dropped his blade and once more stood disarmed before me: whereupon, driving him back by threatening him with my point, I stepped forward and placed my foot upon the spearhead.

"Do you yield and admit yourself beaten, 'Mfuni?'" I demanded in a low voice.

"I yield; I am beaten, 'Nkos'," answered the man, lowering his hands. "Strike me now through the heart, I pray thee, and save me from the torture of the ants."

"Wait!" I enjoined him briefly. Then, turning to the king, I said—the shouts of applause and encouragement having ceased on the instant of 'Mfuni's discomfiture:

"Thou hast seen, O King! Although thy chosen champion fought well and did his best, I have conquered him with this weapon, of which thou wert inclined to think so little. Art thou still inclined to think lightly of it; or art thou convinced that it is a good weapon, capable of protecting a man's life in the heat of battle?"

"Nay," answered Lomalindela, "it is a good weapon; thou hast proved it to be so at the risk of thy life, and I thank thee for the gift. Ask me now what shall I give thee in return for it? Wilt thou have gold or cattle? Thou hast but to say, and it shall be thine; for thy gift is good, and mine shall equal it."

This answer, by good luck, afforded me the very opening that I wanted, and at once I replied:

"I thank thee, Great, Great One, and take thee at thy word. I want none of the things that thou hast named; but if thou dost really value my gift to thee I ask thee to give me in return the life of 'Mfuni, the man who fought with me and whom I conquered by the might and magic of this sword. He fought bravely and well; worthily did he uphold the finest traditions of the Mashona warriors: but against this sword he had no chance; he could not conquer me. Therefore, because it is not his fault that he has been beaten—your soldiers and indunas, to a man, will admit that—I ask you to give the man his life, free from all stigma or disgrace of defeat; and to repeal your sentence that, if conquered, he should be given to the ants."

The silence that followed this bold request of mine was so intensely profound that when it had endured for a minute or more at its full tension I began to suspect that I had unwittingly committed some utterly unpardonable offence, and that all nature was breathlessly awaiting the fall of the avenging thunderbolt. For it was not only that every man present in that great open space seemed tongue-tied, they seemed to be not even drawing their breath; they were as absolutely motionless as so many statues; there was not even the faint sound of a man shifting his weight from one leg to the other, not even the scarcely perceptible touch of a spear-haft upon a shield, nor even the faint rustle of the warriors' plumes in the wind, for, strangely enough, at that precise moment even the wind itself seemed to pause in its breathing: and glancing round me in vague discomfiture I perceived that every man in the square was staring blankly before him, right into space. The fact was—as I subsequently learned—that in preferring my request I had asked the king, in so many words, to break the most sacred oath known to the Mashonas, and had he risen in his wrath and plunged his bangwan through my heart, nobody would have been in the least degree surprised; that, indeed, was the logical sequence for which everybody was at that moment waiting. But my request must have touched some hitherto hidden and unsuspected chord in the king's heart, for presently, when the tension had

become almost unendurable, Lomalindela raised his head and said, in so gentle a tone of voice that it electrified everybody:

"Au, white man, you know not what you ask! I have sworn by the bones of my royal father that if that man was conquered, and survived the fight, I would give him to the ants; and that is an oath which I dare not break, for otherwise great evils would fall upon the house of Lomalindela, King of the Mashona."

"Doubtless, O King, what thou sayest is true—under ordinary circumstances," I replied. "But these circumstances are not ordinary; on the contrary, they are so exceptional that they will probably never again occur. The oath which you took was taken in ignorance. You did not know that, in taking that oath, you were virtually condemning a man to a dreadful death for failing to accomplish an impossibility, did you?"

"That is true, white man; I did not know it," answered the king.

"Therefore," I continued, with increasing confidence, "by every law of right and equity your ignorance of that important fact absolves you from your oath, and you are entitled to break it, if you please. And I ask you to break it, knowing that you may certainly do so with impunity, because, in demanding that 'Mfuni should conquer me—or, rather, the sword which I gave you—you demanded of him that which neither he nor any other warrior could possibly accomplish."

Then ensued another tense silence, during which the king appeared to be meditating upon what I had said. Presently he beckoned to Mapela, "the Wise One", and conferred with him in a low voice for a brief space. Then, turning to me, he said:

"I am inclined to believe that what thou hast said as to the impossibility of 'Mfuni conquering the sword is true; for Mapela informs me that he chose the man because of his reputation as the most skilled fighter in the whole Mashona army. Therefore, because of what thou hast said, I would willingly break my oath, if I could but be sure that, in so doing, I should not be bringing evil upon myself and my house. But how can I be sure?"

That was a puzzler, with a vengeance; and I looked about me in perplexity, searching earth and sky for an answer. As I did so, I saw, far away in the northern sky, a filmy something that, even as I looked, resolved itself into a flock of rock pigeons coming directly toward us. I knew, from long experience, the propensity of these birds to fly straight, and I felt sure that, unless something happened to divert their course, they would presently pass right over our heads; therefore, since a man's life was hanging in the balance and only I could save it, I determined to take a chance, and called to Piet to hand me my rifle. Then, with it in my hand, I turned to the king and said:

"Behold, Lomalindela! yonder is a flight of rock pigeons about to pass over our heads. If one of them should fall dead in this square, would you believe that I have told you the truth, and that you may break your oath with impunity?"

"Yea, I will," answered the king, looking in the direction toward which I was pointing, "for why should one of them fall dead, seeing that their flight is strong and full of life?"

"You shall see," said I, and slowly raised my rifle. The birds were flying very high, and I foresaw that the shot would be a difficult one, but I had accomplished others quite as difficult in my time, and was determined that I would not fail now; therefore, holding my breath as the pigeons drew overhead, I sighted about six inches ahead of the leader and pulled the trigger. A low-murmured ejaculation of surprise followed the report of the piece, and simultaneously with it the leading pigeon was seen to spring convulsively upward about a foot, a feather or two detached themselves from its body, and then its wings collapsed and down it came, hurtling through the air, and falling, as luck would have it, within a few inches of the king's feet!

And, as though the soft thud of its body upon the ground had been a signal, up went the hand of every man present to his mouth, and a low "Au!" of awe and amazement rolled round the square like the mutter of distant thunder.

"Is it enough, O King; and are you satisfied?" I demanded, as I stepped forward and, picking up the bird, handed it to the monarch for his inspection.

"It is enough, and I am satisfied," answered the king. "I recall my oath, and the man's life is yours, to do as you will with it."

"I thank thee most heartily, O Great, Great One," answered I. Then, turning to 'Mfuni, I said: "Return now to your place in the ranks, 'Mfuni, and to your friends. You fought well, and it was through no fault of yours that you were defeated. And when you are dismissed from duty, come to my wagon, and I will see what may be done toward mending the wound that the king's sword inflicted upon you."

"'Nkos'!" answered 'Mfuni, throwing up his hand in salute as he swung round upon his heel and marched back to his place in the ranks. And as he went there gradually arose from the assembled troops a sound like the pattering of rain upon a roof, caused by the drumming of spear-haft upon shield, beginning so gently that at first it was scarcely audible, but rapidly swelling in volume until it became almost deafening, when it as rapidly subsided into silence. I did not understand the meaning of it at the moment; but, later on, when I questioned Mapela, he informed me that it was the method adopted by the Mashona warriors to express admiration, approval, and appreciation of any act of an exceptionally generous and noble character, and had been evoked by my treatment in general of the 'Mfuni incident, and especially by my successful intervention to save the man from the most horrible form of death known among them.

From the fact that the scowl had vanished from the king's brow I surmised that he, too, was well pleased at the final outcome of the matter; and when presently the sound of the peculiar salute to which I have referred had died away, he pointed to the rifle in my hand and said:

"Is that the magic fire tube which kills from afar, of which thy servant spoke when he came hither to crave my permission that thou shouldst enter my country and visit me here?"

"Even so," I answered, offering it for examination, for I had not reloaded it, and knew that, however carelessly he might handle it, he could do no mischief. But he declined to touch it, saying:

"Nay, it is great and terrible magic, and I will have naught to do with it. And thou, white man with the unpronounceable name, art also a great and wonderful magician, for at thy will the lightning flashes from thy fire tube and the very birds of the air fall dead at thy feet. Also, when thou didst fight 'Mfuni, thou didst cause the sword in thy hand to flash lightnings about thee by the swiftness with which thou didst wield it. Therefore I give thee a new name; and henceforth thou shalt be known as Chia'gnosi (The Smiter with Lightning). Go now, in peace, Chia'gnosi. I thank thee for the splendid gifts which thou hast bestowed upon me, and especially for the lightning-flashing sword, as also for saving the life of one of my warriors. And to-morrow thou shalt sit beside me, here in this great square, and witness the annual festival of the Mashona nation. Sala guhli!"

Accepting this as my dismissal, I saluted, and, wheeling round, beckoned Piet to follow me to the place where I had left my horse, at the entrance to the square. But I had not gone six steps upon my way when—whether spontaneously or in response to some signal I know not—up went the spear of every warrior present, in salute, and a great shout of "Chia'gnosi—Chia'gnosi—'Nkos'!" rent the air, to which I, as in duty bound, responded by halting for a moment and raising my hand to my hat-brim in a military salute.

About twenty minutes after my return to the wagon, 'Mfuni, my late antagonist, put in an appearance, in obedience to my instructions. He was still in full panoply of war, as he had appeared on parade, and had provided himself with a new bangwan, or stabbing spear, which, with his shield, war club, and a sheaf of hunting assagais, he respectfully laid at my feet as he halted before me.

"Why do you do that, 'Mfuni?" I asked, regarding the man with some surprise.

"Because henceforth I am thy man, O Chia'gnosi," he answered. Then, in reply, I suppose, to my look of continued astonishment, he added: "The 'Nkosi spared my life, and the king gave me to him; therefore henceforth I am his man."

"Do you mean that you intend to attach yourself to me, to become one of my servants?" I demanded.

"Even so, 'Nkos'," he answered simply.

"But," I said, "the king will never permit that, 'Mfuni; he would be very angry indeed with me should he discover that I had carried off one of his warriors. Probably he would send an impi after us to eat us up."

"Nay, O Chia'gnosi, he would not; for it was the Great One himself who ordered me to come to thee," replied 'Mfuni. "He gave me to thee; and the king does not go back from his word."

"Very well. In that case thou mayst remain, and glad shall I be to have thee," said I. "And now, let me look at thy hand; I must see what can be done to heal the hurt that the sword inflicted upon thee."

The gash seemed to be a rather severe one, practically incapacitating the member for the time being, and it took me the best part of half an hour to extract the splinters of bone and bind up the wound, during which time I must have inflicted a good deal of pain upon the poor fellow, for the perspiration streamed down his face like rain. Yet all the time he sat motionless and impassive as a statue, never moving a muscle or shrinking in the least.

Before I had finished with my surgery, Mapela and the rest of the chiefs turned up, in response to my invitation to call at the wagon to receive the gifts which I proposed to distribute among them; and I soon gathered, from their conversation, that 'Mfuni's story was perfectly true, and that the king had indeed given the man to me as a present.

To distribute gifts to nearly one hundred chiefs proved to be a somewhat lengthy business, also it made a pretty severe inroad into my stock of "truck"; still, it had to be done, and I could only hope that, in the long run, my generosity would not be without its reward. I treated them all alike, or practically so, giving each man a yard of thin copper wire, a gill measure of mixed beads, and either a bandana handkerchief or a yard of printed calico.

And while the distribution was proceeding my visitors chatted volubly with me, and still more volubly with each other, the principal topic of interest, I soon discovered, being the festival which was to commence one hour after daybreak on the morrow, and to last all through the day and well on into the hours of the succeeding night. The chiefs conversed with the utmost freedom in my presence and hearing, but at the outset I was too much engrossed in the business of distributing gifts to pay very much attention to what was said, a stray word or two here and there being all that I caught at first. At length, however, it began to dawn upon me that the so-called "festival" promised to be anything rather than festive, if I had not completely misunderstood the trend of certain of the remarks which had attracted my attention, and accordingly I pricked up my ears, and began to ask a few questions. And then I learned, to my horror, that the first feature of the festival, namely, the "smelling out" of the king's secret enemies by the witch doctors, was more likely to resemble closely an orgy of wholesale murder than anything else that I could imagine.

The ceremony, I gathered, was somewhat as follows. The "witch doctors" or magicians of the nation—numbering in all something over a hundred—all of whom were then in Gwanda for the purposes of the ceremony, would assemble at sunset that same evening in a sort of fetish house; and there, under the leadership and direction of one Machenga, the head or chief witch doctor, would perform certain mysterious rites, and submit themselves to a certain mysterious form of treatment, lasting the entire night, which, it was generally understood, would enable them infallibly to "smell out" or detect every individual who might harbour evil thoughts or designs against the king. And

these unfortunates, it appeared, would, upon detection, be haled forth and summarily executed there and then! I learned, further, that while the king put the most implicit faith in the infallibility of the witch doctors, and especially in that of Machenga, the head or chief of them, a few of the indunas who were then talking to me held rather strongly to the opinion that the selection of victims was not so much the result of supernatural guidance and wisdom vouchsafed to the witch doctors, as it was—at least in the case of the more important and distinguished victims—governed rather by Machenga’s personal hatred, or his cupidity; a few of the shrewder observers having noticed, each year, that the chosen victims invariably included certain men toward whom the head witch doctor was well known to cherish a feeling of strong enmity, while other victims comprised those chiefs who were numbered among the richest men in the community—the law being that, while the property of the alleged traitors was forfeited to the king, half of it was surrendered to the head witch doctor, as his fee for the detection of the criminals. Mapela, “the Wise One”, was one of the strongest upholders of the above theory, and in support of the soundness of it he whispered to me:

“You see that tall induna yonder, talking with two others? Yes, the man with the necklace of lions’ teeth. He is Logwane, reputed to be the most wealthy induna. For a number of years he has paid heavy tribute to Machenga, thus purchasing immunity from being ‘smelled out’; but during this last year he has become a favourite of the Great, Great One, and presuming upon this, I understand that now he has refused to pay further tribute to Machenga, and has defied him. *Mark my words: he will be among those smelled out to-morrow!*”

“You think so?” I whispered back. “And, if so, what will be his fate?”

“Chiele (slain)!” answered Mapela tersely, accompanying the word with an expressive movement of his right hand, imitative of a man stabbing another.

“What! notwithstanding the fact that he is a favourite of the king?” I demanded incredulously.

“Neither that nor the fact that he is highly esteemed by us all and is well known to be absolutely loyal to the king will save him. You will see,” replied Mapela.

“But,” I exclaimed hotly, “that would be monstrous—nothing short of deliberate, cold-blooded murder! Do you really think that the king will permit it? And if he should, will none of you intervene?”

“The king will permit it, because he has absolute faith in Machenga,” answered Mapela. “And, as for us, who are we that we should intervene to prevent that which the Great, Great One permits?”

“And are the victims killed there and then, on the spot?” demanded I. “Have they no chance given them to appeal against Machenga’s judgment, no opportunity to produce proof of their innocence?”

“None,” answered Mapela. “They are dragged forth; the executioners take them; and—they die! You will see; for the king has bidden you to be present to-morrow.”

“I shall not see,” I retorted, “for I shall decline to be present. Nothing shall induce me to countenance by my presence such a scene of cold-blooded atrocity!”

“Nay, my friend,” answered Mapela, laying his hand impressively upon my arm, “you must not dream of attempting to evade the king’s command. To do so would be fatal to you and your followers, for it would be interpreted to mean that in your heart you cherish evil thoughts against the king, and fear to face the ordeal. And an impi would instantly be dispatched with orders to ‘eat up’ you and yours! No; however disagreeable to you may be the sights which you will witness to-morrow, you must on no account seek to evade them. I tell you this as your friend, because I wish you well, and because my snake tells me that in some way—how I know not—your presence at the ‘smelling out’ to-morrow will be the means whereby many valuable lives will be saved. And now it is time that we should depart; we have been with you long enough. Sala guhli, Chia’gnosi, until to-morrow. And bear well in mind my caution to you,” he concluded in a whisper. Then, rising, he made a sign to the rest of the chiefs, who sprang to their feet, saluted, and retired in a body, after reiterating their thanks for the “splendid” gifts I had bestowed upon them.

Chapter Twelve.

Machenga, the chief Witch Doctor of the Mashona.

It was about mid-afternoon of that same day when, as I sat in the shadow of the wagon tent, pondering upon the possibility of my being able successfully to approach the king upon the question of a concession to mine gold in Mashonaland, Piet informed me that certain men, whom ’Mfuni recognised as messengers from the king, were coming toward the wagon from Gwanda; and some five minutes later they arrived.

There were six of them, and they were laden with goods which I needed not their explanation to assure me were presents from the king. One bore a complete Mashona warrior’s panoply, consisting of plumed headdress, leopard-skin mantle, mucha of leopards’ tails, armlets, anklets, and garters of cows’ tails, a necklace consisting of about forty gold nuggets, bored and strung upon a strip of rimpì, shield, war club, and an immense bangwan, or stabbing spear. This gift was of course to be regarded as a logical sequence and appropriate return for the uniform which I had presented to His Majesty that morning. But there were other gifts as well, and exceedingly valuable ones, too, three of the other messengers being bearers each of a most magnificent kaross, or skin rug, one being made of lions’ skins, one of leopards’ skins, and one—the finest of all—of monkeys’ skins of some species unknown to me, the black fur being extraordinarily long, thick, and glossy. The remaining two men carried, each of them, a leather bag weighing about sixty pounds, one bag containing coarse gold dust, while the other was full of small, rough nuggets of gold. These two men were also the bearers of a message of apology from the king, to the effect that, since I seemed to have a liking for gold, he regretted that he had no more to offer me, but that as gold was of no value in the country,

and was not particularly sought after, it was only occasionally that a stray nugget or a handful of dust was found; and that the contents of the bags represented the casual findings of many years.

It was somewhat disappointing to learn that here, in Gwanda, where I had confidently anticipated that gold in practically unlimited quantity might be had almost for the asking, there should be so little; yet the situation was not without its compensations, for if the natives attached so little value to the metal that they would not even take the trouble to hunt for it, there ought to be all the more for me—if I could but coax the king into granting me a concession. So I dissembled my disappointment, handed over the gifts to Piet, with instructions to pack them away in the rear of the wagon, rewarded the messengers who had brought them, and dismissed them, happy in the possession of a few mixed beads.

About half-past ten o'clock that night I was sitting in my wagon, reading by the light of the all but full moon—for, this being the eve of the great annual festival, the town was in an uproar, and the volume of sound emanating from it and from the temporary encampments outside it rendered sleep impossible—when I became aware of a figure muffled in a great kaross in such a manner as to render identification impossible. Apart from this circumstance, however, there was a certain suggestion of furtiveness in the movements of the figure, a something indicative of a desire to avoid observation, that attracted my attention from my book and aroused my curiosity. It seemed to be wandering about aimlessly; but when I had been watching it for some ten minutes I became convinced that, erratic as its movements seemed to be, they were not without method; and that method, I soon saw, was causing the unknown one—a man—to gravitate slowly but surely toward the wagon. So I waited patiently, and a quarter of an hour later he accomplished a masterly movement which brought him within the shadow of the wagon.

"S'a bona muntu," I remarked quietly. "What is the business that brings you by such a crooked path to my wagon to-night?"

"Au!" ejaculated the mysterious one in some confusion. "Chia'gnosi has good eyes; nothing escapes him; he sees even the little red ticks that hide themselves on the blades of the grass. If his ears are as good as his eyes he will perchance have heard of one named Machenga."

"I have heard of such an one," I answered cautiously.

"What have you heard of him?" demanded the unknown.

"I have heard that Machenga is the name of the king's chief witch doctor," I replied, with still greater caution. "But who are you, and why have you come to my wagon at this time of night? Is it to talk to me of Machenga?"

"Machenga is a very great man," observed my visitor. "Next to the king, he is the greatest man in all Mashonaland. Also, he is the king's friend: the friends of the king are his friends; and the enemies of the king are his enemies."

"Come you to me with a message from Machenga?" I demanded. "If so, proceed; my ears are open."

"Au!" ejaculated the unknown one. "Chia'gnosi is very wise; he understands. He understands that when Machenga speaks the king listens; and those who—like Chia'gnosi—are wise and desire the king's favour, do well first to secure the favour of Machenga."

"Piet," I called, "come hither and open for me the bale containing the handkerchiefs and printed calico; also find for me the pliers and the brass chain."

The articles named were duly produced, and I selected two of the most brilliant bandanas I could find, added thereto a couple of yards of calico, printed with a tasteful design in crimson and blue consisting of an alternation of horseshoes and running horses carrying their heads and tails very high, cut off a yard of brass chain to which I attached a shaving mirror as a pendant, filled a brass box with mixed beads, and arranged the whole in a tasteful little heap on the top of the voorkissie. Then I turned to my visitor and, pointing to the heap, said:

"Friend, your words are words of wisdom. You see these gifts? Take them and place them in the hut of Machenga, saying that I, Chia'gnosi, send them in token of my goodwill. Say also that I have here many other gifts, equally precious, and that, if the king continues to regard me with favour, and grants me a certain request which I think of preferring, a generous share of these gifts shall find their way to the hut of Machenga."

For an instant my visitor leaned forward, his gleaming eyes fixed avariciously upon the little pile of trumpery spread out temptingly upon the lid of the chest, and, as he did so, the upper folds of his kaross slipped apart, and I caught a momentary glimpse of a most extraordinary countenance. It was that of an old man, so old that the head was quite bald and the wrinkled face entirely devoid of hair; but the deeply sunken eyes glowed like those of a leopard in the dark, the forehead was broad and high, the nose thin and crooked like the beak of an eagle, the mouth a mere straight slit, and the thin lips were drawn back in a sort of incipient snarl. But it was the expression of the face that particularly arrested my attention, for never before had I beheld a human countenance on which unimaginable cruelty and boundless rapacity were so clearly and strongly written. This was no common, ordinary individual, I at once told myself: there could be but one man in all Gwanda with such a countenance as that, and I instantly guessed the truth, that my visitor was none other than Machenga himself.

For a moment or two the talon-like right hand of the man hovered greedily over the little display; then it flashed back and was lost in the folds of the kaross, which were quickly drawn round the head again, all but concealing it from view. The man stepped back a pace and drew himself up haughtily, and, with a gesture of contempt, pointed to the gifts.

"Au!" he exclaimed. "Think ye that Machenga craves such baubles as those? They are well enough for children and fools, but Machenga accepts only gifts of real value."

"Such, for instance, as—" I suggested.

"One of the magic fire tubes with which you caused a flying pigeon to fall dead at the king's feet to-day," answered my visitor.

"Nay," said I, "that may not be. It would be no kindness on my part to give Machenga a fire tube, for he would not know how to use it—"

"But you could teach him," hastily interposed the stranger.

"Nay," answered I, "not so, for it is a thing of magic; and the magic of the white man is unlike that of the black man, nor can the black man learn it. Were Machenga to take one of my fire tubes in his hand, one of two things would happen. Either the tube would refuse to slay at all, or it would turn upon Machenga and kill him."

"Au! white man, that is not true, and when you speak lies you talk as a fool," exclaimed my visitor, displaying much righteous indignation. "I know, for I have seen the magic fire tubes before. Many moons ago—ay, before you were born, and before Lomalindela was king—two white men came into Mashonaland, and only one of them went out again. They, too, possessed fire tubes, and one of them, an Amaboona (Boer)—the man who did not go out—once put his fire tube into my hands and showed me how to use it. The magic lies not in the tube itself, but in the few grains of black powder that are poured into it and the round lump of metal that is thrust down on the top of the powder. Au! I know. Though so many moons have passed I remember quite well. Ay, and I remember many other things also, things that happened here long before the Mashona arrived in the land, things that happened when the Monomotapa dwelt here and great cities of stone and brick covered the face of the country, when men dug gold out of the rocks and made it into ornaments for the arms, necks, and ankles of their women—"

"What foolishness is this that thou art talking?" I interrupted angrily, for it was growing late and I was beginning to feel tired, while there seemed to be no sign of an intention on the part of my unwelcome visitor to leave. "Return now to Machenga," I continued, "describe to him the gifts which I have set aside for him, and say that if he will send thee for them to-morrow at sunrise they shall be his. But if he wants them not, it is well: I have no others for him."

"Then thou wilt not give him one of thy fire tubes, with a supply of the magic powder and enough of the round lumps of metal to kill one hundred—pigeons?" demanded my visitor.

"I will not," I replied shortly, "and that is my last word."

"Au!" retorted the man. "Very well, white man, I hear thee and I go. But it may be that to-morrow thou wilt be sorry that thou didst refuse." And, so saying, he wrapped his kaross still more closely about him and strode away into the moonlight with the light, springy step of a young man.

As for me, I was now quite ready for bed, therefore I undressed and turned in without further delay, expecting to fall asleep on the instant. Yet I did nothing of the kind, for when I stretched myself out upon my cartel I found my thoughts dwelling upon my mysterious visitor, who I felt sure could be none other than Machenga himself, stolen surreptitiously away from the mysterious rites of the fetish house in the hope of cajoling a rifle out of me; and I began to wonder whether the two white men to whom he had referred as having visited Mashonaland many moons ago—one only of whom went out of the country again—could by any chance have been my friend Henderson and his Boer partner, Van Raalte. And I also greatly wondered what the fellow could possibly have meant by his mysterious talk of a time before the Mashonas came to the country, when it was inhabited by a people whom he named the Monomotapa, who built great cities of brick and stone, worked the gold mines, and made gold ornaments for their women. Pondering thus, I became a little vexed with myself for my untactful treatment of the man, whom I had permitted to leave me in a distinctly bad temper, instead of humouring and conciliating him, as I felt persuaded I might easily have done.

However, I was not altogether without hope that, after a night's reflection, the fellow might reopen negotiations, when I would do my best to establish friendly relations with him, if only for the purpose of learning a little more about the mysterious Monomotapa, the ruins of one of whose towns I had actually seen and examined. And, so thinking, I gradually dropped off to sleep; and, as was not very surprising, dreamed a wonderful dream, wherein I found myself living and moving among the Monomotapa, who proved to be a very highly civilised race, possessing a vast amount of knowledge of many things that we moderns only guessed at in the most vague fashion. And I was plunged deep in the midst of a most astounding adventure when Piet awoke me with the intelligence that it was sunrise, and that the regiments in the outlying cantonments were already astir and preparing to enter Gwanda, to assist in the celebration of the great annual festival. I enquired whether there was any sign of our visitor of the previous night, and was told that there was not, at which information I was sorrier than ever for my hasty behaviour; for it was now evident that Machenga definitely refused the gifts that I had set out for his acceptance, and for a savage to refuse a gift is tantamount to a declaration of enmity, and I could ill afford to make an enemy of anyone in Mashonaland, still less of so powerful a personage as Machenga, the chief witch doctor and confidential adviser of the king.

It was by then too late, however, to mend matters, unless I were prepared to make an unconditional surrender by sending Machenga the particular gifts that he coveted; and it is always unwise in the extreme to surrender to the demands of a savage. I therefore decided to let matters take their course, but to be prepared as fully as possible for any untoward contingency. Therefore, as soon as I had bathed and breakfasted, I directed Piet first to feed and water the horses, then have them brought back to the wagon, saddle and bridle them, leaving the girths loose but ready to be drawn tight at any moment, and tie them up in the shadow of the wagon, so that, if necessary, the entire party could mount and ride at a moment's notice. Next I had five parcels of ammunition prepared, each parcel weighing about thirty pounds, and placed in readiness in the wagon, so that, if occasion should arise, we could each snatch a parcel and secure it round our waists before abandoning all our other belongings. Then I had each gun loaded and placed with the parcels of ammunition, indicating the particular weapon which each man was to take charge of

should it perchance become necessary for us to make a hurried flight for our lives. And finally, I loaded my own pet rifle and a brace of pistols, thrust the latter in my belt, and, carrying the rifle in my hand, mounted Prince and rode off unaccompanied to be present at the festival, since, according to Mapela, failure to comply with the king's command would inevitably result in myself and my following being "eaten up"—otherwise destroyed—by an impi.

As I swung into the saddle the rear companies of the last regiments of warriors to enter Gwanda were winding snake-like through the four entrance gates; therefore, to give them time to reach their appointed positions in the great square before my arrival, I proceeded at a foot-pace, with the result that I was the last person to enter the town: and immediately I had passed in through the south gateway the massive gates were swung to and barred behind me, while a company of some fifty warriors drew up across the face of the closed gates, barring all possibility of exit—to my great inward discomposure. I was careful, however, not to permit any smallest outward indication of that inward discomposure to manifest itself, but proceeded onward up the long street, still riding at a foot-pace, and wearing as complete an air of nonchalance as I was able to assume under the somewhat disconcerting circumstances. During my progress through the town I glanced right and left about me from time to time, but saw not a solitary man in any of the narrow lanes between the huts—they were evidently all congregated in the great square in the centre of the town; but here and there I caught a passing glimpse of a woman or two, or a little group of children, peering curiously at me from the interior of the huts as I passed. Finally, I reached the junction of the square with the street which I was traversing, and, dismounting, turned over my horse to the care of a lad of about fourteen, directing the umfaan to lead the animal into the shadow of a certain hut which I indicated, and there carefully hold him by the bridle until I should return. Then, on foot, I passed through a narrow gap in a solid phalanx of warriors, and found myself in the square, with Mapela waiting to conduct me to the place which had been assigned to me, and from which I was unwillingly to witness the forthcoming spectacle.

Imposing as had been the scene in the great square on the preceding day, it was as nothing compared to what I now beheld; for, with the exception of a small open space about one hundred feet in diameter in the north-west corner of the square, the vast quadrangle was literally packed with warriors, all in full war equipment, regiment after regiment being drawn up in such close order that there was only a narrow space of less than a yard in width between the ranks. As Mapela conducted me through the serried ranks I idly wondered what these narrow spaces were for. I was to learn their purpose all too soon.

"I am glad that thou hast come, Chia'gnosi," murmured my companion in my ear, as we made our way slowly toward the small open space. "Nevertheless, I say unto thee, be watchful, and do nothing that may by any chance anger the Great, Great One, for he is in a black mood to-day—why, I know not—and when the king frowns it means death! This is thy place," indicating a stool placed close to the king's empty throne. "Stand here until the king is seated, for it is not lawful for any man to sit until he is bidden to do so by the king. Farewell!"

So saying, Mapela saluted and withdrew, making his way toward the regiment of which he was induna.

And now, left absolutely to myself in that vast space, I became acutely conscious of the terribly oppressive silence that prevailed, notwithstanding the fact that, according to my estimate, there must have been nearly fifty thousand men in the enclosure. But every one of them stood straight up, staring intently into space immediately in front of him, moving not so much as a muscle, scarcely daring to breathe—as it seemed to me—and mute as a figure carved in stone.

For perhaps ten minutes—although it seemed more like half an hour to me—this dreadful, breathless stillness remained unbroken; then a faint sound, like that of a sudden breeze sweeping over grass, but which was in reality an involuntary sigh of relief from suspense emanating from fifty thousand breasts, stirred the air as the curtain veiling the entrance to the itunkulu, or king's house, was drawn aside, and the figure of Lomalindela, fully clad in his hussar uniform, sword included, appeared. For a brief space he stood there in the doorway, glowering; then, doubtless in obedience to some signal that I failed to note, the spear which every warrior held in his right hand was raised aloft, and the royal salute of "Bayete! Bayete! Bayete!" pealed out like a thunderclap on the startled air, and all was silent again.

For a moment the king's brow cleared, and the ghost of a smile flitted across his countenance: I would defy any man living, civilised or savage, to remain entirely indifferent to such a tremendous outburst of homage—all the more intense because of the imposing figure which His Majesty cut in his new rig-out. Then the smile passed, the scowl returned, and, with a glare that seemed to be concentrated especially on me, Lomalindela strode majestically forward, and, scarcely deigning to acknowledge my salute, slowly seated himself in his chair, or throne. And, as he did so, a company of a hundred picked warriors—His Majesty's own bodyguard—marched out from behind the itunkulu, and, under an induna in an especially imposing war dress, ranged themselves in a semicircle round and immediately behind the king's person.

Then, from somewhere in the rear of where I was sitting, there suddenly came leaping and bounding into the small open space a most extraordinary and horrible figure. It was that of a man—the man who had visited me at my wagon on the previous night, I presently perceived, although I did not immediately recognise him; for his dark body was painted, back and front, from head to foot, in white, in such a manner as to represent, with considerable skill and fidelity, a fleshless skeleton. His head was decorated with a pair of bullock's horns, firmly secured by means of straps; round his neck he wore a necklace composed entirely of skeleton human hands, which had been severed at the wrists; about his waist was a girdle of animals' teeth and claws, supporting a mucha, or rather a short petticoat made of dry grass, from beneath the rear portion of which dangled a bullock's tail; and in his right hand he carried a formidable bangwan or stabbing spear.

Notwithstanding his great age, this man—who, of course, was Machenga, the dreaded chief witch doctor—capered and pirouetted with astounding agility in the centre of the arena for fully five minutes; then he suddenly dashed forward, and, prostrating himself at Lomalindela's feet, proceeded to do bonga, or homage, by shouting the various titles of the king, and exalting His Majesty to the skies as the greatest, most potent, most wonderful, most glorious

monarch in the universe, the only king, in fact, worthy of serious mention. This sort of thing, punctuated at intervals by thunderous shouts of acclamation from the troops, continued until the king, satiated with praise, put a stop to it, when the man, after a brief interval of silence, rose to his feet and stood staring intently for a few minutes up into the rich blue splendour of the cloudless sky.

Then, gliding meanwhile slowly hither and thither in a series of narrow circles and turns and twists, in a kind of slow waltz step, Machenga began a song, the burden of which was the glory, majesty, and power of the king, and the inexpressible wickedness of those who presumptuously dared to entertain evil thoughts of him. This continued for about twenty minutes, during which the singer gradually worked himself up into a state of excitement and exaltation that finally became a perfect frenzy, under the influence of which his voice rose to a piercing shriek, while he dashed hither and thither with a display of strength, agility, and fury that seemed to me incredible. Finally, the man collapsed and sank to the ground exhausted, and foaming at the mouth; and at the same instant out from the rear dashed the entire company of subordinate witch doctors, in number fully one hundred, who, forming up about their prostrate chief, began to dance madly round him, singing a weird song of which I could make nothing except an occasional word, here and there, that conveyed no particular meaning to me.

These men were all decorated and garbed exactly like their chief, excepting that, instead of a bangwan, each carried a slender white wand, about twelve feet in length, in his right hand. For a period of about five minutes these terrible beings whirled and flashed hither and thither in bewildering confusion; then, with the precision of highly trained soldiers, they suddenly halted, and I became aware that Machenga, their chief, was again upon his feet, standing in their midst. Then, while the cloud of dust raised by their mad gyrations still hovered in the air, half obscuring the company, the tramp of feet was heard, and into the small arena marched twenty stalwarts, ten of whom were armed with enormous bangwans, while the remainder carried heavy, straight-bladed knives, about two feet long, and some six inches wide at the hilt, tapering away from there to a sharp point. These twenty—whom Lomalindela grimly condescended to inform me were the Slayers—halted on the king's left, just clear of the left wing of His Majesty's bodyguard, arranging themselves in pairs—a spearman and a knife-bearer alternately—as they did so. Then Machenga, at a nod from the king, raised his bangwan, and immediately his satellites began to circle hither and thither, with a slow, waltz-like movement, similar to that with which he had begun his own mad dance; and as they moved, gradually widening their circles until they were strung out all along the face of the motionless regiments, they hummed a low, weird, wordless song that was somehow inexpressibly suggestive of vague, nameless horror. As for Machenga, after watching his assistants for a minute or two, he stalked slowly toward the king and seated himself at His Majesty's feet, where, after a time, he seemed to lose all consciousness of outward things, and to sink into a state of profound and anxious thought. Meanwhile the general company of the witch doctors had separated into units who were slowly working their way along the front ranks of the closely packed regiments, pausing occasionally as though in doubt, and then passing on again, to the obvious relief of the individuals before whom the ominous pause had been made. For a little while, possibly five or six minutes, matters proceeded thus, and nothing happened; then I observed that one of the witch doctors had halted, with his head thrown up, and was sniffing the air, like a dog that has scented game. He turned his head eagerly here and there, as though trying the air, seemed to get the scent for which he was seeking, and then looked square into the eyes of a man in the ranks, who visibly quailed beneath his gaze. Then, sniffing again, the witch doctor suddenly sprang forward, thrust his face close to that of the man who seemed to have incurred his suspicion, and, after a momentary pause, as though to make quite sure of what he suspected, stepped back a pace, and, stretching forth the wand in his hand, lightly touched the unfortunate warrior on the breast with it.

Instantly the man's comrades to right and left of him seized the unhappy wight by the arms and led him forward unresisting to within about ten paces of the king. For a moment the king regarded the supposed culprit with a cold, frowning stare: then he turned toward where the Slayers were drawn up and nodded, upon which a pair of them stepped forward and stationed themselves, the bangwan-bearer in front and the knife-bearer behind the doomed man, who stood with his hands clenched by his sides, his comrades having, at the king's nod, taken from him his spear and shield and laid them at His Majesty's feet. Then, as I saw the right arms of the executioners raised to strike, I shut my eyes. A moment later I heard the dull sound of a blow, followed by the thud of a falling body; and when I opened my eyes the first victim of the diabolical rite of "smelling out" lay stretched out upon his face, dead, with skull cloven and a bangwan wound that must have cut his heart in twain. It was a sickening sight; but there was one redeeming feature about it, the mode of death was at least merciful, for the Slayers had done their work so well and so quickly that the unhappy man must have died instantly, with perhaps scarcely a pang to mark his dissolution. He was a mere nobody, just a common soldier from the ranks, who had probably never harboured in his simple heart a single thought disloyal to the king; but Machenga was cunning enough to realise that a certain number of such unconsidered and inconspicuous victims must be sacrificed if he would avoid attracting undue attention to the fact that the holocaust included all those whose death advantaged him either pecuniarily or as the gratification of his revenge.

Chapter Thirteen.

I kill Machenga, and am expelled from Mashonaland.

After the fall of the first victim the dreadful work proceeded quite briskly, each witch doctor seeming to feel it incumbent upon him to display his skill and zeal by providing at least as many victims as the most active and zealous of his brother practitioners. And as victim after victim fell a sacrifice to as cruel, wicked, and debasing a superstition as it is possible for the mind to conceive, so did my anger burn the more fiercely, until I felt an almost irresistible impulse impelling me to spring to my feet, and, with my pistol levelled at the king's head, insist upon an end being put to the slaughter.

Yet all the while I knew that I could do nothing in the way of interposition; I was as utterly helpless as though I had been a thousand miles away, instead of sitting there within arm's length of the man who was responsible for it all. For

supposing that I should be crazy enough to obey that impulse, what would happen? Why, the king's guards would be upon me in a second, and I should be hacked to pieces by their terrible bangwans in the drawing of a single breath, while probably an even worse fate would befall my hapless followers! No, of course, the idea was madness, the act an impossibility; yet when a few minutes later I saw the tall induna, Logwane—Mapela's friend—led forth and mercilessly done to death, I could not refrain from leaning toward the king and murmuring:

"O King, your witch doctors are not infallible; they made a dreadful mistake when they smelled out that man! Among all your subjects none was more loyal and faithful than Logwane. Why did you suffer him to be slain?"

The king glowered at me for a moment, his eyes smouldering with suppressed anger. Then he answered coldly:

"White man, I believed Logwane to be all that you say. But I was mistaken, for my witch doctors cannot err; no man can hide his guilt from them: and had Logwane not harboured treachery in his heart they would not have smelled him out. Therefore I suffered him to be slain. No man may think evil of me and continue to live."

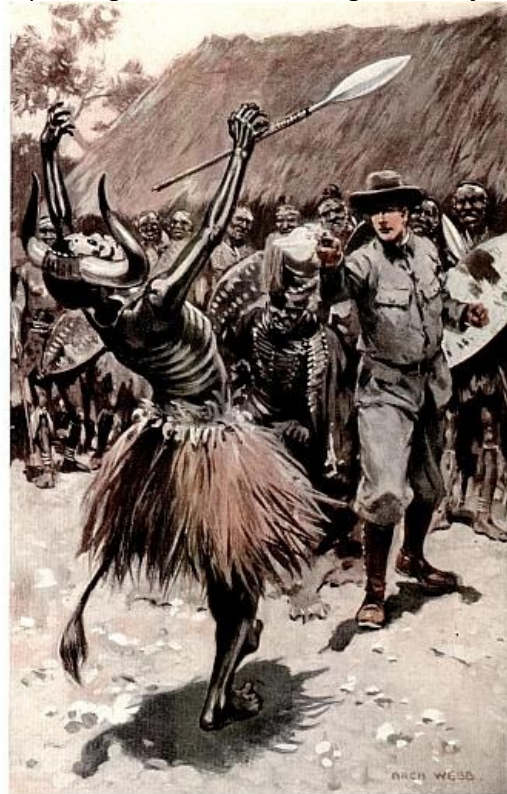
At this moment Machenga, who seemed to have gradually sunk into a kind of trance, rose slowly to his feet, and, with fixed, glassy eyes staring straight before him, began to mutter to himself in a voice pitched so low that at first I could distinguish nothing of what he said. Then he began to glide slowly round in a very small circle, and I perceived that presently, when he faced me, he raised his head and sniffed the air strongly. This occurred three times, and upon the third occasion I detected that for an instant the fixed, glassy stare of his eyes gave place to a lightning-like glance of triumphant malignity; and then I knew that his entire pose was merely a piece of exceedingly clever acting, and that he was no more in a trance than I was. When he had completed the fourth half-circle he halted, at a distance of about ten yards from where I was sitting, and, with his back turned toward me, proceeded to sniff the air still more strongly.

"Yes," he presently exclaimed in a voice quite loud enough for the king and me to hear, "I am not deceived, I smell him; though his skin is white his heart is black, and I smell the evil thoughts against the Great, Great One that lurk deep down in it!" And a smile of diabolical malice overspread his evil face as he shook his great spear aloft and began to dance very slowly, singing softly to himself.

So that was it—the villain was actually going to smell me out! But—"Not if I know it," thought I; and starting to my feet as I drew a pistol from my belt and levelled it at him, I cried:

"Halt there, Machenga! Halt, I say, or thou diest! Deceiver and murderer, destroyer of the king's most faithful friends, and giver of evil counsel to the Great, Great One, my magic tells me that in that evil heart of thine thou hast conceived the design to slay me, because when thou didst come secretly to my wagon last night I refused to give thee one of my magic fire tubes. Now I will prove thee, rascal; I will show the king that thou, his chief witch doctor forsooth, art nothing but a base pretender, a player upon his credulity. Thou dost claim to be a great and powerful magician; well, so am I. Kill me, if thou canst; and it shall be that he of us two who kills the other shall be the more powerful magician, and shall also be the one whose mouth speaks the truth."

Meanwhile, during this interlude, brief as it was, five new victims—two of them indunas—had been smelled out and brought forward; but the king, intent only upon what was passing between Machenga and myself, had forborne to



give the fatal signal to the Slayers, and thus the little group of victims and executioners stood motionless in the centre of the arena, while every eye was turned upon the chief witch doctor and myself.

Machenga had obeyed my imperative command to halt, thus unconsciously demonstrating at once that his state of trance was merely a pretence; and when I ceased to speak he further betrayed himself by answering me.

"Au, Chia'gnosi!" he exclaimed, "so thou, too, art a magician? And thou dost threaten to kill me! Fool! no man living, magician or otherwise, can kill me, else I should have died ages before thou wert born. But I can and will kill thee, in despite of thy magic, and thus I do it!"

And, as he spoke, up went his right hand, with the great bangwan in it, his intent being evidently to transfix me by hurling the spear at me. But I guessed at his purpose, read it in his eyes; and, quick though he was, I was the quicker, and before he had time to gather his strength to cast the spear I had levelled my pistol and pulled the trigger. The good little weapon barked out as the hammer fell, and through the thin veil of powder smoke I saw Machenga spin round on his heels, flinging up his arms at the same time, and the next instant down he crashed upon his back, with a small blue hole in the very centre of his forehead, from which a thin stream of blood began to trickle slowly.

With a lightning-like movement I thrust the empty pistol into my jacket pocket, and transferred my rifle from my left hand to my right, at the same time wheeling sharply round upon the king to see what action, if any, he intended to take. I caught him in the act of springing to his feet, and at once flung up my left hand warningly.

"Nay, O Great, Great One," I said very firmly, "rise not, I pray thee, lest evil befall. My magic is just now very strong, as thou hast seen—so strong that I can scarcely control it—and if anyone here cherishes evil designs against me he had better forget them now, this instant, lest they rise up and destroy him. So: that is well!"—as the king sank limply back into his seat. "Now," I continued, raising my voice so that it could be heard by at least the greater part of the warriors gathered there in the great square, "the king and I are about to confer together; therefore let no man move hand or foot, or utter a single word, for the air is full of terrible magic that only I can control; and if we are disturbed it may break loose, when—!" I concluded with an expressive gesture which was meant to convey all sorts of dreadful things; and I had the satisfaction of seeing Lomalindela's black skin turn a kind of slate colour, while his lips became a dirty blue-white.

For a few seconds the king stared stupidly at Machenga's dead body, as though he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes; then he turned to me and said:

"Truly, Chia'gnosi, thou art well named, for thy lightning has slain him who was as we have always known him, even when the oldest living man in Mashonaland was a boy running at his mother's heels. Why hast thou slain the chief of my witch doctors?"

"I slew him, O King," answered I, "because he was a liar, a cheat, a betrayer, and a murderer. He lied to thee and cheated thee by pretending that he could smell out thine enemies, whereas he possessed no such power; and he smelled out and caused to be destroyed Logwane, one of the most loyal and faithful of your indunas, because, after heavily bribing Machenga for several years, in order to obtain immunity, Logwane refused to submit to further robbery. And what he has done to Logwane he has, doubtless, done to many others of Your Majesty's loyal and faithful subjects."

"How knowest thou all this, Chia'gnosi," demanded the king; "and how am I to know that thy words are true?"

"Have I not proved it to thee by destroying Machenga?" retorted I. "Thinkest thou that if Machenga had been what he claimed to be I could have slain him? As to how I know it, my snake told me, and he never lies. And if thou dost still doubt me, question the indunas. Doubtless there are some among them whom thou canst trust, who will tell thee whether Logwane was true, or whether he was false to thee."

The king frowningly considered my proposition for a little, and finally, looking up, called Mapela to approach.

"Mapela," said Lomalindela, when the induna had drawn near and saluted, "I am perplexed, and know not what to believe. I can believe thy words, because I have proved thee, and know thee to be faithful and true. Thou didst know Logwane intimately; tell me, therefore, was he loyal to me, or was he not?"

"There was no man in all Mashonaland more faithful to thee than Logwane," answered Mapela.

"Yet Machenga smelled him out and caused him to be slain as an enemy of mine," the king reminded him.

"Do I not know it?" retorted the old man bitterly. "And if Machenga had smelled me out, I too should have been slain, although, as thou sayest, thou hast proved me and know me to be faithful and true! But thank thy snake, O Lomalindela, King of the Mashona, that Chia'gnosi saw the evil and falsehood that lurked in that black heart,"—pointing to the dead body of Machenga—"else would many another of thy friends—myself among the number, perchance—have died before yon sun sank behind the hills."

The king placed his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands for several minutes, evidently overwhelmed by a sense of profound perplexity. At length, however, he looked up again, and, still addressing Mapela, asked:

"And think ye, Mapela, that all those,"—pointing to the long array of slain—"suffered unjustly?"

"Nay," answered Mapela, "I am but a simple induna, knowing nothing save the art of warfare, and the way in which warriors should be trained in order to make good fighters of them. Who am I that I should presume to answer such a question? Ask Chia'gnosi; he is young, but he is very wise. Perhaps his wisdom may be able to answer thee. Ask him."

The king turned to me.

"Thou hast heard my question, Chia'gnosi, and Mapela's answer," said he. "Canst thou tell me what I want to know?"

"Listen to my words, O King," said I. "Last night, when the moon was so high in the heavens,"—I pointed to the approximate altitude of the planet—"Machenga came secretly and in disguise to my wagon, asking for gifts. I knew

not then who he was, nor did he say; indeed, he pretended to be a messenger from Machenga: but presently I knew him for Machenga himself, although I had never before seen him, and I set forth certain gifts, which I offered him. But he refused them, demanding as a gift one of my magic fire tubes; and when I refused him he went away, threatening me that to-day I should be sorry that I had refused him. Then I knew that it was no messenger, but Machenga himself who had visited me; and I knew the man for a liar and cheat. Thou dost ask whether all those slain suffered unjustly. I answer thee that they did! I know none of them save Logwane; but send thou and ascertain the names of the other indunas who have died to-day by the hands of the Slayers, and thou shalt find that, like Logwane, they were rich men, the half of whose riches would pass to Machenga; or they were men who had incurred Machenga's hatred. Let the smellers-out be brought before thee and questioned, and thou shalt find that it was by Machenga's orders that they smelled out the indunas. As for the others, it was necessary that a certain number of the common people should also die, else would the choice of the indunas have been too obvious."

"By the bones of my royal father, thy words, Chia'gnosi, are the words of wisdom, and I will do as thou sayest!" exclaimed the king. "Mapela, give orders that the smellers-out be brought before me."

Some ten minutes later the subordinate witch doctors, or "smellers-out", were called together and drawn up before the king, when, prompted by me, Mapela subjected the wretches to a searching cross-examination, with the result that my surmise was completely confirmed. It is not easy to shock a savage, but there could be no doubt that when the investigation was finished Lomalindela was shocked, not so much at the fact that a great deal of innocent blood had been shed, but that so many of his most loyal and devoted indunas had been removed, and could therefore no longer exercise their loyalty and fidelity on his behalf; and no one knows better than a savage autocrat the value of true loyalty and fidelity. He was distinctly perturbed at the disquieting thoughts that came crowding into his mind; and it was characteristic of him that he seemed more than half-inclined to blame me for what had happened—on the principle, I suppose, that but for me he would have known nothing about it, and would consequently have escaped the perturbation and disquiet which resulted from the revelation. At all events, when the revelation was complete, it was upon me that he turned, demanding sharply:

"And now, Chia'gnosi, having revealed the evil, reveal also the remedy."

"That, O Great, Great One, is easy," I replied. "Let there be no more smelling out, and there will be no more mistakes."

"No more smelling out?" he repeated. "Then how shall those who meditate evil against me be found?"

"They will not need to be found," I replied; "for if such there be, rest assured that they will betray themselves, even as Machenga betrayed himself to me. I repeat, let there be no more smelling out; but if any man be discovered meditating evil, let his accusers bring him before thee and bear witness against him, and if he be found guilty, let him suffer."

The king meditated upon this proposition at considerable length, and asked a multitude of questions before he appeared able to grasp the idea fully; but finally he seemed to apprehend my plan, and graciously announced his willingness to consider it. The "smelling out" function was thus brought to a somewhat premature conclusion—to the obvious relief of everybody except perhaps Lomalindela himself—and the troops were dismissed. But when I, too hastily assuming that everything was over, rose to take my leave and return to the wagon, I was imperiously ordered to stop. Upon resuming my seat I was thanked by the king in a somewhat perfunctory, half-hearted way for what I had done; but he added that my revelations had so upset him that he found it impossible to tolerate my presence in his country any longer, and he therefore begged me so to arrange matters that I could resume my journey that same afternoon. Naturally, I remonstrated against such discourteous treatment, reminding His Majesty that although the revelation was certainly mine, the evil-doing was Machenga's; and I wound up by saying that, so far from expecting to be expelled from the country, I had confidently reckoned upon being granted a concession to mine gold in Mashonaland. But it was all of no avail; it was through me that the upset had occurred, therefore out I must go—escorted by an impi, the induna of which would receive instructions to see that I did not unduly loiter on the way. And, as to gold, if I wanted that, the king strongly advised me to go to the Bandokolo country, far away to the north, where I would doubtless be able to obtain as much of the metal as I needed. After generously giving me this piece of valuable advice His Majesty curtly dismissed me, with the intimation that I must be prepared to start in the equivalent of two hours' time—or take the consequences of my disobedience. Upon which I, in turn, got angry, and, having told the king one or two plain truths in distinctly undiplomatic language, bade him an abrupt farewell and hastened back to the wagon.

We were quite ready to make a start, even to the extent of having the oxen inspanned, by the time that the escorting impi put in an appearance; and when it did I was thankful to discover that it was commanded by my friend Mapela.

"Au, Chia'gnosi!" the old chap exclaimed, as the impi halted and saluted, with great heartiness; "so thou art ready. It is well; for the Great, Great One is in an evil temper, and his face is black toward thee because thou hast spoiled the festival: therefore it will be good for thee to withdraw thyself from before his eyes as soon as possible. Which way go ye—forward or backward?"

"I go forward, Mapela," I replied. "I came to this country in the hope of obtaining gold, and gold I must have; therefore I am going forward to the country of the Bandokolo, where, so your king tells me, gold is to be obtained in great abundance."

"Wao! ma mè! the Bandokolo!" exclaimed the old fellow in great astonishment. "Know ye aught of the Bandokolo, or where they are to be found?" he demanded.

"Nay," answered I; "I know nothing of them, save that their country lies far to the north, and that they have much gold."

"That is true," returned Mapela. "Then, let us start, for delay is dangerous; and if we linger, the Great, Great One may change his mind and not suffer thee to go at all. Yonder is the way, up that valley. Give the word, Chia'gnosi. And, as we go, we can talk together; and if what I can tell thee should cause thee to change thy mind, we can take the road back on the other side of the mountains when we have passed through the valley."

He paused and left me for a moment while the wagon was getting into motion and the impi was forming up round it; then, when we were fairly under way, he came to my side again, and remarked:

"Au, Chia'gnosi! thine arrival at Gwanda was well timed; for many are still alive who, but for thee, would have lain dead in the great square before the setting of yonder sun. Did not I say that my snake told me thou wouldst save many lives? And thou hast done so; and mark thou this, Chia'gnosi, though to-day the king's face be black against thee, the people know what thou hast done; and henceforth thy name will be hlonipa among the Mashona." (Hlonipa means "unmentionable". To make a man's name hlonipa is the highest honour that the Kafirs can render the bearer; for it indicates that the name is regarded as too sacred, too highly venerated, to be spoken. Thus I subsequently learned that after my departure from the country the Mashona never mentioned Chia'gnosi (Smiter with Lightning), but, when they referred to me, spoke of "Him who slew with thunderbolts", or in some other more or less roundabout fashion evaded any direct use of the word lightning.)

"Well," I replied, "to be quite candid with you, Mapela, I believe it is a very good thing for the Mashona that Machenga is dead; and I am not sorry that he compelled me to kill him. Also I am glad that the king has promised to abolish the system of 'smelling out', for in the first place I do not in the least believe in it, and, in the next, it is perfectly evident that an unscrupulous scoundrel like Machenga would only be too likely to use it for his own vile purposes. And now let us talk about something else. Tell me, for instance, what you know about the Bandokolo, and whereabouts their country is situated."

"Their country lies yonder," answered Mapela, pointing a little to the west of north; "and it is a long way off. Thou wilt have to cross the Great River (Zambezi), and then travel through the wilderness for the space of a moon and a half, or, maybe, two moons, before thou wilt reach it. For myself, I have never been beyond the Great River; but many moons ago there came into Mashonaland a stranger who said that he had been one of a band accompanying a white man from afar, who, after much weary wandering, had arrived in the Bandokolo country, and had there died—how I know not. And when the white man died the Bandokolo took his followers and made slaves of them, treating them so cruelly that at last the man who told me these things resolved to escape. And after waiting many moons for an opportunity it came, and he succeeded. But when he arrived in Mashonaland he was so weak and ill with fever and starvation that, after lingering for a short time, he died.

"But before he died he told me many wonderful things about the Bandokolo. He said that they were little people, about so tall (indicating with his hand a stature of about four feet eight or nine inches). Also, that instead of being black, as I am, they are almost white; that they live in great houses dug out of the rocks of the hillside; that the men wear clothes made of small plates of gold, and carry spears, shields, and great knives made of gold; that they adorn themselves with shining stones which they dig out of the ground; and that they are all 'mkulu 'mtagati (great wizards)."

"That is a very extraordinary story, Mapela," said I. "Did you believe it; or do you think that the man who told you had a sick brain and imagined things that were not?"

"Nay, who can say?" returned Mapela. "As I have told you, the man was very sick when he reached Mashonaland; but I think his sickness was of the body, not of the mind: and he told me these things many times before he died, therefore I believed him."

I spent the best part of the afternoon in cross-questioning Mapela upon the exceedingly interesting and remarkable story which he had told me; but the old fellow stuck to his text so perfectly that at length I was forced to the conclusion that what he had told me was substantially what he had himself been told, and that if there was any falsehood or exaggeration in the yarn it was not he who was responsible for it. We outspanned that night at a distance of twelve good miles north-east of Gwanda, in a most beautiful valley full of lush grass, and beside the stream, now much diminished in volume, which we had been following ever since our passage of the Limpopo; and, I having shot an elephant about an hour before our arrival at the outspan, we all feasted royally that night, the impi building an enormous watch fire and squatting round it, stuffing themselves with elephant meat until they could eat no more.

Early in the forenoon of the eleventh day after our departure from Gwanda we reached the Zambezi, at a point where, by a stroke of good luck, the river chanced to be fordable; and, having got the wagon and all my other belongings safely across to the left bank, I immediately outspanned, and then proceeded to distribute liberal largesse among the subordinate officers of the impi, gave Mapela a specially handsome present, and so parted upon excellent terms from my Mashona friends, not without a qualm of regret and of wistful surmise as to my chances of ever again seeing them. Later on, after a meal and a rest, we again inspanned, and, trekking a few miles upstream, rounded the shoulder of a range of low hills and plunged into a valley stretching northward, with a small southward-flowing stream running through its centre and discharging into the Zambezi, upon which splendid river we now turned our backs. 'Mfuni, the man who had fought me by command of Lomalindela, and had afterwards attached himself to my train, exhibited some slight symptoms of regret at parting from his friends in the returning impi; but he quickly recovered from his fit of the blues, and, evidently being very fond of animals, devoted himself with zest to the task of making friends with the horses and dogs. Also the poor fellow speedily developed a most devoted attachment to myself, so arousing in Piet a feeling of profound jealousy and disgust which I only succeeded in dissipating with difficulty after the occurrence of several more or less serious quarrels between the pair.

During the three weeks that immediately followed our passage of the Zambezi, our route lay through a wilderness in which for days together we never saw a solitary human being. But this did not very greatly matter, for the country,

consisting for the most part of low, rolling hills, was well watered by streams which, flowing generally in a direction more or less north and south, we were able to follow day after day, while the grass was plentiful and of very good quality. Moreover, there was not much bush, which would have been to some extent a disadvantage but for the fact that, as we advanced, the game became so tame that we had very little difficulty in stalking it through the long grass. During this particular period of our journey we encountered very few elephants or big game of any kind, but antelope of various descriptions were abundant, so that we always had plenty of buck meat in the larder. Then, one day, scouting far ahead of the wagon, accompanied by Piet, 'Mfuni, and the dogs, I discovered that we were approaching a vast open plain, where the grass was not nearly so good. I therefore rode back a few miles, and, upon meeting the wagon, gave orders for a prolonged outspan at a suitable spot, so that the oxen, which were becoming thin from constant work, might have a few days' rest, and recover flesh in preparation for the journey across the plain.

We remained at that outspan five days, and when we resumed our journey I had every reason to regard the time as well spent; for as we pushed forward across the open plain the grass became so poor that, but for the period of rest and recuperation which I had allowed them, I am convinced that the oxen would never have accomplished the journey at all. Luckily for us, when we had lost three oxen, and the remainder had become little better than walking skeletons, we reached the other side of the plain, and once more came to good grass and water; and here we rested again for a week.

On the second day after the resumption of our trek, two mountains of almost perfect pyramidal form were sighted right ahead and apparently about fifty miles apart; and on the following day the flat, open plain gave place to undulating country, which gradually grew more rugged and park-like as we advanced, with good grass, small, detached patches of bush, and a few trees, singly or in clumps, scattered thinly here and there. But we soon noticed that, apart from the grass, the vegetation generally was new and strange, of a kind that none of us had ever before seen; the trees in particular being very curious and grotesque in shape, both as to their trunks and branches, and their foliage being of almost any other colour than green. In some cases the trees, notwithstanding their strange and abnormal configuration, were very beautiful, the large, heart-shaped leaves being of almost every conceivable tint of red, ranging from palest pink to a very deep, rich crimson, with great bunches of snow-white blossom; while at the opposite end of the scale, as it were, there occurred examples in which the trunks and branches were swollen, knotted, and twisted into the most extraordinary and uncouth shapes, while the foliage consisted of long, flat, ribbon-like streamers of a dirty brownish-grey hue, coated with an exudation the odour of which was offensive beyond the power of words to express. Fortunately for us, these last were comparatively rare, and we soon learned to give them plenty of room and to pass them to windward, where possible.

And here, too, we saw the first of several new and strange forms of animal life. As Piet and I were, as usual, riding forward some distance ahead of the wagon, we suddenly came upon a small herd of seven curious-looking animals, which we at first mistook for young giraffes; but as they stood gazing at us curiously, thus permitting us to approach within less than a hundred yards of them, we observed that while the creatures bore a certain general resemblance to giraffes, there were differences, the most important of which was that of size. For these creatures stood, at the shoulders, only about as high as an eland; the neck, although abnormally long, was not proportionately as long as that of a giraffe; the head was hornless, and of quite different shape from a giraffe's head; and, lastly, their colour was a deep, rich, ruddy brown on the head, shading gradually away along the body and legs until, about the fetlock, it became quite a pale buff. I shot one of them, and have the skin to this day, which has been a source of great interest and also a bit of a puzzle to several naturalists who have seen it, and who all declare it to have belonged to an animal of which they had no knowledge whatever. The flesh of the creature proved to be very tender and juicy, and my "boys" ate of it freely; but after trying a mouthful I decided that I did not care for it, the meat having a very strong and peculiar musky flavour which I found much the reverse of appetising.

And then, as an appropriate wind-up to a day that had been rich in surprises, while we were looking about for a suitable spot at which to outspan for the night, we came upon the first of the Bandokolo people, or rather, she—for it was a woman—came upon us. We were, at the moment, riding through a shallow depression, about half a mile wide, bordered on either side by rising, bush-clad ground that was scarcely high enough to be worthy of the name of hills, with a narrow, shallow rivulet on our right; and we had about decided that the spot where we had reined up would answer our purpose quite well, when the two dogs, Thunder and Juno, who had been following quietly enough at our horses' heels, suddenly ran forward a few paces and then stood pointing, uttering low, half-yelping, half-whining noises the while, as was their wont when they were puzzled. For a few moments I could see nothing to account for their excitement, and I was about to speak to them, when, looking forward, I suddenly saw something raise itself in the grass, remain visible for perhaps half a dozen seconds, and then sink down again. It was about a hundred yards from the spot where we had pulled up, and from the brief glimpse which I had obtained I almost thought that, strange as it might be, I had seen a child! To satisfy myself, therefore, I called to Piet, and, accompanied by the dogs, cantered forward toward the place where the strange apparition had appeared.

Chapter Fourteen.

Some Marvels of the Bandokolo Country.

Our horses had not advanced more than half a dozen strides when the strange-looking object again appeared and came stumbling toward us, and then we saw that it was indeed a human being, apparently a girl of about twelve years of age, from her stature. The first thing that I particularly observed was that her skin was a kind of brownish white, the next that she had a mop of black hair streaming loosely down over her shoulders; then I saw that she was half-naked, for the single garment in which she was clad was in such a tattered condition that all that remained of it was a few fluttering rags. It was evident that the poor creature was in the very last stages of exhaustion, for she reeled and staggered as she came toward us with outstretched, appealing arms; and presently, when we were still a few yards apart, with a low, wailing cry she fell prone and lay huddled up in a pathetic little heap in the long grass,

while the dogs dashed forward and stood alternately nuzzling her and looking up to us with plaintive whines. The next instant I swung out of my saddle, and, bending down, raised the unfortunate creature in my arms, when I saw, to my amazement, that she was evidently a full-grown woman, but of very diminutive stature, being only about four feet six inches in height. Moreover she was in a most shockingly emaciated condition, and on her back was a close network of scarcely healed scars, which looked as though they might have resulted from a most merciless scourging; and she was in a deep swoon, having apparently exhausted her last particle of strength in the endeavour to reach us.

Taking off my hat, I handed it to Piet, with instructions that he should fill it and his own at the brook, and return to me with all speed; and while he was gone I pulled off my jacket and wrapped the frail, senseless form in it. For I saw at once that this creature had not been accustomed, like the native women with whom I had thus far come in contact, to go about in such a state; the rags which still clung to her attenuated form showed that she habitually wore clothing, and there was a certain suggestion of refinement in the mould of her features that led me to the conclusion that she belonged to a race of people having some claim to be regarded as civilised, in their own peculiar fashion. In short, she answered in every respect to Mapela's description of the Bandokolo; and I had gathered, from what he said, that they were in some sort a civilised race.

It was a long time before we succeeded in restoring the poor creature to her senses, so long, indeed, that when at length she opened her eyes and began to look wonderingly about her, the wagon was close at hand. As soon, therefore, as it was within easy hailing distance I ordered Jan to outspan, instructed Piet to prepare my cartel, and, when the latter was ready, carried my patient to it and laid her upon it. Then, having shot a buck earlier in the day, we started a fire and set to work to prepare some good strong broth, which, when it was ready, I administered, with seemingly good effect, for when the woman had partaken of it she spoke a word or two which sounded like an enquiry. But I could make nothing of it, nor could Piet, whereupon 'Mfuni came forward, and presently he contrived to hit upon a kind of Bantu dialect which the woman understood. And then, when we had satisfied her curiosity as to who we were, where we came from, and whither we were going, and had assured her that we were friends and that she might regard herself as perfectly safe with us, she informed us, in turn, that she was of the Bandokolo, and that she had been driven out of the country—the border of which was then one day's march distant—for some offence. This she was endeavouring to explain, when she sank back exhausted upon the cartel, and again fell into a swoon.

It soon became evident that the unfortunate little creature was in a most critical condition, from the combined effects, as I supposed, of fiendish ill treatment, violent exertion, and insufficient nourishment; and we were kept busy all that night reviving her from swoon after swoon, and in the preparation and administration of strong broth, with which to combat the terrible prostration that was her most alarming symptom. Toward morning, however, she seemed to revive a little, and after absorbing another liberal dose of broth, slightly dashed with brandy, she complained of weariness, and soon afterward sank into a deep sleep, from the restorative effects of which I hoped much. But of course the idea of continuing our trek that day was quite out of the question; we therefore remained where we were, and I set Jan and 'Ngulubi to look after the oxen and see that they came to no harm, while Piet, 'Mfuni, and I devoted ourselves to the task of looking after the invalid, though, goodness knows, our ignorance of everything connected with the leech's art was so complete that we could do nothing more than pour into her all the nourishment that she could be persuaded to absorb.

And I am afraid that it was this lamentable ignorance of ours that was responsible for her condition when she awoke about ten o'clock in the morning. For after tossing restlessly upon the cartel for about half an hour, she suddenly sat up, and stared about her with glassy, terrorstricken eyes, and began to mutter rapidly to herself; and upon feeling her pulse I found that it was throbbing furiously; also her skin was dry, and scorching hot: in short, it was evident that she was in a state of high fever closely bordering on delirium. We improved matters a little by withdrawing the cartel from beneath the close, suffocatingly hot tent of the wagon, and placing it on the grass, in the shadow of the wagon, where the soft breeze could play freely upon the patient, also by swathing her head in towels which were kept continually dripping wet; and after about an hour of this treatment the fever so far abated as to permit her to talk coherently, when she told us her story, to the following effect.

"My name," said she, "is Siluce, and I am of the Bandokolo. I am two hundred and twenty-five moons (a little more than seventeen years) old; and my father, Mindula, is one of the most powerful chiefs of the nation. A little more than fifteen moons ago he used his influence to secure me what is greatly coveted and regarded as a very high honour in Bandokolo, namely a position in the household of Bimbane, the queen. And for a time all went well, and I was happy, although Bimbane—who is so old that no man living knows how old she is—is very severe, tyrannical, and cruel to all those who are brought into contact with her. Then, six moons ago, I met Anuti, one of the captains of the queen's guard, and we learned to love each other. Four moons passed, and then, in accordance with the custom of our country, Anuti presented himself before the queen, and besought her permission to make me his wife.

"Now, Anuti is one of the most splendid men of the Bandokolo: he is three hundred and seventeen moons (nearly twenty-four and a half years) old; in stature he stands a full head taller than myself; he is a valiant warrior, a clever hunter; and he has royal blood in his veins, for his father's father's father was the son of a prince of the royal house, and was said to be a tenth cousin of Bimbane, the queen."

"But," I interrupted, at this point, "how could that be? The prince from whom Anuti descended must have lived—let me see—yes, more than one thousand six hundred moons ago. Surely your queen is not so old as that!"

"Ah, but she is, and infinitely older!" answered Siluce. "No man knows how old she is; there is no record of her birth and parentage; she has been queen of the Bandokolo for unnumbered ages."

"Oh, but that is nonsense, you know!" I retorted; "unless of course your records have been very badly kept. Why, in my country, if a man lives to be thirteen hundred moons old we regard him as a marvel. Surely your queen cannot be older than that?"

"Yes," answered Siluce; "indeed she is. You do not understand. Bimbane is a great magician, who keeps herself alive

by certain secret arts unknown to the rest of us. And she does so, not only because she fears to die, but also because she is persuaded that somewhere in the world there is—or will be—a man who, if she can find him and induce him to become her spouse, will restore to her her long-lost youth and all the joy of life that she once knew. It is the great desire of her life to find this man, and no sooner did she see Anuti than the thought arose that he might be the one through whom she would attain the fulfilment of her desires; and by the exercise of her magic she stole his heart from me, and induced him to wed her. And because I protested she first caused me to be publicly whipped, and then ordered me to leave the country, saying that at sunrise of the following day she would send forth hunters to seek for and destroy me if they found me. And, knowing that Bimbane would keep her word, I fled forthwith, all smarting from my whipping as I was, and made southward, avoiding all villages on my way, and following the most lonely bypaths that I could find. For just half a moon have I maintained a continuous flight, living on such fruit and other food as I chanced to come upon while pursuing my way, hiding whenever I saw man or woman, and scarce daring to rest or sleep lest savage beasts or the still more savage hunters should come upon and slay me. And now all my strength has gone; the hardships of my flight have sapped my life; and naught remains for me but to die, glad that I am permitted to pass painlessly in your hands rather than by those of the cruel hunters, who would drain the last remnant of my miserable life from me by slow torture!" And as the unhappy creature uttered the last words she threw up her hands with a gesture of despair and burst into a passion of hysterical weeping which I made no effort to check, hoping that thus she might gain relief to her overwrought feelings.

But instead of that happening, the thoughts and memories which had been awakened during the recital of her terrible experiences only increased her excitement, until in the course of half an hour the unhappy girl was fighting us and screaming in high delirium. Yet through it all there was one idea that seemed to haunt her, for later on, during a comparatively quiet period, she looked up into my face, and, seizing me by the hand, said:

"O wonderful white man, great and strong, you are going to Masakisale,"—the capital of Bandokolo—"and will see Bimbane. Take notice, and you will see that on the thumb of her right hand she wears a ring in which is set a wonderful stone that shines like the sun at eventide. That stone is a magic stone, a potent amulet, by virtue of which she is able to do many marvellous things, and, among others, to win the hearts of men. Some think that it is the possession of that stone which enables her to prolong her life indefinitely. If it were taken from her, and she were to die, all Bandokolo would rejoice; for Bimbane is a cruel tyrant, grinding down the people, and making the lives of many an intolerable burden to them. There have been those who have sought to take the stone from her, but by the power of her magic she has discovered their purpose and has destroyed them. But it may be that her magic will have no power over you, O white man; therefore, if you can, take from her that stone, and so deliver Bandokolo from her merciless tyranny. You will do it? Promise me."

"I promise you, Siluce, that, if I can, I will take the stone from her," I answered, more to soothe the unhappy little creature's consuming anxiety, I must confess, than with any serious intention at that moment of fulfilling my promise. I meant well, and I was glad to see that my promise had produced a beneficial effect, for her agitation gradually subsided, and a little later, after partaking of more broth, she sank into a slumber that, uneasy at first, gradually became quiet and profound.

But the improvement was only of brief duration, for in little more than an hour she was again awake and raving in high delirium, fighting with us more fiercely than ever, under the impression, apparently, that we were the hunters who had been sent out to destroy her. Fortunately, I possessed a very fair knowledge of the Bantu dialect that she seemed to understand, and, using this, I did my utmost to soothe her and calm her fears. But all my efforts were worse than unavailing, for they only seemed to increase her terror; moreover, she appeared now to have become raving mad: therefore, in despair, and because I saw that in her struggles with us she was rapidly wearing out what little strength remained to her, I suddenly released my hold upon her, and bade Piet and 'Mfuni do the same; whereupon she sprang from the cartel and dashed off down the valley with the speed of a hunted deer. There was nothing for it, of course, but to follow, and this I did on horseback, with Piet and the dogs accompanying me. We proceeded at an easy canter, taking care to maintain a good distance, so that she might not be conscious of being followed, but just keeping her in sight; and in this fashion the poor, demented creature ran quite two miles before she fell exhausted.

When we came up to where she lay, we found her doubled up in the long grass, apparently senseless, but moaning pitifully; and again, as on the previous day, I sent Piet off to the river for water with which to restore her. But all our efforts were vain, for in less than half an hour after we had come to her the unhappy girl died, without recovering consciousness. As soon as I was quite sure that she was dead I mounted my horse, and, bidding Piet place the poor scarred, emaciated corpse in my arms, rode back to the wagon; and, procuring the necessary tools, I dug a grave in which we laid the poor inanimate body to rest, covering it well with big boulders from the river to protect it from the ravages of the jackals and hyenas. Then, notwithstanding that it was by this time late in the afternoon, we inspanned and trekked a good ten miles up the valley; for there is nothing that a South African savage fears much more than a grave, and I knew that nothing would have induced my "boys" to pass the night within half a dozen miles of poor Siluce's last resting place.

Two days later, about mid-afternoon, we outspanned close to the headwaters of the small stream, the course of which we had been following for so many days. It had its source in the slopes of the more eastern of the two mountains toward which we had been travelling, and we outspanned at the very base of the mountain and close to the margin of the rivulet, which at this point had dwindled to a width that I could easily leap across. And now, having arrived at a point where this particular stream would be of no further service to us, our first business, before continuing our journey, must be to find another stream, flowing northward in a direction corresponding generally with that which we desired to pursue. Accordingly, as there still remained to us some three hours of daylight, Piet and I, accompanied by 'Mfuni, who had by this time learned to sit a horse, set out upon a short exploring expedition northward.

The spot upon which the wagon was outspanned was at the extremity of the south-western slope of the mountain, almost on the northernmost extremity of a wide, flat plain; and from this position, looking northward, we saw that the

country again presented a somewhat broken appearance, with high ground to the right and left, and something in the nature of a valley directly ahead. And, a valley being obviously the place where one would most naturally expect to find water, it was toward the entrance to this one that we wended our way, with the steep slope of the mountain, shaggy with thickly growing timber, of strange forms and still stranger colours, on our right.

As it happened, we were exceptionally fortunate in our exploration on this occasion, for we had not ridden more than six miles when, issuing from the northern slope of the mountain, the base of which we had been skirting, we discovered another rivulet, very similar in character to that near which we had left the wagon outspanned, and upon tasting the water we found it to be deliciously sweet and cool; moreover, the stream was flowing northward, or precisely in the direction toward which we wished to travel. We followed the course of the stream for a distance of some four miles down the valley, and then, finding that it continued to flow northward, and showed a tendency to increase in volume, being fed by other small brooks flowing into it here and there, we turned our horses' heads and cantered back to the wagon, very well satisfied with the result of our ride.

Inspanning at dawn the next morning, we easily accomplished the trek from the headwaters of the stream we were leaving behind us to those of the stream which we intended to follow before the heat of the day had fairly set in, outspanning at length, about eleven o'clock in the morning, in a nicely wooded, shady valley, which gradually widened as we progressed, with the stream on our left and rising ground on both sides of us. Here we allowed the oxen to rest and graze for nearly three hours, resuming our journey about half-past two o'clock in the afternoon.

As usual, Piet and I, on horseback and accompanied by the two dogs, preceded the wagon, the pace of the horses, even at a walk, being so much faster than that of the slower-moving oxen that we generally managed to find ourselves at least two or three miles ahead by the time that a suitable spot for the next outspan was reached. But upon this occasion I was desirous of exploring our route for some little distance ahead; therefore, upon mounting, we put our horses into an easy canter, and soon left the wagon out of sight and hearing behind us. Proceeding in this fashion, with an occasional rein-up to breathe our horses, we found ourselves, in the course of an hour and a half, about ten miles from our starting-point, in the midst of a beautifully wooded, park-like plain about five miles in width, with the stream, now considerably augmented in volume, purling musically over a shingly bed on the eastern margin of the plain, and the high land, rising by this time almost to the dignity of hills, still shutting us in on either hand.

The spot which we had reached seemed well enough adapted for our nightly outspan, therefore Piet proceeded to mark the spot by setting up our usual signal, which was a small branch of a tree, with its leaves attached, broken from the parent stem and stuck upright in the soil. This would at once arrest the attention of Jan, the Hottentot driver, upon his arrival at the spot; and seeing it, he would outspan, even if we chanced to be elsewhere when he arrived. Then, mounting again, we resumed our journey down the valley, in search of something wherewith to replenish our empty larder.

At a distance of some five miles farther down the valley we secured what we wanted, having come quite unexpectedly, while our horses were walking, upon a herd of black antelope, among them a number of half-grown fawns, one of which I managed to bowl over before they had sufficiently recovered from their surprise to get away; and having secured our prize upon the back of Piet's horse, behind his saddle, we proceeded to retrace our steps leisurely. But we had scarcely covered a mile upon our backward way when we became aware of certain strange roaring and grunting sounds, of a kind quite new to us, apparently proceeding from the far side of a big clump of bush which lay at a distance of a short quarter of a mile on our right front. Curious to learn what could be the origin of those strange sounds, we turned our horses' heads in that direction, and a few minutes later, upon rounding the extremity of the clump, we came upon a most extraordinary sight.

The scene was an open glade of about four acres in extent, bordered by trees, among which were a few specimens of the kind described in the preceding chapter, with weirdly shaped, swollen, knotted, and twisted trunks and branches, and long, flat, ribbon-like streamers of leaves, coated with a vile-smelling exudation. But it was not so much the glade itself—strange as was its appearance, with its weird-looking vegetation—that attracted our attention, as what was being enacted in it. For away toward one edge of it was a big boulder, on the top of which crouched the figure of—was it a woman, or a monkey? The creature seemed to partake about equally of the characteristics of both; she was entirely unclothed, her whole body was covered with short, thick, golden-brown hair, that on her head being much longer than that on the rest of her body, while her features might be described as very human-looking for a monkey, or very monkeyfied for a human being. But I noticed that her arms were disproportionately long, as compared with those of a woman; and a further glance revealed that her feet had a distinct resemblance to hands, her great toes looking very much more like thumbs.

It was not from her, however, that the roaring and grunting sounds emanated—for she sat quite silent—but from two males of her own species, who, in the middle of the arena, were engaged in deadly combat, using their hands, feet, and teeth as weapons, which they employed with most ferocious energy. Gripping each other by the throat with the left hand, apparently with the twofold purpose of strangling and preventing the opponent from biting, while with the right fist they battered each other savagely, occasionally using the right foot in an endeavour to throw each other, the combatants—both of whom stood well over six feet high—whirled hither and thither with astounding agility, so completely occupied with each other—and the female so absorbed in watching them—as to be utterly oblivious of our presence there on the edge of the arena, partially concealed beneath the shadow of the trees.

For several minutes they fought thus, locked together in a deadly grip; then, as though by mutual consent, they drew apart a few paces, evidently for the purpose of recovering their breath, glaring ferociously at each other meanwhile, and uttering low, deep, rumbling, snarling growls: and the tremendous energy which they must have expended during the struggle was abundantly evidenced by the convulsive heaving of their great, hairy chests. Then suddenly they rushed at each other again, and became locked in a deadly embrace, each fixing his strong, fang-like teeth deeply in the shoulder of the other, and each apparently striving to crush the body of the other in the grip of his great, hairy arms, the enormously powerful muscles of which could be plainly seen working beneath the skin. To and fro they swayed, still tightly locked together, growling and snapping at each other with such deadly ferocity that in a

few moments the blood was streaming copiously from their lacerated shoulders and arms; and then one, apparently the younger of the two, succeeded in throwing his opponent violently to the ground. The shock seemed partially to stun the thrown one for a few seconds, and of this his opponent took instant advantage by flinging himself astride upon his antagonist's body, pinning his arms down by kneeling upon them, and gripping his throat with both hands in a throttling grasp that soon reduced his enemy to a condition of utter helplessness. Then, rising heavily and somewhat unsteadily to his feet, the conqueror glared about him for a moment, and, seeming to see what he was looking for, stooped over his insensible foe, seized him by an arm and a leg, and, lifting him above his head, went staggering across the open space toward one of the weird-looking trees already mentioned, into the foliage of which he flung the body. And forthwith, to our unspeakable horror, the long, sticky, ribbon-like leaves, sensitive as those of a mimosa, seized and wrapped themselves about the body, until, in less time than it takes to tell, it was so completely enveloped that nothing of it was to be seen, while the leaves of the tree—which was only about fourteen feet high—had formed themselves into a great, horrible, tightly compressed mass, in which I seemed to detect, for the space of a minute or two, signs of an internal struggle. Meanwhile, the conqueror, having thus effectually and terribly disposed of his foe, went reeling and staggering over to where the female sat impassively upon the boulder, seized her roughly by the arm, and dragged her, unresisting, into the depths of the wood, where we soon lost sight of them.

Speechless with horror for the moment, even more at the demoniacal ferocity displayed by the combatants than at the weird ghastliness of the manner in which the fight had ended, I signed to Piet, and, wheeling our horses, we galloped away from the scene of the tragedy, nor drew rein again until we reached the wagon, which was in the act of being outspanned. Then, dismounting, I beckoned to 'Mfuni, related what we had seen, and asked him whether he had ever heard of such creatures as those men, or monkeys, that Piet and I had beheld fighting. But 'Mfuni shook his head and replied in the negative; he had never before been anything like so far north, and his knowledge of the Bandokolo country, it appeared, was even less than that which I had gained from Mapela.

In the course of the next day's trek we passed close to the scene of the combat, and, for the satisfaction of my curiosity, I made a point of carefully examining the tree into which the body of the vanquished had been thrown. The leaves were still bunched tightly together; but I observed that the mass thus formed was distinctly smaller than it had been when I last looked upon it, and I believed I could guess pretty accurately at the process which was going on within it. I felt very strongly disposed to have the tree cut down and subjected to examination; but there were two strong arguments against this, one being the overpowering carrion-like effluvium which the tree exhaled, while the other was Piet's point-blank refusal to have anything to do with such an attempt.

On this day we saw two new species of animals, one being a hyena nearly twice as big as any that I had hitherto seen, and of quite different marking, the ground colour of its skin being very similar to that of the lion, while it had a black head, a distinct black mane, a broad black line running along its spine from the base of the skull to the tail, and an alternation of black stripes and irregular blotches upon the whole of its body except the under part, which was white. We came rather suddenly upon a pack of eleven of these creatures disputing possession of the carcass of a buffalo with a flock of vultures, and were therefore afforded an excellent opportunity to note carefully their peculiarities before they made off, which they did slowly and unwillingly, uttering the most dreadful maniacal laughs as they went. The other creature was a kind of jackal, as big as a full-grown leopard, with a splendid coat of long, fine, glossy black fur. This beast broke cover about fifty yards away from us, and, unlike the rest of his species, instead of beating a hasty retreat upon seeing us, turned promptly and attacked us with indescribable fury. Luckily, I had my rifle ready, and shot the brute dead as he was in the very act of leaping at Prince's throat; and it was well that I did so, for upon examining him we found that he was possessed of a set of terrible fangs, capable of inflicting dreadful injuries had he been afforded the chance. We stripped off his hide, and left the carcass to the vultures to dispose of, which they did with commendable promptitude, as Jan subsequently informed us when we rejoined him at the next outspan. We also saw in the distance, on that same day, a herd of about thirty elephants; but I did not attempt to interfere with them, as I hoped that before long I should have something even more valuable than ivory with which to load the wagon.

As we proceeded, the country steadily became more broken and irregular, the hills higher and more precipitous, with frequent outcrops of enormous granite boulders and towering cliffs of felspar, from the interstices of which sprang strange and beautiful ferns, interspersed with bushes bearing flowers of remarkable shapes and the most splendid colours. The trees, too, grew more closely together: the streams increased in number, many of them pouring down the face of the cliffs in the form of waterfalls, which dissolved into spray and mist long before they reached the bottom, veiling the dark and rugged rocks in soft clouds of delicate vapour reflecting every hue of the rainbow. In short, with every mile of our advance the scenery grew more wildly and romantically beautiful, yet withal there were spots, deep narrow glens and ravines shut in by towering cliffs and overshadowing trees, where the effect was as weird as a scene copied from Dante's *Inferno*, and in the midst of which one felt that the strangest happenings would have excited no surprise.

It was in the midst of such a scene that we again encountered the gigantic man-like monkeys, which, I subsequently learned, formed part of the fauna peculiar to this remarkable country. There were two of them this time, a male and a female, and they were coming toward us when we sighted them. The instant that they caught sight of us, the female turned and ran for the face of the nearest cliff, which she scaled with incredible agility; but the male halted and stood his ground, evidently prepared to dispute our passage, if necessary, and to cover his companion's retreat. But I had no fancy for engaging in a fight with a creature which was such a strange and unnatural compound of man and beast. I therefore spoke a word to Piet, and we reined up; whereupon the creature, after much snarling, growling, and baring of teeth, slowly retreated, following his mate, but keeping a wary eye upon us meanwhile, until he too reached the foot of the cliff, when, with a parting snarl of defiance, he climbed the vertical face of the rock with an agility no less extraordinary than that displayed by his mate.

I learn some interesting Particulars concerning the Queen.

It was a little after ten o'clock on the following morning when Piet and I, mounted as usual, and riding about a mile ahead of the wagon, emerged from a narrow, winding gorge, hemmed in on either hand by stupendous, almost vertical, cliffs, drawn so closely together that, riding though we were beside the margin of the river, there was little more than bare room for us to travel abreast. It was not until we rounded a bend in the gorge that we knew how near we were to the end of it; and the sight which then greeted our eyes caused me to utter a shout of delight: for before us, at a distance of a short quarter of a mile, was the extremity of the gorge, a mere narrow slit between two mighty walls of overhanging sandstone, through which we caught a glimpse of an open, grassy, sun-bathed plain, the long rich grass billowing to the sweep of a fresh breeze, and its wide stretches of level surface darkened here and there with the rich purple shadows of slow-moving clouds, promising a welcome change from the close, suffocating, enervating, insect-haunted atmosphere of the gorge. And as a background to this breezy, sunlit scene, there towered high into the air, at a distance of some ten miles, a magnificent sweep of lofty mountains, rugged and broken of outline, tree-clad to their summits, and gleaming like emeralds in the strong blaze of the morning sun.

With another shout of delight I pressed my heels to Prince's ribs, and three minutes later Piet and I trotted gaily out through the mouth of the gorge into the sunlit plain—to find ourselves confronted by a troop of some fifty of the most extraordinary-looking warriors I had ever seen, who had evidently been lying *perdu* in waiting for us behind the screen of towering rocks that formed the gateway, as it were, of the gorge.

They were little fellows, about the height of a well-grown English boy of ten years of age, but that they were full-grown men was evidenced by the luxuriant beards and moustaches which they all wore; indeed, one of them, their leader, appeared to be well advanced in years, for his hair and beard were dashed here and there with grey. It was a little difficult to judge what their natural complexion might be, for they were all deeply tanned by the sun, but I imagined it could be very little darker than my own, for I was as deeply bronzed as any of them, as I could see by a glance at my own sunburnt hands. They were clad in a uniform consisting of a sleeveless shirt that looked as though made of white thick silk, over which was worn a kind of tunic of fine scale armour, which gleamed and flashed in the sun as though made of gold—as indeed it afterwards proved to be. On their heads they wore plumed helmets of the same precious metal; their legs were bare, save for a kind of buskin made of leather, coloured white, reaching to just below the knee; they were armed with a short, broad-bladed sword, and a round target or shield, finely embossed, also made of gold; and they were mounted on zebras, the trappings of which were thickly studded with small gold bosses, the saddles consisting of thickly rolled blankets of some soft material strapped over big saddle cloths of crimson silk, edged with stout gold cord and adorned at the corners with tassels of gold bullion. There was a standard-bearer with them whose trappings were even richer and more ornate than those of the rank and file, and who bore aloft upon a slender lance a small standard of crimson silk, deeply edged with gold fringe, and beautifully emblazoned in gold thread with a device which seemed to be a hieroglyphic of some sort, of which I could make nothing.

Upon finding ourselves thus suddenly confronted with this extraordinary array, we promptly reined our horses back upon their haunches, while I with equal promptitude unslung my rifle and brought it to the "present", more by instinct than anything else, for of course the idea of successfully resisting fifty of even such little fellows as these, if they were evilly disposed toward us and were possessed of only ordinary courage, was absurd. But their chief, or leader, quickly set our minds at rest, for without moving from his place in the front of his troop he threw up his right hand and exclaimed, in a rather high-pitched voice, and in the Bantu dialect with which I happened to be acquainted:

"Nay, mighty and noble lord, slay us not with thy lightnings, I pray thee, for we mean naught but good to thee and thine! I, Pousa, captain of the queen's bodyguard, have been dispatched by Bimbane, the Deathless One, the Possessor of all Knowledge, the Reader of all Secrets, the High and Mighty Queen of the Bandokolo, to bid thee welcome to her country and to conduct thee in all honour to her gracious presence."

"It is well, O Pousa, and I thank you," answered I, as I lowered my rifle. "But tell me, I pray you, how came Bimbane to know that it is my purpose to visit her, and how came you to know where you would find me?"

"The queen knows all things; there is no secret hidden from her," answered Pousa simply. "She has long known of thy coming and the reason for it, and at first she was minded to destroy thee and thy following and seize all thy belongings. Then she changed her mind and determined to forbid thine entrance into her country. And now, quite recently, she has again changed her mind, and has decided to receive thee in peace, with all honour. She it was who directed me how and when to come and where to lie in wait for thee. Ay, she even knows that Siluce, the outlawed rebel, went out upon the Dark Path from thine arms."

"The dickens she does!" exclaimed I in English, in the height of my astonishment. "Nay, but how can that be, seeing that no one has passed from me to her to tell her so?" I continued in Bantu.

"It matters not, she knows," answered Pousa; adding, with just a touch of impatience: "Do I not tell thee that she knows all things?"

"Yes," I answered, "you certainly tell me so, but—"

I checked myself abruptly, realising that I was on the point of saying something that might easily be construed as offensive. "It will give me great pleasure to make the acquaintance of your queen," I continued; "for a woman who possesses such an extraordinary gift of knowledge must be very well worth knowing. There are one or two matters upon which I am badly in need of reliable information. Perhaps she may be induced to give me that information?"

"She will, without doubt—if it so pleases her," answered Pousa. "But," he continued, "where is thy house that travels, being drawn of oxen, and where are the rest of thy followers? The queen told me that there were with thee four black ones, and that—"

"My wagon—which you call a house that travels—and the remaining three of my followers are behind," I answered. "They will doubtless be with us in the course of a few minutes. I shall outspan here, so that my oxen may rest in the shade of the gorge. Will you not direct your men to dismount and rest their zebras? We shall not resume our march for about three hours."

Pousa regarded me for a moment, a little doubtfully I thought; then as I calmly dismounted and turned Prince over to Piet to be off-saddled, the little soldier gave a few crisp orders, in a tongue of which I was ignorant, and his troopers at once dismounted, stripped their zebras of their trappings, hobbled them, and turned them loose to graze; then the men, arranging themselves in small parties, proceeded to open their ration sacks and refresh themselves with a meal consisting, as I noticed, of sun-dried meat and small cakes. Pousa very politely invited me to share his ration with him; but as I just then caught the sounds of Jan's shrieks to his oxen, and the cracking of his long whip, I as politely declined, inviting him in return to defer his meal for a time and join me at luncheon, which invitation he eagerly accepted, somewhat to my surprise, I confess, seeing that the little chap could not possibly guess what kind of food he would be offered, or whether he would like it when it was placed before him.

A few minutes later the wagon arrived and was outspanned, its appearance exciting the utmost curiosity and admiration of the Bandokolo, who, I now learned, had never before seen a wheeled vehicle, and were profoundly interested when I endeavoured to explain the principle of the wheel to them. But they were infinitely more interested and amazed when 'Mfuni, having collected a quantity of dry leaves and sticks with which to build a fire, came to me, and, receiving from me the burning-glass which I habitually carried in my pocket, calmly proceeded to kindle the fire with its aid as usual, it being our regular practice to economise our flint and steel as much as possible by never using it when a burning-glass could be made to serve the same purpose. The Bandokolo, it appeared, used fire for a number of purposes, but possessed no knowledge of how to produce it, and were therefore obliged to conserve it by keeping lamps perpetually burning; and I could readily understand that, as Pousa explained, there were occasions when, as in times of violent storm and heavy rain, they were put to the gravest inconvenience through their inability to convey a lighted lamp from one place to another.

While we were partaking of luncheon—for which, by the way, Pousa displayed great relish, after regarding the roast deer flesh for a moment or two rather dubiously—I endeavoured to pump my guest with regard to the character and disposition of Her Majesty Queen Bimbane; but I found the old fellow rather inclined to be reticent upon the subject, and uneasy when I began to question him, the reason being—as he presently informed me furtively in a whisper—that, as likely as not, the queen would be with us in spirit, listening to our conversation, and that he had no wish to offend the lady by affording information that she would perhaps prefer should be withheld. Despite his disinclination to talk, however, I contrived to extract a little information from him, learning, among other things, that I was not the first white man who had been permitted to enter the Bandokolo country, one other having arrived when Pousa was quite a young man, and died somewhat mysteriously soon afterward. I was also given to understand that the Bandokolo generally strongly objected to strangers visiting them, and were indeed in the habit of resorting to the most drastic measures for preventing such visits, or, at all events, for preventing the departure of unwelcome visitors from their country alive. As for Bimbane, what little I could induce him to say about her only went to confirm the astounding account of her that Siluce had given; and I confess that once or twice during the progress of that conversation I very seriously asked myself whether, after all, it would not be wiser on my part to turn back there and then, instead of pushing on any farther into so extraordinary a country, and placing myself in the power of so extraordinary a woman. But I do not like to be beaten, and could not bring myself to abandon my purpose ignominiously after having come so far; therefore about two o'clock in the afternoon I gave the order to inspan, and we resumed our journey.

Still closely following the course of the river across the open plain, Pousa and I rode side by side at the head of the cavalcade, with the wagon bringing up the rear; and I soon found that, apart from anything relating to Queen Bimbane, my companion was quite willing to be communicative, telling me many things of an exceedingly interesting nature with regard to his extraordinary country. I was naturally anxious to know whether gold and "shining stones" were as plentiful as I had been led to believe, and I was gratified to learn that they were, gold indeed being so abundant that it was used for every purpose where metal was needed, the Bandokolo having learned to harden and temper it in such a manner that it afforded a very fair substitute for steel, in proof of which he showed me his sword. I took the weapon in my hands, examined it, and found that it was made entirely of hardened gold, and that it had been treated in such a manner as not only to possess a certain elasticity but also to be capable of receiving a fairly sharp edge. The scales of their armour, I was told, were also treated in the same way, and were so hard that it was impossible to pierce them either with sword or spear. Then I exhibited my hunting knife, which excited Pousa's highest admiration, and also a certain amount of apprehension when, of set purpose, I casually mentioned my conviction that I could drive the blade through the best scale armour that the Bandokolo could produce. "Shining stones", also, it seemed, were fairly abundant, but they had no particular use for these excepting as adornments, the stones being admired because of the extreme brilliancy with which they reflected light and colour.

We had been trekking a little more than an hour when, suddenly, without the least warning, an enormous two-horned rhinoceros hove himself up out of the long grass about a hundred and fifty yards in front of us, and stood regarding us doubtfully, with his little eyes gleaming and his tail switching angrily. At this unexpected apparition we all drew bridle, as with one accord, to await developments, while I quickly unslung my rifle and prepared for action. I could not help noticing that Pousa viewed the creature with considerable trepidation, while as for the troopers in our rear, with one accord they wheeled their zebras, with the evident intention of making a bolt if necessary. And that it would be necessary soon became evident, for rhino, instead of being alarmed at our imposing display of force, and making himself scarce, was clearly annoyed at our presumption in daring to disturb him; and presently he lowered his head and, with loud squeals of rage, came charging straight down upon us, whereupon our escort incontinently dug their heels into the ribs of their frightened zebras and dashed off, scattering in all directions, to my intense amusement. But the wagon was not very far in our rear, and if rhino were allowed to get past us, and should choose to attack it, he might easily play havoc with my diminished team of oxen; therefore, hastily dismounting, lest Prince, despite his training, should flinch and swerve at the critical moment and so spoil my aim, I raised my rifle to my shoulder, and,

waiting until the now thoroughly exasperated beast was within ten yards of me, fired and sent a bullet through his right eye into the brain, bowling him over like a rabbit. Then, quickly reloading my rifle, I quietly waited for Pousa to rejoin me, which he presently did, after re-forming his scattered command, without seeming to be in the slightest degree abashed at his desertion of me.

Approaching me with considerable circumspection, as I stood over the fallen brute, with Prince beside me, he raised his right hand and saluted, as he exclaimed:

"Truly, white lord, thou art well named Smiter with Lightning, for I beheld the flash wherewith thou didst slay this fierce and terrible beast, before whose anger not even the bravest warrior of the Bandokolo may stand! Thou art as mighty a wizard as the Deathless One, for thou canst slay without fighting, even as she can."

"It is true, Pousa, I can," answered I, willing to avail myself to the utmost of the opportunity that had been afforded me to display my power. "But," I continued, "who told thee that I was named Smiter with Lightning?"

"Who but the Wise One, even Bimbane, the queen?" retorted Pousa, in tones which seemed to suggest: "Who else do you suppose it can possibly have been?"

"Not only did she tell me how thou wert called, but she described thee to me, told me of thy huge stature and immense strength, how thou wert clothed, the wonderful weapon from which thou dost discharge thy lightnings, and even the great black beast which thou dost bstride!"

I fell into a rather uneasy reverie. Could this man be by any possibility telling the truth? The story was so astounding, so utterly incredible—and yet it was told so simply, and with such an utter lack of all straining after effect: the man made no attempt to impress me with the marvel of it all; his tone and manner were those of one who told of the most matter-of-fact, everyday occurrences. Besides, if he were not telling the truth, how could he possibly have come to know the name which had been given me by Lomalindela, the King of the Mashona?—for I was perfectly certain that he had had no opportunity to learn it from either of my own "boys."

But if this and the other things that he had told me concerning Bimbane were indeed true, she must be a most extraordinary woman, endowed with strange and wonderful powers, and it might be that I should find her rather more than I could manage before I had done with her. To admit the possibility that she might indeed possess such uncanny powers led inevitably toward several very unpleasantly suggestive reflections; but with an effort I threw them off, for I had already determined to go through with the adventure, and would not allow myself to be diverted from my purpose by the thought of any possibilities, however unpleasant. Therefore I roused myself and continued my conversation with Pousa by describing the fight between the men-monkeys and its awful conclusion, and asked him to tell me what he could about both the beasts and the trees. He could not tell me much about either, but what he did tell was grim enough; for, with regard to the monkeys, he informed me that they were well known as the most ferocious beasts to be found in Bandokolo, and that a certain number were captured by means of pitfalls, in which they were permitted to remain until they were all but dead from starvation, when they were removed to Masakisale (the capital city), and carefully tended until they were restored to a condition of normal health and strength. Then they were used to test the guilt or otherwise of persons charged with offences of exceptional enormity; the test being made by setting the accused to fight with one or more of the brutes, when, if he conquered, it was presumed that he was innocent.

I naturally enquired whether anyone had ever thus succeeded in demonstrating his innocence, and was not surprised to be answered in the negative. Then I asked why, if Bimbane really knew all things, it was necessary to subject a suspect to such a test in order to determine his guilt or innocence, to which Pousa replied that, of course, the test was quite unnecessary, for the queen could always tell whether or not a man was guilty, and to sentence a prisoner to such an ordeal was equivalent to pronouncing him guilty and ordering his execution; but the form of trial was retained since it was one of the institutions of the country which had existed from time immemorial.

As to the tree, into the foliage of which the victorious monkey had flung his antagonist, I was told that it, like the monkeys, was indigenous to Bandokolo, and that one of its most gruesome peculiarities was the ghoulish avidity with which it enveloped any unfortunate individual or animal in its tentacle-like leaves and forthwith proceeded to absorb its victim into itself. These trees, Pousa added, were sometimes employed instead of the monkeys as a means for the disposal of criminals. "A truly charming country and people," thought I, "apparently abounding in the most delightful characteristics!"

About half an hour before sunset we reached the foot of the mountains toward which we had been trekking all through the afternoon, and outspanned on the veld at the entrance to a pass which had revealed itself about an hour earlier.

The scenery in this pass, when we entered it on the following morning, proved to be very similar in character to that of the gorge through which we had passed on the previous day, before encountering Pousa and his troopers, but, if anything, even more wild, gloomy, and sombre; and I was not sorry when, about eleven o'clock, we emerged from it into a kind of basin, hemmed in on all sides by hills. Through the centre of this basin a narrow road ran, bordering a tiny rivulet which had its rise somewhere among the adjacent hills; and on either hand the ground was cultivated, maize, sugar cane, cassava, and fruit of various kinds being among its products, while the far end of the basin consisted of pasture land, upon which a herd of quite a thousand cattle were grazing. There were a few people at work in the field and orchards, pygmies, like Pousa and his band, but at sight of us they hastily retired, having been previously ordered—as I subsequently learned—to keep well out of our way and not intrude their presence upon us. There was no sign of buildings of any description, but when I questioned Pousa on the subject he drew my attention to a large number of almost invisible openings in the rocky sides of the encircling hills, which he told me were the entrances to the cave dwellings of this extraordinary people; and when I examined them through my telescope I discovered that the reason why these openings were so difficult to detect was because they were each choked with

people staring intently out at us as we wound our way through the valley far below them. My telescope enabled me to discover that almost every opening, however small, was decorated with more or less carving, executed in the living rock; and beneath each I also noticed the little heap of débris which had been thrown out by the owner when he took possession of his cave and proceeded to enlarge its interior according to his wants.

We outspanned at the far end of the valley, where the pasture had been reserved, and spent the night there, having made a sort of forced march through the valley in order to reach grass for the cattle—that forced march, by the way, costing me one of my rapidly diminishing team of oxen.

On the following day we passed another of the extraordinary Bandokolo villages, and, on the day following that, two more, each being considerably larger than the preceding one, while the distance between them steadily decreased, so that on the tenth day after Pousa found us we passed through no less than five villages, the last two being within three miles of each other, and of such extent that I estimated each of them to contain at least four thousand inhabitants, if not more. And now, as every mile brought us appreciably nearer to Masakisale, the capital and the abode of the mysterious and redoubtable Queen Bimbane, it was no longer possible to keep the people at a distance, and I had abundant opportunity to study their appearance, manners, dress, and customs generally.

I feel bound to say that, taking into consideration all that I had heard about them, my first impression was distinctly favourable. For, pygmies though they were, they were as a rule perfectly formed; their colour was so light that it soon became scarcely noticeable; their expression was intelligent, and by no means unamiable, at least in the case of the women, while as for the latter, though real beauty might be rare it was certainly not entirely absent, and many of the younger ones were quite good-looking, if not actually pretty. In the matter of attire, the dress generally worn was admirably adapted to the tropical climate in which the wearers lived, that of the men consisting simply of a pair of tight-fitting drawers reaching to just above the knee, over which was worn a sleeveless shirt of thick silk, confined at the waist by a belt; while that of the women appeared to be a single garment of thick silk, generally white, but occasionally dyed, the favourite colours being a rich crimson, a sea green, and a very pale blue. But, apart from the soldiers, neither sex wore any head covering, their thick hair seeming to afford them all the protection needed from the fierce rays of the vertical sun; but both sexes wore a kind of buskin of soft leather reaching to just below the knee, the sole consisting of a shaped piece of thick hide stitched on to the under part of the buskin.

The abundance of gold in the country was amply testified by the fact that all adorned themselves more or less with ornaments, such as belts, bracelets, armlets, or necklaces, made of the metal, many of the women wearing, in addition, small plaques or bosses of hammered gold stitched to the hems of their dresses, while others wore a kind of coronet, formed of hammered or chiselled gold, in their hair. A rather sinister feature which quickly attracted my attention was that, with scarcely a solitary exception, the men went armed, each with a heavy, murderous-looking knife of hardened gold thrust into his belt. Diamonds also now came in evidence, a few of the women wearing the rough, uncut stones set in gold, as necklaces, in their belts, or as adjuncts to their coronets. And now, too, for the first time, I had an opportunity to see the kind of vehicle in general use among the Bandokolo, this consisting of a rough kind of sleigh, usually drawn by a single elephant, although I encountered, here and there, sleighs big enough to need, when fully loaded, two elephants to draw them. The horse was a hitherto unknown beast among them, and it was amusing to note the wonder and admiration which my animals excited among the people as we passed. But they had contrived completely to domesticate the zebra, which seemed to be quite common among them, although it was used exclusively as a saddle animal.

Up to the present I had been afforded no opportunity to view the interior of the rock dwellings of this extraordinary people; but as we drew ever nearer to the capital I could not help feeling impressed by the increasing elaboration of the decoration of the entrances, and the high degree of artistic taste displayed. Some of the dwellings, indeed, seemed to be wholly artificial, that is to say, the owner appeared to have chosen a particular spot on the face of the living rock, and, attacking it, had begun work by hewing out first the entrance—which was usually rectangular in shape, ornamented with columns supporting a sculptured pediment—and thence proceeding to excavate inward as many apartments as were needed for the accommodation of his family. Such a structure would, if executed by the members of the family alone, require many years of continuous labour to complete; but Pousa informed me that the usual practice was for a young man to start his house as soon as he attained the age of two hundred and thirty-four moons (eighteen years), leaving the exterior ornamentation quite rough, to be completed at his leisure, and, hewing out a central passage, to employ others to help him in excavating the interior apartments, adding to their number from time to time as the need for them arose.

About mid-afternoon on the eleventh day after Pousa and his detachment had taken charge of us, we reached the city of Masakisale, the capital of Bandokolo; and after what has already been said with regard to this remarkable people, the reader will not be surprised to learn that it was far and away the most extraordinary city that I had ever seen or heard of. It was situated in a kind of basin about eight miles wide by about twenty-two miles long, hemmed in on every side by precipitous mountains, and approached through one of the weirdest, wildest, and most forbiddingly picturesque gorges that it is possible for the mind of man to imagine. A mountain torrent foamed and raged over a rocky bed through this gorge into the basin, and finally discharged itself into a gloomy tarn, about two miles wide by three and a half miles long, which occupied the whole of the lower or northern end of the valley. A wide, straight road ran lengthwise through the valley from end to end, and was intersected, at intervals of about a mile, by cross roads, between which the whole of the valley was under cultivation, except for a patch of about five miles long adjoining the tarn, one-third of which was pasture land, while the remainder was devoted to the raising of hay, four crops of which were cut every year. A road, with which the intersecting roads communicated, ran right round the valley, at the base of the precipitous mountain slopes which formed the sides of the basin, and from it other roads zigzagged up the slopes to the very summit.

These zigzag roads gave access to the rock dwellings honeycombing the mountains, the sculptured entrances to which were clearly discernible through the variegated colours that splashed the slopes, these variegated colours being due to the fact that the mountain slopes had been terraced from base to summit, filled with earth where required, and converted into gardens and fruit orchards.

The industrial portion of the city was situated at the northern end of the valley, the prevailing wind here being from the south; thus the smoke of the factory furnaces was carried away out of the valley at its northern end, which obviated all nuisance. The population of Masakisale numbered fully twenty thousand, according to Pousa; and I afterward had reason to believe that he was very far within the mark, for I roughly estimated that there must be nearly that number of dwellings in the valley, and they would accommodate, on an average, at least four persons each. There appeared to be nearly or quite five thousand people at work in the fields when we entered the valley, assisted by some forty or fifty elephants, which seemed to be employed here and there in ploughing up the land and preparing it for a new crop. There was also a considerable amount of traffic, pedestrian and vehicular, on the various roads; and when the news of our arrival spread through the valley—which it appeared to do with marvellous celerity—this traffic increased a hundredfold at least, so that within an hour of our arrival it seemed as though every man, woman, and child in the valley had turned out to stare at us. And I confess that I was by no means favourably impressed with the manner in which the men at least of Masakisale regarded my appearance among them, for if I correctly interpreted the expression of their countenances it was made up, in about equal proportions, of hatred and fear; while that of the women, on the other hand, seemed chiefly to indicate wonder, probably at my stature, for, compared with their fifty-four inches, my seventy-four must have appeared gigantic.

There was no difficulty at all in identifying the royal palace; for whereas most of the other dwellings in the valley were indicated merely by a more or less elaborately sculptured doorway hewn out of the living rock, the abode of Queen Bimbane measured—judging by the eye alone—at least five hundred feet long by sixty feet high, the whole surface of which was sculptured into the form of a house front, consisting of a doorway with window openings on either side of it, and, above that, two other tiers of window openings giving upon wide projecting balconies, the whole very elaborately decorated with mouldings, balusters, architraves, pediments, columns, entablatures, and other architectural features, in a style quite strange to me, yet very handsome and impressive, and representing, I should say, the life's work of several hundred masons. Moreover, there was a banner flying over the centre of the building, consisting of a replica, upon a very much larger scale, of that borne by the standard-bearer who accompanied my escort.

This remarkable building—if indeed it may so be called—was situated about three miles down the valley, on its western side and consequently facing east, so that for the greater part of the day it was in shadow, while every one of its window openings was shaded from the morning sun by awnings of some material (which I afterward found was silk) arranged in alternate stripes of green and white. I sighted and identified it at a distance of more than a mile away; and when we arrived opposite it I found that, as of course might be expected, one of the intersecting roads crossing the main road led up to it. But there was this difference between that particular road and all the others, that whereas the others had cultivated fields on either side of them, this road was bordered on either hand by beautiful smooth grassy lawns, kept cut quite close, interspersed at frequent intervals with great, fancifully shaped beds of flowers, while here and there enormous shade trees had been left, beneath which quite a large number of handsomely attired men and women were lounging. These were, of course, the palace gardens; and when I enquired, Pousa informed me that the loungers belonged to the queen's retinue, the general public being rigorously excluded from them. Upon our arrival at the point where the road leading to the palace branched off from the main road, Pousa informed me that I must now bid a temporary adieu to the wagon and my followers, these being destined to the lower end of the valley, where the pasture was situated, while, by command of the queen, I was to be lodged in the palace; therefore if I would indicate such of my personal belongings as I wished to have taken to my new quarters, he would see that they were duly conveyed thither. I rather demurred at this, not caring to be separated from Piet and 'Mfuni; but upon learning that the arrangement had been ordered by the queen, and could not now be altered, I yielded, with the best grace I could muster, and gave instructions that all my spare guns and a plentiful supply of ammunition should be conveyed to my destined quarters with the utmost circumspection, and there deposited.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Plot thickens.

Separated from the wagon, and thus under no further obligation to regulate our pace by that of the slow-moving oxen, we now, at Pousa's command, advanced at a trot along the road leading directly to the palace; and as we rapidly approached that structure I became increasingly impressed by the remarkable grace and beauty of its architectural decorations, the exquisite details of which forced themselves more insistently upon my attention with every foot of our progress. For instance, I saw now that certain irregularities in the surface of the walls and the shafts of the columns, which in the distance I had taken as due to the effect of weather, were really a vast number of small pictures, sculptured in very low relief, representing scenes in the history of Bandokolo, many of those scenes being, naturally, battles. And although the figures were conventionally drawn, the vigour of action and the truth to nature of the attitudes portrayed evidenced the work of an artist of no mean power.

But I had no opportunity just then to study the sculptures at leisure, for Pousa was evidently very anxious to complete his responsible task of delivering me safely within the precincts of the palace. I was therefore obliged to content myself with a hasty glance at the façade as a whole, while dismounting and resigning my horse to the care of a groom who awaited my arrival at the foot of the broad flight of steps leading up to the main entrance. Then, accompanied by Pousa, who also had dismounted, I ascended the steps, fifty in number, and was ushered through a wide and lofty doorway provided with a pair of heavy swing doors of massive gold, the panels of which were decorated with figures in high relief, into a cool and lofty hall, where I was received by and formally turned over to an official whom I afterward learned was the major-domo, or master of the queen's household. This individual very cordially welcomed me to Masakisale, in the name of the queen, and, bidding me and the attendants bearing my belongings to follow him, led the way to the rear of the hall, which, as soon as my eyes grew accustomed to the somewhat subdued light, I saw was about fifty feet long by fifty feet high by twenty-five feet wide, with a broad balcony, supported by columns, running all round it at a height of some thirty feet from the pavement.

At the far end of the hall was a massive flight of steps, hewn out of the solid rock wall, leading up to the interior balcony, to which we climbed; and, arrived there, I was conducted to a suite of two rooms, which I was given to understand had been assigned for my use by the queen. The larger room of the two was a front room looking out upon the palace gardens, and was evidently intended for day use; while the one behind, which had no window and derived its light from the front room and from a handsome gold lamp suspended from the ceiling, was a combined bathroom and sleeping chamber. This latter room, the stone floor of which was covered with fine matting, contained a very beautiful and spacious ivory couch, most luxuriously furnished, a number of elegant and equally luxurious divans, and an immense bath, almost big enough to swim in, sunk into the floor. The official who had me in charge pointed out these various matters to me, as well as a very handsome suit of clothing, evidently made expressly for me, which, he intimated, it was the queen's wish I should wear during my stay in the country; told me that by clapping my hands I could summon a servant who had been detailed to attend upon me; and then bowed himself out.

Left at length to myself, I instructed the people who had brought my belongings where to put them, satisfied myself that nothing was missing, and then, dismissing the men, proceeded to take stock of my surroundings. The apartments assigned to me were very spacious, lofty, cool, and airy, and were furnished with a degree of elegance and luxury that was simply astounding, especially in view of the fact that I was in a part of Africa which, so far as I knew, but one white man had ever visited before, and from which no white man had ever emerged; and I felt that I was fully justified in regarding myself as very highly honoured. Then, when I had completed my inspection, I clapped my hands, and, upon the appearance of the attendant, intimated that I should like a bath; whereupon the man withdrew a wooden plug from a hole in the wall, and in a few minutes the immense bath was full to the brim of bright, cold, sparkling spring water, into which I at once plunged, completely submerging myself for about half a minute, to the amazement and consternation of my attendant, who afterward confessed that he feared I was bent upon drowning myself, none of the Bandokolo, it appeared, possessing the slightest knowledge of natation. My use of soap, too, and the facility with which by its aid I was enabled to remove the dust and grime accumulated during the day's travel, was another revelation to him; as was also the comb wherewith I arranged my now much too luxuriant locks. My bath towels likewise came in for a share of his admiration; but the thing which, next to my stature, most excited the fellow's astonishment was the whiteness of my skin, where it had been protected by my clothing, compared with the deep bronze of my face and hands. Having bathed to my satisfaction I proceeded to clothe myself in the new garments which had been so thoughtfully provided for me—and for which I was indeed grateful, for the best of my own clothes were by this time little better than rags. These new garments consisted of a pair of bathing drawers—at least that is what they were like, for they only reached down to just above the knees—a tunic-like, sleeveless shirt, and a pair of buskins made of soft white leather, soled with ox-hide. The drawers were made quite plain, of thick white silk, and fitted fairly tight to the body; the shirt also was made of the same material, but about the armholes and the hem of it there was stitched a broad band of crimson silk, sewn in a beautiful pattern with gold thread and thickly studded with small gold bosses about the size of ordinary coat buttons, each boss being beautifully chiselled with a flower-like pattern in high relief. There was also a waist belt, made of solid gold links fastened together with a sort of hinge, and clasped in front with a pair of massive gold sculptured plaques, forming a very handsome adornment to one's person, and very convenient, too, for it happened to be of just the right width to take my pistol holsters. These garments all fitted me as though made to measure, to my great astonishment; and when I asked Langila—that being the name of my new servant—how he accounted for such an extraordinary fact, he further amazed me by saying, as calmly as though it were the most natural thing imaginable, that the articles had all been made according to measurements supplied by the queen! And when I pushed my curiosity farther by asking how Her Majesty could possibly guess so accurately at the proportions of a man whom she had never seen, he simply shrugged his shoulders and repeated Pousa's astounding statement that "the queen knows all things!" After which I requested that I might be left to myself; for I wished to give this statement my most careful consideration, and to endeavour to fathom all that it might possibly mean to me.

Was it possible that this extraordinary woman, reputed to be old far beyond the limits of the age usually ascribed to humanity—this queen of a wonderful people hidden away in the mysterious depths of Africa, the continent of strange and mystic happenings, was really the possessor of the gift of unlimited knowledge? To me, a plain, simple, matter-of-fact Briton, such a thing seemed impossible; yet Pousa had already supplied me with proof that surely ought to have been convincing to any reasonable man. He had been told that on a certain date and at a certain spot he would encounter me, and he had done so; my appearance had been described to him, and the description had proved accurate in every particular, down to the most minute detail; and he had even learned the facts connected with the death of the unhappy Siluce! How had the queen, his informant, become acquainted with all these matters, seeing that even the fact of my impending visit to Bandokolo could not possibly have been made known through any of the ordinary recognised channels of communication? It was an exceedingly disquieting circumstance; for if Bimbane actually possessed this astounding, supernatural gift of knowledge it practically rendered her all-powerful, and how could any ordinary individual—myself, for instance—successfully contend with such a being—if contention should ever become necessary? I decided that contention, strife, between her and myself must not be permitted to become necessary: I must cultivate her goodwill and gain her friendship if I could, then all might be well; whereas if I should be so unfortunate as to incur her displeasure—well, there was no use in blinking the fact that she was powerful enough to destroy me.

I had just about arrived at the above conclusion when Langila appeared and respectfully enquired when it would be my pleasure to eat, which reminded me that several hours had elapsed since I had last partaken of a meal, and that, despite the disquieting nature of my recent reflections, I was hungry. I therefore intimated that I was quite ready for a meal at any moment, whereupon he disappeared, to return a few minutes later accompanied by half a dozen servants, who quickly and deftly prepared a table by covering it with a very handsome cloth of spotless white linen, upon which they placed a number of elegantly wrought dishes of polished agate, heaped high with fruits of various kinds arranged with their respective leaves, a most beautiful vase of some wonderfully marked and highly polished stone, full of wine, and several elaborately chased plates and dishes of massive gold, one of which contained a little pile of thin, flat cakes of a kind of bread, smoking hot. Then another man entered, bearing a gold dish containing what looked like a roast fowl, but what I presently discovered was a parrot; and Langila intimated that my dinner was served. And a very excellent dinner it proved to be; for the parrot was tender, juicy, of very appetising flavour, and

perfectly cooked, while the little cakes of hot bread were particularly good. Then the wine! It was of a rich ruby colour and exquisite aroma, but light and innocuous as water. As for the fruits, I had never before—and have never since—tasted such luscious peaches and grapes. And all this elegance and luxury, I kept reminding myself, existed in a part of Africa utterly unknown to the white man!

Whether it was the novelty of my surroundings, the somewhat perturbing character of my reflections, or the contrast between the luxuriousness of my couch and the hard cartel upon which I had reposed for so many months under a stifling wagon tent, I know not, but sleep was slow to come to me on that first night of my sojourn in the palace of Queen Bimbane; and when at length it visited me it seemed that I had scarcely closed my eyes before I opened them again to find that it was day, and that Langila was standing beside my couch, respectfully enquiring whether it would please me to bathe before dressing for breakfast. I replied that it certainly would, whereupon the fellow filled my bath for me, and a few minutes later I was luxuriously wallowing in the cold, crystal-clear water. To towel myself dry and dress was the work of but a minute or two, and then I sat down to a meal which in point of elegance and luxury was the equal of that partaken of on the previous evening.

When I had finished, Langila, who was really a most admirable servant, respectfully enquired what I next proposed to do; and when I informed him that I intended to ride to the lower end of the valley, to see how my servants were faring, and that the wagon and oxen were being properly looked after, he assured me that I might rest perfectly easy as to that, but that if I were determined upon doing as I proposed it was the wish of the queen that I should appear in public suitably arrayed. Thereupon he vanished, and presently returned bearing a superb doublet of gold scale armour upon a foundation of doeskin as soft as a kid glove, a broad belt of massive gold links heavily studded with uncut diamonds, supporting a gold-bladed sword in a richly chased golden sheath, and a gold helmet, wadded and lined with silk and surmounted by a splendid plume of ostrich feathers dyed a deep, rich crimson! And, thus magnificently bedizened, I presently set forth, mounted upon Prince, who, in his turn, had not been forgotten, he also proving to be a beneficiary to the extent of a superb crimson silk, gold-fringed saddle cloth, and a new bridle of a kind of velvet, dyed crimson, and heavily studded with gold bosses.

The ride to the lower end of the valley and back proved exceedingly interesting, for there was novelty everywhere; and I noticed that my gorgeous trappings seemed to produce a profound effect upon the people, who now saluted me with the utmost reverence, the fact being—although I did not know it at the time—that I was dressed in the uniform of a general of the Bandokolo army. I found the wagon all right, and the remnant of my team of oxen luxuriating in the rich pasture by the margin of the lake; while as for Piet, Jan, and 'Ngulubi, they had plenty to eat and no work to do, and were therefore perfectly happy. But 'Mfuni, who had developed a most extraordinary devotion to me, gloomily informed me that the country and the people were "'mkulu 'mtagati", and that he did not at all approve of my being housed in the palace, surrounded by strangers, and with him miles away and quite unable to watch over my welfare. Upon hearing which, I comforted the poor fellow as well as I could by assuring him that I was not in the slightest danger, that the arrangement was merely temporary, and that at the first opportunity I would endeavour to persuade the queen to allow him to come to the palace as my personal attendant.

Upon my return to the palace I was informed by Langila that the queen was in her apartment, and had given instructions that, upon my return, I was to be conducted into her presence, that she might personally express her satisfaction at my arrival in the country; therefore I at once proceeded to bathe, and, when I was ready, desired Langila to announce me. I had not far to go, for the royal apartments were situated, it appeared, in the wing of the palace opposite to my own, just on the other side of the grand staircase; and in a few minutes I found myself in the royal presence.

The room in which Queen Bimbane received me was a superb apartment, magnificently decorated with elaborately carved columns supporting a kind of groined roof, the walls being draped with splendid tapestry worked on silk in gold thread, and hung with several enormous mirrors of polished silver in massive gold frames—brackets supporting clusters of lamps on either side of each. The stone floor was covered with fine grass matting worked in a very tasteful pattern with different-coloured grasses; and at the far end of the room was a divan that looked as though made of solid gold, upholstered in embroidered silk. Upon this divan reclined a diminutive figure entirely shrouded in white silk draperies, so that only the two eyes could be seen through a narrow slit; and behind this figure stood two handsome young women, gorgeously attired, who perpetually waved two enormous fans of ostrich feathers to and fro over their mistress.

The lord chamberlain, who took me over from the hands of Langila, duly announced me and forthwith retired; and I noticed that as I strode through the doorway, attired in all my bravery, the little figure on the divan started and gave utterance to a faint ejaculation. But she instantly recovered herself, and, stretching out her right hand, swathed in silken wrappings, exclaimed in a low, pleasant voice:

"Greeting, and many welcomes, Chia'gnosi! I have been anticipating this moment with much curiosity, and also with a little trepidation, for my prescience tells me that you are destined to exercise a great, indeed a vital, influence upon my future; and I have wondered whether that influence will be for good, or for evil."

"For good, I trust, Your Majesty," I replied, as, sinking on one knee, I placed my right hand beneath hers and raised it respectfully to my lips. As I have said, that hand was swathed in silken wrappings, so that I could not see it, but my sense of touch told me that it was small and, as it seemed to me, painfully thin. But although I did not see the hand I saw something else, and that was the orange and ruddy flashes of a jewel on the thumb, the brilliance of which was so great that it made itself manifest even through the silken veil in which it was enveloped; and I immediately remembered the "potent amulet", containing a stone "which shines like the sun at eventide", mentioned by Siluce, which she had besought me to take from its owner.

"I, too, trust that it will be for good, Chia'gnosi, otherwise you would never have been allowed to come here," answered the queen. "My prescience—which has never yet deceived me—tells me that in you I shall find a man who can be either a true, loyal, steadfast friend, or an implacable enemy; and as I am determined to make you my friend,

I am not afraid. Yet I see that, in the depths of your heart, you are already prejudiced against me; and since that prejudice must be removed before friendship can be born, tell me, I pray you, how did that prejudice originate? But first, rise, and sit beside me, here."

I rose and obeyed, in some confusion; for how, I asked myself, could this woman possibly read my inmost thoughts, as she appeared able to do? Nevertheless, it seemed to me that honesty was the best policy, therefore I answered her, after seating myself at as respectful a distance from her as the divan would allow:

"If I am indeed prejudiced at all against Your Majesty, it is because of the story that Siluce told me."

"Ah, yes, Siluce!" retorted the queen rather bitterly. "She died in your arms. And, before dying, she no doubt told you that the Bandokolo are a cruel, wicked people; and that I, their queen, am the most cruel and wicked of them all. Did she not?"

"I am told that you know all things," I returned. "If that be true, you must be fully aware of every word which that unhappy young woman said."

"Ye-e-es," answered Bimbane slowly, "I ought to know, certainly; but it happens that I do not. For at the moment when you encountered Siluce, it chanced that my attention was distracted from you for a time; and when at length I was again free to visualise you, the woman was lying dead in your arms, and so I missed hearing what she told you. But I can guess; and I have guessed aright, have I not?"

"Pretty nearly," I replied. And then I repeated what Siluce had said as to the treatment which she had received, and the causes for that treatment; and I ventured to hint that, according to the views of civilised people, the unhappy girl had been atrociously misused.

"So that was the story Siluce told you?" remarked the queen, when I had finished. "Now listen to mine, and judge between us.

"I am not a young woman; I am indeed old, as you have already guessed: yet when the time of mourning for my late consort was past, many chiefs and nobles urged me to wed again, and offered themselves as suitable candidates for the position of spouse to the queen. I knew that these proposals were made only because of the power, influence, and wealth which belong to the position; yet, because I am a woman, with all a woman's weaknesses, and the Bandokolo are a fickle, turbulent people, impatient of restraint and difficult to govern, it seemed desirable that I should choose another consort from among the many suitors for the honour. And after careful consideration I chose Anuti, one of the captains of my guard, because he seemed the most suitable for the position, and the man most likely to be helpful to me in my difficult task of government.

"But Siluce, who was one of the women of my household, had already seen Anuti, and desired him as her husband, although the man would have naught to do with her. And when the forthcoming espousals of Anuti and myself were announced, Siluce forced her way into my presence, upbraided me for robbing her of her lover, and sought to slay me! Therefore I dismissed her from my household, and forbade her ever to appear again in my presence; but it was Anuti who caused her to be whipped, and afterwards ordered her banishment. And because, after our espousals, I learned this, and rebuked Anuti for his cruelty, he has quarrelled with me and become my enemy."

"U-um!" I returned. "That, of course, is a very different story from the one told me by Siluce."

"And it is the truth," asserted the queen; "although doubtless there are those who will declare to the contrary. I possess much knowledge, Chia'gnosi, yet I know not how I am to convince you of the truth; for he, my husband, who could verify my words, resents my rebuke and has become my most bitter and implacable enemy, and doubtless he will seek to win you over to his side by bearing false witness against me. I would that I could make you my friend, Chia'gnosi, for never have I so sorely needed a friend as now, when Anuti has turned against me and seeks to oust me from my place and become supreme in the land. And you are wise with the wisdom of the white man; you are a warrior, and come of the race of those who always conquer: therefore if I could win you to my side I should certainly triumph in the struggle that I foresee is at hand. Tell me, Chia'gnosi, how may I win you to become my champion?"

"Nay, O Queen," answered I, "ask me not, I pray you; for I came here not to take part in any quarrel, but merely to—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted the queen. "You came hither hoping to obtain much gold and many shining stones. Well, whether or not you will become my friend, I can at least help you to realise your wish. You shall have as much gold and as many shining stones as you can carry away. I have many stones already, and I will give orders that more shall be obtained, so that you may have as many as you desire; while as for gold, all that I possess is yours for the asking."

What could I say by way of reply to such lavish generosity as this? I could but thank the queen with all my heart, and did so, yet with a lurking dread that she might attach to the acceptance of her gift some condition which I certainly could not assent to without a great deal more knowledge than I then possessed. But she did not: on the contrary, she led me to understand that her gift was quite unconditional; and we then proceeded to talk of other matters, with the result that when at length I was dismissed, I left the royal presence strongly impressed with the conviction that my hostess was a very much misunderstood and maligned woman, earnestly desirous of governing an unruly people wisely and well, in the face of strenuous opposition on the part of a clique of ambitious and unscrupulous nobles, of whom the most ambitious and unscrupulous was Anuti, her husband, who, it seemed pretty evident, aimed at nothing short of her dethronement and death, and the usurpation of supreme power. I confess I felt very sorry for the poor old creature; and although I was particularly careful to pledge myself to nothing, I was conscious of a very strong inclination to espouse her cause and do what I might to defeat the machinations of her powerful enemies. She readily assented to my petition that 'Mfuni, my Mashona, might be permitted to come to the palace, to act as groom to Prince, that animal having manifested a distinct distaste for the attentions of the Bandokolo stableman; and the man presented himself that same afternoon, in response to a message which I sent, commanding his immediate

appearance.

For nearly a week after this nothing of any particular import happened. Upon one pretext or another the queen sent for me every day, sometimes more than once, to converse with her; and by the end of the fifth day after my arrival I had practically forgotten Siluce's charges against her, forgotten that she was an old woman—although on the occasion of our third interview she had permitted me to see her small, withered, wrinkled old face—forgotten everything, in fact, except that I had come to the conclusion that she was the most charming, delightful, and interesting, as well as the most friendless and vilely betrayed woman I had ever heard of. She had kept her word right royally in the matter of the diamonds, having sent me a goatskin sack full of the most magnificent stones, while I was led to understand that more were being diligently sought for; and as for gold, there was already enough of it in my apartment to tax the strength of my diminished team of oxen to the utmost to draw it when it should be loaded into the wagon.

On the sixth day after my arrival in Masakisale I encountered Anuti, the queen's husband, while riding from the palace to the wagon, as was my daily wont. He joined me when I was about halfway down the valley, riding out from one of the side roads, which, it appeared, led to the house that he was then inhabiting, he having deserted the palace immediately after his quarrel with the queen. He approached and accosted me, introducing himself quite frankly; and upon learning that I was on my way to the lower end of the valley, asked permission to accompany me, which I accorded rather ungraciously, I am afraid, for I was by that time very bitterly prejudiced against him. Yet, as we rode, conversing together, I found it hard to maintain that prejudice, for he was as unlike the man I had pictured him as it was possible for a man to be; indeed, I was amazed at the frankness, geniality, and courteousness of his manner. He professed to be rejoiced at the opportunity that I was affording him to make my acquaintance, for which he thanked me; very delicately hinted his admiration of my prowess in killing the rhinoceros which had attacked the escort; and expressed an earnest desire that, despite the suspicion and dislike with which I at that moment regarded him, the time was not far-distant when we should be stanch friends. He added that there were several of Bandokolo's most influential nobles and chiefs who were anxious to be made known to me; and when I received this intimation with a return to my original frigidity of manner he turned to me and exclaimed, with an almost startling earnestness of manner:

"Ah, Chia'gnosi, I would that you could be persuaded to lay aside your prejudices, and treat me and my friends fairly! Our conception of you has been that of a man who loves justice and fairness above all things, else would you never have been permitted to come hither. I know that you have been a sojourner in the palace for the last five days, and that you have been daily—ay, almost hourly—brought under the influence of the queen, consequently I fully understand your antagonism to me. She has told you her story, and has cunningly played upon your sympathy and the chivalry of your character, leading you to believe that she is the most unfortunate, most maligned and persecuted woman in the whole world. But that is only her version of the story; and I swear to you that it is false! I know the story which the lips of the dying Siluce whispered into your ears, for my spirit was with you both then, and I say that every word of it is true, although I know that Bimbane has asserted the contrary. Think of this, therefore, Chia'gnosi, and ask yourself whether you may not have been led by a cunning, unscrupulous, and lying old witch to give your sympathy to the wrong person. If you are capable of being convinced by the truth—as I believe you are—I can convince you. But you must give me the opportunity; and if you will but do this, I tell you that you will thank me for asking you to hear what I have to say."

To say that I was amazed and shocked beyond all power of expression at the possibility that I had been hoodwinked and played with by a preternaturally plausible old woman is to put the matter very mildly; yet slowly the conviction dawned upon me that it might be so. I suddenly remembered my own youth and inexperience, and the tales that had been told me of Bimbane's unnatural longevity; and gradually I came to realise how easy a woman of her prolonged and wide experience would find it to play upon my sympathy and credulity until she had brought me to a state of mind in which I should be prepared to believe whatever she might choose to tell me. She had indeed almost brought me to that state of mind, but not quite; I still retained sense enough to recognise that my judgment was not infallible, my wisdom not so great but that it might be possible for an exceedingly clever person to deceive me. And then it suddenly occurred to me that Bimbane's version of the Siluce incident was entirely unsupported save by her own assertions, while the statement of Siluce herself—made with her dying breath, when, it might be assumed, she could have no possible motive for telling a falsehood—was fully confirmed by Anuti. Yes; the two stories differed so completely that one of them must necessarily be untrue, and I felt that I owed it to myself to discover which of them it was. It was all very well for me to pretend that I would not permit myself to be involved in a quarrel with which I had no concern, but I began to realise that possibly I might not be allowed any option in the matter, and that in spite of myself I might be compelled to take one side or the other; and if that should prove to be the case I must see to it that I was not inveigled into espousing the wrong side. Therefore, when I had reasoned the matter out in my own mind, somewhat after the above fashion, I turned to Anuti, and, giving him my hand, said:

"You are right, Anuti; you are entitled to demand that I shall afford you the opportunity to set forth your version of the dispute between the queen and yourself, and to bring forward proofs of the soundness and justice of your own contention, and you shall have it. Therefore, make such arrangements as you may deem necessary; and when you are ready I shall be prepared to listen to you. But, understand this: your proofs will have to be very full and complete to be wholly convincing, for, rightly or wrongly, I have been very strongly impressed with the conviction that the queen is the victim of a powerful band of thoroughly ruthless, unscrupulous conspirators."

Anuti laughed heartily as he grasped my extended hand. "There was no need for you to tell me that, Chia'gnosi," he said, "for I know Bimbane, and am fully aware of her extraordinary powers of persuasion. Her magic is potent and wonderful, ay, even to the extent of enabling her to persuade you that this blaze of sunlight is the darkness of the great cavern whence we obtain our shining stones, that yonder sun is the day-old moon, or that she herself is young and beautiful. Therefore I am in nowise astonished that you insist upon my proofs being complete. I am fully aware that they will have to be so in order to convince you; and I promise you that they shall be. And now, a word of warning. It may be that Bimbane is cognisant of what has passed between us, for I doubt not that she watches your every movement; and, if so, she will be fully aware, not only that we have met, but of every word that we have

spoken. In that case, Chia'gnosi, you will be in some danger: and if I thought that you feared danger I would express my regret for having brought you within touch of it. But I know that you do not; therefore I will merely say to you, be on the watch, for when the peril comes it will come swiftly, without warning, and you will need all your courage and all your great strength to meet it. Farewell, Chia'gnosi, and thanks for the courtesy and fairness with which you have hearkened to me. I will collect my facts and my witnesses; and when all is ready you shall hear from me. Again, farewell!"

Chapter Seventeen.

At last I learn the Truth.

Profoundly perplexed, and quite unable to decide which of these two, Bimbane or Anuti, was telling me the truth, I rode slowly and thoughtfully back to the palace, and, surrendering Prince to the care of 'Mfuni, sought the privacy of my own apartments, anxious to think over quietly and free from all distraction what I had heard, in the hope of being able to arrive at some definite conclusion with regard to the matter. Also, I was anxious to learn whether there was any foundation for Anuti's suggestion that Bimbane was probably aware of his meeting with me, and of what had passed between us, believing that if such were indeed the case the queen would assuredly betray her knowledge either by her speech or in her manner. But although I had scarcely been back long enough to bathe and change into the garments which I usually wore indoors when I was invited to join the queen in her apartments, I could detect nothing in either her manner of greeting me or in her subsequent speech to indicate that she had the least suspicion that I had spent nearly two hours in her husband's company. There was not the slightest shade of difference in her cordiality of manner toward me, not the faintest suggestion of uneasiness or anxiety; and as for her conversation, after informing me that she had received information from the mine to the effect that a large consignment of the shining stones might be expected shortly, she proceeded to question me with regard to the details of my past life—of which she appeared to possess a quite extraordinary general knowledge—and finally referred, in a perfectly natural manner, to little Nell Lestrangle, asking whether I still adhered to my original intention of endeavouring to find the child. And upon my assuring her that I certainly did, she asserted that she possessed the power to help me very materially in my search, and was perfectly willing to afford me that help, if I cared to avail myself of it; to which I replied that I would gladly do so, and would feel infinitely obliged and grateful for it. Whereupon she offered to show me, there and then, the road which I must follow, upon leaving Masakisale, in order to reach the place where the lost child might be found.

To one who thought somewhat slowly, as I generally do, this seemed to be rather rushing matters, and, with Anuti's warning fresh in my mind, I hesitated for just the fraction of a second, wondering whether perchance this might not be some subtle scheme on Bimbane's part to get me into her power; but the friendly, ingenuous look in her eyes, as I glanced into them, disarmed my momentary suspicion, and a few seconds later, animated by the intensity of my desire to learn what I might regarding poor Nell's whereabouts, I found myself stretched at full length upon the divan, with the little, shrivelled, decrepit figure of the queen bending over me as, in obedience to her command, I stared intently at the jewel on her right thumb, which she held within a few inches of my eyes.

For perhaps a minute I gazed at the wonderful flashing and changing colours of the stone, which seemed to be something between a diamond and an opal; and then, suddenly, I seemed to be mounted on Prince and journeying back along the road by which we had reached Masakisale, with Piet and 'Mfuni beside me and the wagon in the rear. We seemed to be passing the spot where I had buried the remains of the unhappy Siluce, and in my dream we turned aside to examine the grave, and assured ourselves that it had not been disturbed. Back, mile after mile, we travelled until we reached a certain mountain that I remembered perfectly well, and here we abandoned the route by which we had formerly travelled, striking eastward round the southern side of the mountain, and following for several days a stream that led south-eastward. Then, abandoning that stream, and still journeying south-eastward, we "struck" another stream that finally led us to a broad river which I somehow knew to be the Zambezi. Along the left bank of this great river we seemed to journey for several days, carefully noting the natural features of the country as we went, and especially some very fine falls—which were not, however, the famous Victoria Falls, discovered by Livingstone—and shortly afterward we reached a drift which enabled us to cross the river; and here we turned our backs upon it and followed upstream a smaller river discharging into it. And thus we seemed to go, day after day and week after week, until two months were past, when suddenly, toward the close of a certain day, I seemed to find myself in the midst of surroundings that I dimly remembered having seen before; and presently it dawned upon me that I was looking upon the plain which Mafuta, the Basuto nyanga, had shown me in the vision wherein I had been permitted a brief glimpse of Nell Lestrangle. Yes, that was the place, without a doubt; and as I stood gazing in wonder at it a Kafir at my side, who had come from I know not where, informed me, in reply to a question, that the place was named Umgungundhlovu, and that it was the Great Place of Dingaana, the king of the Zulu nation. And therewith, as the man's words fixed themselves in my memory, the vision faded; and, opening my eyes, I found myself staring into those of Bimbane, who was still bending over me.

"Well, Chia'gnosi," said she, with a smile that, even on her withered features, I somehow thought very sweet and engaging, "you have slept long. Have you seen aught?"

"Yes," said I, rising to my feet. "I have seen the way from this place to the spot where my friend's little daughter may be found; and I thank you most heartily for granting me the vision. It is very wonderful, and I wish that I possessed the power to gain such information by means of self-induced dreams. I suppose the power lies in that ring, does it not?"

"Nay," answered Bimbane, quickly placing her right hand behind her, "the power is in myself; the ring is but a means, and any bright thing would do as well." (And then I suddenly remembered the bright disk by means of which Mafuta, the Basuto nyanga, had produced the vision that I had witnessed in his hut.)

"And wish not for any such power, my friend," continued the queen, seating herself upon the divan from which I had risen; "for while the information so gained is sometimes useful, it is more often of a distressing nature, and many times have I thus learned that those whom I deemed my staunch friends were really secret enemies, industriously plotting evil against me. One is far happier without such knowledge, therefore I make use of my gift as seldom as possible. And now, go, Chia'gnosi, for the exercise of my power has rendered me very weary, and I must rest. But come to me again to-morrow; for although my magic has enabled me to learn much of what happens in the world outside Bandokolo, there are many things which I have never been able to understand until now, when you have explained them to me, and I wish to learn all I can while you are here to teach me."

I retreated to my own apartments more puzzled than ever as to the true character of the queen; for while I could not help feeling that Anuti was perfectly sincere in his denunciation of her, the more I saw of her the more convinced did I become that there was some frightful misunderstanding somewhere, and that she was in reality a true, tender-hearted, generously disposed woman. Finally, I called for Prince, and took a long ride up the valley, seeking for light; but none came, and when about sunset I returned to the palace, I was as much befogged as ever.

When on the following day I was again summoned to the queen's apartments, I found her full of schemes for the better government of the Bandokolo and the improvement in general of the condition of the people; and upon these schemes she expressed herself anxious to have my opinion, as well as any suggestions which I might see fit to offer. Now, I felt that I was altogether too young to set myself up as an authority upon so abstruse a subject as statesmanship; yet I was not quite destitute of ideas, or the inclination to express them when they happened to be strong and well-defined, consequently it was not long before we were so deeply engrossed in conversation as to be practically oblivious of everything else. Hence I was greatly astonished, not to say chagrined, when after about an hour's animated and exceedingly interesting conversation I suddenly became conscious that I had been asleep—for a second or two only, it seemed to me, for when wakefulness returned the queen was still speaking, and I gathered from her speech that I could not have missed more than, at the most, half a dozen unimportant words. I was profoundly annoyed with myself, for if there is one thing upon which I especially pride myself it is my courtesy to women, let them be young or old, rich or poor, and I felt that in permitting myself to lose consciousness, even though it were but for a second, I had been guilty of a piece of gross discourtesy to a woman whom I was daily growing to respect and esteem more profoundly. Respect and esteem! Nay, those were cold words in which to express the feeling with which I was rapidly coming to regard this much vilified, much misunderstood woman; admiration was a word much nearer the truth: and I sincerely hoped that my momentary involuntary lapse of attention had escaped her notice. I presently believed that it had, for when I ventured to look at her I perceived that she was staring into vacancy, as people are apt to do sometimes when they are expressing their views on a subject upon which they feel very deeply.

We conversed together for nearly three hours that morning, and when at length the queen dismissed me the last shred of suspicion raised in my mind against her by Anuti had vanished, and in its stead I was conscious of a feeling of exalted, romantic devotion, such as the knights errant of old must have felt when they went forth to perform some deed of desperate gallantry in honour of the women who had won their admiration.

When I rode out from the palace that afternoon, I was animated by a fervent hope that I might encounter Anuti; for I longed for the opportunity to convince him that the ideas which he had somehow formed with regard to his royal wife were as far from the truth as darkness is from light, or as the east is from the west. And, as sometimes happens, my desire was gratified; for as I rode down the valley to pay my daily visit to the wagon, I found the man obviously waiting for me at the spot where we had previously met.

Upon seeing me he pressed his heels to his zebra's sides, and galloped forward to meet me, greeting me with the same frank friendliness as before.

"Well met, Anuti," said I. "I have been hoping that I might see you, for I have several matters of moment that I wish to discuss with you. Will you ride with me to the end of the valley, or shall I accompany you to your house?"

"Let us ride to the end of the valley first, Chia'gnosi," said he; "then, afterwards, if you will accompany me to my house, I shall feel myself very deeply honoured."

"Right!" I said. "Forward, then! Now, Anuti, I wonder whether you can guess why I am so anxious to have an opportunity to converse with you?"

"I think I can," he answered, with that frank, genial smile of his which had so favourably impressed me at our former meeting. "You want to prove to me that my ideas concerning Bimbane are all wrong, and that I, and those who regard her as I do, are doing her the utmost injustice. Is not that it?"

"Heavens, man, you must be a thought-reader!" I ejaculated in astonishment. "How did you come to guess that?"

"Oh," he replied laughingly, "it was quite easy! I knew that by the time you next met me Bimbane would have fully convinced you that she is a wronged and grossly maligned woman; and, having thoroughly read your character at our last meeting, I was sure that no sooner would she have done that than your chivalry of feeling would urge you to espouse her cause and undertake the task of proving to me and the rest of her enemies that, in regarding her as we do, we are doing her a hideous injustice. Well, now is your opportunity to convince me—if you can. She has convinced you. Tell me, how did she do it?"

By way of reply I related in detail everything that had happened since I had last met him, repeated our conversations word for word, so far as I could recall them, and dwelt at length upon the many exalted sentiments and lofty aspirations to which the queen had given expression; asking him finally how he could possibly associate those sentiments and aspirations with a woman of such a character as he believed that of Bimbane to be.

"Quite impossible, Chia'gnosi," he answered, "if she were sincere in their expression."

"And how do you know that she is not?" I demanded hotly.

"How do you know that she is?" he retorted. "You have only her word for it; she has not furnished you with a shadow of proof. It is easy for a woman—or a man—to express exalted sentiments and lofty aspirations, even though she—or he—may not feel them. As a matter of fact, I entertain the precise sentiments and have the same aspirations with which you credit Bimbane; but I suppose you will require something more than my bare assertion before you will believe me. Yet why should you doubt me, and believe her? I will tell you. It is because she has thrown the spell of her magic over you! You tell me that yesterday she cast you into a trance wherein you saw the way which you must follow in order to find the captive child of your friend. By allowing her to do that, you afforded her an opportunity to get you under her influence and into her power; and to-day, when you fell asleep while she was conversing with you, she was simply testing and strengthening her power over you. You believed that your sleep lasted but a second or two; I believe that it may have lasted half an hour or longer, during which she was getting more complete control over you: and when at length she aroused you from your trance she simply resumed her conversation at the point where it had broken off at the moment when you lost consciousness; hence you imagined—as she intended you should—that you had been asleep but for a moment."

"I will not believe it," I exclaimed hotly. "Nothing shall convince me that any woman could be so base as to take such dastardly advantage of a man as you suggest."

"Has the mischief indeed gone so far as that?" demanded Anuti, soberly enough now. "Then I am very sorry for you, Chia'gnosi; very sorry for us all. For in that case you will never be permitted to leave Bandokolo, never have the opportunity to rescue the captive daughter of your friend; while as for the rest of us, we shall inevitably be plunged into a disastrous civil war, in which many of Bandokolo's highest and best will be slain. Probably Bimbane, aided by you, will triumph; but, believe me, when it is too late and the evil has been wrought, you will discover that you have made a disastrous mistake—or, rather, have been hideously deceived. Ah, do not shake your head in unbelief, my friend, for remember that I am speaking from experience. I know that what I say is true, because it was through the influence which Bimbane gained over me that she constrained me to become her spouse, although I loved Siluce. You look incredulous; you doubtless think that I might have resisted, had I chosen: but I swear to you that so complete was her power over me that I was absolutely helpless, and although I fully understood the enormity of the crime which she was committing, and which she was compelling me to commit, I was powerless to resist, because I could not escape from her. But afterward, when the foul wrong was done, when I was irrevocably bound to her, and my poor Siluce had been driven forth to perish miserably, Bimbane foolishly relaxed her hold upon me, thinking, I suppose, that, the knot being tied, I should not attempt to escape, but should accept the ignoble fate which she had designed for me. Also I think she was indifferent, because the event proved that I was not the man through whom she believes she is to recover her long-lost youth and beauty. And I took advantage of this relaxation of vigilance on her part to escape from the palace and from her influence, and, despite her entreaties and commands, have steadfastly refused to return: hence I have been able gradually to shake off her influence until now I am quite free from it; and I tell you that never again shall she have an opportunity to recover her power over me, if I can help it. Now, if you are not so completely bewitched as to be incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, come with me, for I am prepared to submit to you ample and convincing proof of the truth of all my charges against Bimbane."

"Very well," said I, "I will go with you, for although the matter is really no concern of mine I am anxious to get at the truth, if only in order that I may be of some assistance in adjusting this most unhappy misunderstanding between the queen and the nobles. For I am convinced that it is nothing more serious than a misunderstanding, and that a little explanation on either side will suffice to clear it up completely. But I warn you, Anuti, not to indulge in any false hopes of your ability to persuade me of the queen's guilt, for I shall need something far more convincing than unsupported assertions to satisfy me."

"Yet Bimbane's unsupported assertions have thus far completely satisfied you; do not forget that, Chia'gnosi," retorted Anuti. "However," he continued, "if you can persuade yourself to regard the question of the queen's guilt or innocence as an open one for a little while, I have no doubt of my ability to make you recognise the truth."

Much more was said by Anuti to the same effect, but as it was in the main but a reiteration and amplification of his previous statements, it need not be repeated here; suffice it to say that by the time we reached his house he had brought me to a state of mind which enabled me to recognise that, after all, it was just possible that I might be mistaken, that Bimbane might not be the sort of person I had allowed her to persuade me she was, and that Anuti and his friends were at least entitled to a dispassionate hearing.

And then, when at length we reached Anuti's dwelling, that individual introduced me to some thirty of the most important and influential nobles and chiefs of Bandokolo, among whom was Mindula, the father of the unhappy Siluce; and, one after the other, these men arose and related the wrongs, the cruelties, and the injustices which they and theirs had suffered at the hands of Bimbane, accompanying their statements with proofs of so convincing a character that I no longer found it possible to disbelieve. And when at length the session was over I arose, stunned, astounded, horrified, and furious at the thought of the danger which I had so narrowly escaped, of falling into the hands of a vile, unscrupulous woman, and becoming her willing, deluded tool.

"And now," I demanded, as the nobles rose to depart, "what am I to do? It is impossible that I can continue to reside in the palace and remain the guest of the queen; yet, having come so far, I do not like the idea of quitting the country without at least enough of the gold and shining stones to repay me for the toil and peril of my adventure. And I suppose that when I announce my intention of quitting the palace the queen will at once conjecture that I have been in communication with you, and have learned the truth concerning her. Will she attempt to detain me by force, think you?"

"It is impossible to surmise what she may do," answered Anuti. "It is, however, not force so much as persuasion that you have to fear, for I do not believe that there is a man in Bandokolo who would be willing to face your fire weapons,

even at Bimbane's command: but if you venture to return to the palace and see her again, rest assured that she will bring the whole power of her influence to bear upon you in the effort to persuade you that we have deceived you, and that your original opinion of her was the correct one. And you best know whether you have now the strength of will to resist her beguilements. It would be safer, perhaps, not to risk it, but to take up your abode here with me. I will send a messenger to your servant, if you like, telling him—"

"No," said I decisively, as the thought that 'Mfuni was still in the queen's power came to me for the first time, "I must return to the palace, face the queen, inform her that I now know the truth concerning her and refuse any longer to remain her guest, and see what comes of it. As to her seeking to influence me, I have no doubt that she will do that, but I must take the risk; and now that I am fully convinced of the truth of all your assertions, I do not greatly dread the result. I will go at once, and get the interview over; after which I can either return here or ride to the wagon and make it my abode, as I have already done for so many months."

"Nay," said Anuti, "you shall certainly not do that. There is ample room in this house for you, and so long as you remain in Masakisale you must consent to be my most welcome and honoured guest."

So it was arranged; and then, after a little further conversation, and reiterated warnings to be on my guard against every possible description of machination on the part of the queen, I mounted and rode back to the palace at a hand gallop, determined to get through what was certain to be a very unpleasant business forthwith. As 'Mfuni came out, at my approach, to receive my horse, I bade him walk the animal to and fro, instead of unsaddling him, and hold himself ready to accompany me to new quarters upon my reappearance. Then, entering the palace, I made my way straight to the queen's apartments, and sent in a message craving an immediate interview.

I was admitted at once, and found Her Majesty occupying her usual seat upon the divan. At my entrance she dismissed her attendants; and, as soon as we were alone, invited me by a gesture to seat myself at her side. But I declined, saying that, as my interview would be but brief, I preferred to stand.

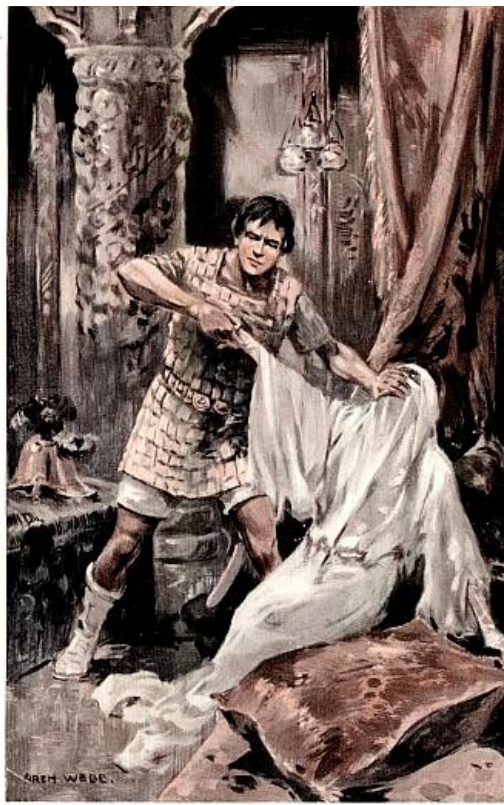
"Nay, Chia'gnosi," she returned, "it will not be so brief as you appear to think; therefore sit, I pray you, if not by my side, then opposite me, for it wearies me to see you standing. That is well!"—as I drew up an ottoman and seated myself upon it.

Bimbane kept silence for a short time, resting her chin upon her clasped hands and regarding me with an inexpressibly mournful expression; and as I returned her gaze I felt my anger against her dying away, and a great pity for her taking its place in my heart. She looked so small, so frail, so utterly helpless and lonely and miserable that all the innate chivalry of my nature arose and clamoured that it was impossible she could be guilty of the crimes imputed to her; that I had judged her hastily and unfairly; that I had wronged her by lending a too ready ear to her declared enemies; and that in deciding to forsake her I had been guilty of a base and cowardly thing. Then a faint smile of dawning triumph, which lighted up her eyes and irradiated her face, warned me of my danger, warned me that again she was exercising her evil influence upon me, and that I was fast succumbing to it; it reminded me of the dreadful state of helplessness to which Anuti had been reduced by that influence; and I pulled myself together and braced my mental powers to meet and resist it. And as I did so the smile of triumph vanished from her eyes, and was replaced by a gleam of malice and hatred so deadly that although it was but momentary I recoiled in something that, if it was not fear, was very closely akin to it. Yet I was glad that I had caught that fleeting expression, for it reassured me; it afforded me a transitory glimpse of the woman's true character, and taught me more thoroughly, perhaps, than anything else could that Anuti and his friends were right and justified in their denunciation of her character. And I think she must have realised in that moment that she had betrayed herself and lost her hold upon me, for when she spoke her voice was harsh and bitter, and full of scornful anger.

"So, Chia'gnosi," she said, "you, to whom I extended a cordial welcome to my kingdom, whom I made a general of my army, upon whom I heaped benefits innumerable, even to the bestowal upon you of all the shining stones I possess, and which you have so greatly craved—you whom I deemed the very soul and embodiment of chivalry and honour and truth—you have stooped so low as to clandestinely consort with my enemies, to hearken to their slanderous tongues, to credit the base falsehoods about me which they have poured into your ears; and now you have the assurance to come to me with the purpose of telling me that I am so utterly vile that even you, false and craven that you are, will no longer remain my guest, from fear of contamination!"

"I don't quite know how you came by your information, unless it was by means of your accursed magic," I said, "but in the main you are right. There are one or two errors with regard to detail, such, for example, as your reference to the 'falsehoods' told me about you by Anuti and his friends, and also with regard to my reason for quitting the palace. But, after all, these discrepancies are really of no moment, and may be allowed to pass. That which is of moment is the fact that I cannot possibly remain any longer the guest of a woman who has been guilty of such crimes as you have perpetrated, nor can I submit to the degradation of retaining any of the gifts which I have accepted from you. I shall leave them all in my rooms when I presently quit them; and my regret at abandoning them will be much less than that which I shall always feel since it has been my misfortune to have been brought into contact with yourself, and thus to have learned beyond question that such women sometimes actually exist."

"Oh, Chia'gnosi, you are cruel, bitterly cruel and unjust to say such things to me!" she cried; and then, to my utter consternation, she burst into a perfect passion of weeping, and again I felt my heart insidiously softening and warming toward her, she looked so utterly woebegone, so terribly helpless and friendless. But the moment that I became conscious of the feeling I brought my will power to bear and determinedly repressed it; although I confess that I never in my life had a more difficult task than that which I battled with while Bimbane proceeded to explain tearfully that although she had undoubtedly done those deeds with which Anuti and his friends charged; her, she had been compelled to do them in the interests of good government and for reasons of state, and that if I would only



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"I DREW THE RING FROM HER THUMB"

listen to her explanation I would see that they different interpretation from that put upon them by her enemies.

were capable of a very

And I listened—I will do myself the justice to say that I listened patiently to the woman's attempt to exculpate herself by proving that her crimes were really not crimes at all, but grim necessities of the peculiar position which she occupied as ruler of a turbulent and restive people. But, having steeled myself against the effect of her tears and her pathetic assumption of helplessness, I was able instantly to detect and draw her attention to the weak points of her defence; with the result that at last, realising, I suppose, that she had lost her power over me and that I was no longer to be cajoled, she suddenly abandoned her efforts and flew into a furious passion, abusing me most abominably, and heaping upon my head every opprobrious epithet that she could think of—and she was able to think of a good many.

"And you are fool enough to think that after such treatment as I have received at your hands I will let you go?" she shrieked in a perfect frenzy of fury. "No, Chia'gnosi; you have humiliated me as I believe no woman was ever before humiliated by a man, and since you have scorned my friendship you shall learn what it means to incur my hate. See!" and she flashed the ring on her thumb before my eyes. "By the power which the possession of this stone confers upon me I slay all your cattle. So! they are dead!" and she dashed her clenched right fist toward me. "Now it is impossible for you to leave the country, unless you choose to adventure into the wilderness without your wagon. But even that you shall not do. You shall leave this palace, as you have determined, at once, but it shall be to lodge in the cage next that occupied by the captive man-monkeys; and as soon as I have disposed of Anuti and his friends I will proclaim a festival, at which you and those of my enemies who survive shall do battle with an equal number of the monkeys, for the delectation and amusement of the people! Aha, Chia'gnosi, it will be a rare sight to watch you, unarmed, fighting for your life against the biggest and most savage man-monkey that my hunters can capture! Ha, release me, brute! What would you do to me? Help—!"

Although I had not the smallest belief in the woman's power to destroy my cattle by any alleged occult virtue pertaining to her wonderful ring, the sight of it flashed before my eyes in so provocative a manner reminded me of my almost forgotten promise to Siluce to take the jewel from Bimbane, if I could; and, exasperated at last beyond endurance by her abuse and threats, I sprang to my feet, seized her right hand in mine, and, while I stifled her cries for help with my left, drew the ring from her thumb and thrust it upon my own little finger, animated by some sudden impulse for which I could not in the least account.

And as the ring passed from her possession into mine, the change that occurred in us both was startling in the extreme, particularly so as regarded Bimbane. For a few seconds after I released her she remained absolutely silent and motionless, as though scarcely able to realise what had happened; then, instead of summoning her guards and handing me over to their custody, she instantly became abjectly apologetic and pleading, entreating me to restore her ring in exchange for anything and everything that I might choose to demand. She offered me gold and diamonds without limit, perfect liberty to remain in the country as its honoured guest as long as I pleased, and all the help I might need in the transport of my spoils when it should please me to start upon my return journey; in short, she gave me clearly to understand that I need set no limits upon my demands if I would but restore the ring to her. But as for me, the moment that I slipped the jewel upon my finger I became conscious of a strange, new, exhilarating sense of power, of ability to do things, of being generally complete master of the situation; and I determined that I would keep the ring, if for no other reason than that Bimbane seemed to attach such an extraordinary value to it, and to require its restoration so badly. I therefore left her at last, quite exhausted with her fruitless entreaties, and doubled up in a little, shapeless, miserably sobbing heap on the divan; and as I went forth from the apartment I summoned her waiting women and directed them to go in and attend to the queen, as I feared that Her Majesty was unwell.

Chapter Eighteen.

The Climax of the Adventure.

Hastening across to the suite of apartments I had thus far occupied, I discarded the splendid garments which had been presented to me by the queen, and in which I had been wont to appear in public, and resumed the somewhat worn and faded suit in which I had arrived at Masakisale; after which I turned my back upon the rooms, as I thought for ever, and descended to where 'Mfuni awaited me, walking my horse to and fro before the main entrance to the palace. The Mashona seemed somewhat startled to behold me once more clad in my shabby travelling garments; but without wasting any time in explaining matters I simply bade him hasten to the wagon, ascertain how things were in that quarter, and report to me at Anuti's house, which I pointed out to him. Then, urging Prince into a gallop, I made the best of my way to Anuti's abode, anxious to communicate to him what had passed at my final interview with Bimbane, and to take counsel with him as to what was best to be done under the circumstances.

He was at home when I arrived, and might indeed have been watching for me, for he came forth to me as I dismounted.

"Aha, Chia'gnosi," he exclaimed, "welcome to my house, for I perceive that something of import has happened at the palace, and that you have indeed left it, as you resolved to do!"

"Yes," said I. "I have left the palace, never to return to it; for I have quarrelled with Bimbane beyond all possibility of reconciliation. And now, if you are not afraid to give me lodgment for a short time, I will very gladly avail myself of your offered hospitality; for I want to tell you exactly what has happened, and to obtain your advice."

"Pray, enter, and again welcome," he replied. "No, I am not at all afraid to receive you as my guest; for you will be perfectly safe here, and— But what is that I see on your finger?—surely not the magic ring of Bimbane!"

He seized my right hand, stared incredulously at the ring on my little finger, and then, murmuring: "It is, it is!" sank upon one knee before me, pressed the ring to his forehead, and exclaimed:

"Salutations and homage, O high and mighty King! I know not how it has come to pass, but this is a great and happy day for Bandokolo; for at last the dominion has passed out of the hands of that cruel and wicked woman, under whose galling yoke the country has groaned for unnumbered generations, and has passed into yours, who will rule us mercifully, wisely, and justly. Great is my pride and joy, O Chia'gnosi, that mine is the privilege to be the first to hail you king. Deign to honour my poor house with your gracious presence for a few hours, Your Majesty, while I go forth and proclaim the glad tidings to the nobles and chiefs here in Masakisale, and make arrangements for the news to be transmitted to the uttermost parts of the kingdom—"

"Stop, stop, for mercy's sake stop your wild talk, and tell me what is the matter, and what you mean by all this rubbish about my being king!" I exclaimed, as soon as I had sufficiently recovered from my amazement to speak, at the same time dragging Anuti to his feet.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten!" replied Anuti. "Naturally Your Majesty does not understand. How should you, since no one has explained? In a few words, then, the matter stands thus. The possession of that ring carries with it the sovereignty of Bandokolo, and since you now possess it, you are, in virtue thereof, the monarch of the country; and right glad will all be that such is the case. But, if I may be permitted to ask, how passed the ring into your possession? For the tradition runs that it may only pass as a free gift from the reigning monarch to his—or her—chosen successor when the former is at the point of death; to attempt to steal it, or to take it by force, brings upon the would-be robber the doom of a mysterious, terrible death, otherwise Bimbane the Cruel would not have been permitted to reign so long. Yet I find it difficult to imagine that—that—"

"She surrendered it to me of her own free will?" I interrupted. "You are right, Anuti, she did not. We quarrelled; she threatened to set you and me, among others, to fight the man-monkeys, and declared that by virtue of this ring she would destroy—has indeed destroyed—the remainder of my team of oxen. This made me angry; and in my anger I flung myself upon her, snatched the ring from her thumb, and placed it upon my own finger. And—and—there it is, as you see," I finished lamely.

"Yes. And you still live!" said Anuti thoughtfully. "It is wonderful; and it is proof conclusive that you are destined to be our king."

"Nonsense, man," I retorted; "it is proof of nothing of the kind. I have no desire to be your king. All that I want is to find the daughter of my friend, rescue her from captivity, and return to my own country, taking with me, by your goodwill, as many of the shining stones as will enable me to retrieve my ruined fortunes. Therefore, permit me—" and before Anuti knew what I was about I withdrew the fateful ring from my own finger and slipped it on his.

"There!" I continued, "now you are the king, which is as it should be. The Bandokolo will rejoice to have you as their sovereign, while, as for me, if you require any help or advice that I can give, it shall be freely yours; and when once you are firmly established upon the throne I will bid you farewell and go my way. But what about Bimbane; what will you do with her?"

"There will be neither trouble nor difficulty in disposing of her, for she has not a friend in all Bandokolo," answered Anuti. "It will but be necessary for me to display this ring and even her bodyguards will gladly transfer their allegiance to me. And perhaps you are right, Chia'gnosi, in the matter of the kingship; it is better that the Bandokolo should be governed by one of themselves than by a stranger. But you have this day done a service to the Bandokolo which we shall not forget, for by your action in wresting this ring from the queen, and, with it, all her power and authority, you have saved the country from civil war, with all its attendant horrors and slaughter. And now it will be

well that the nobles and chiefs should be instantly informed of what has happened; therefore, if you will excuse me for a short time, I will dispatch the necessary messengers."

Anuti had been absent about three-quarters of an hour when a servant announced that two of my natives desired speech with me; and when they were introduced they proved to be 'Mfuni and Piet, who had encountered each other on the main road and now returned together, bringing with them the astounding news that the whole of my oxen had suddenly dropped dead while feeding, at the precise moment—so far as I was able to fix it—when Bimbane had pronounced their death warrant! It was a very extraordinary thing, much too extraordinary, I thought, to be a mere coincidence; yet I was not so much astonished as I might otherwise have been, for I had by this time been long enough in Bandokolo to have realised that many surprising and startling things happened there which would have been regarded as impossible in more civilised countries.

But this was not the only, or even the most startling, occurrence of that eventful day; for Anuti had scarcely returned to the house, accompanied by half a dozen of the most powerful nobles, whom he had been lucky enough to encounter, when a wild-eyed messenger arrived from the palace with the astounding news that the queen was dead, having taken poison! This news, if true, would of course simplify matters immensely, since, the queen being childless, her husband would, according to the laws of Bandokolo, succeed her; and accordingly we all hastened to the palace to investigate the statement.

Arrived at the royal residence, we found the place in a state of wild commotion—although the excitement was not so intense as to make the squadron of bodyguards then on duty forget to accord the royal salute to Anuti upon his entrance. We were informed that the body of the queen was in her sleeping chamber, and thither we hastened, to find the apartment in possession of about a dozen physicians, who had hurried to the palace upon the summons of the chief lady-in-waiting, and who had just completed their examination of the body. They all agreed that death was the result of poison, self-administered; and indeed there seemed to be no room for any other conclusion, for when the corpse was discovered a tiny flask was found tightly grasped in the right hand, the odour clinging to which, and to the lips of the dead woman, proclaimed beyond all question that it had contained bicari, a decoction prepared from the root of the combuti plant, and one of the most deadly toxics known to the Africans of the interior.

The fact of the queen's death being fully established, Anuti gave orders that the body should be prepared in the usual way for public cremation on the following day, after which the chamber was to be closed and sealed, and a guard of honour mounted before it. In the meantime, while these orders were being carried out, we all adjourned to the council chamber, where we were soon afterward joined by several other nobles and chiefs, who had been hastily summoned; and a council was held at which it was decided that, for expediency's sake, Anuti should at once take up his abode at the palace, and that he should be proclaimed king that same evening. Mounted messengers were accordingly sent forth into the city, summoning the people to assemble before the palace at an hour corresponding to ten o'clock; and at that hour the ceremony of proclamation was duly performed.

The scene was one of considerable barbaric splendour, chiefly by reason of the magnificent dresses worn by the various personages who took part in it. It happened that all the nobles and chiefs who were really of paramount importance were dwellers in the city. It was consequently possible for every one of them to be present; and as they all held high rank either in the army or what may be called the civil service, and wore the full-dress uniform of their rank upon this occasion, the display of golden armour and weapons, richly embroidered robes and banners, and jewelled and feathered head-dresses glittering in the somewhat smoky light of thousands of blazing torches presented a spectacle which I shall never forget.

The act of proclamation was performed from the steps leading up to the main entrance to the palace, upon the top landing of which stood Anuti, clad in the resplendent uniform of a general, supported by the nobles and chiefs—and also by myself, in my uniform, which I had resumed at the urgent request of the king and his supporters; while the herald and trumpeters also stood upon the steps, but halfway down. The actual ceremony was of very brief duration, and simply consisted of seven blasts upon the golden trumpets, followed by the formal statement by the herald that, it having pleased the spirits who presided over the destinies of the Bandokolo nation to summon Bimbane to her long-deferred rest, her husband, the noble and illustrious Anuti, would take up the reins of government and henceforth rule the people. Might the king live for ever! Upon which the trumpets again sounded seven blasts, the assembled multitude expressed their approval by loud and prolonged applause, the nobles and chiefs present came forward in the order of their rank and did homage to the new king, the royal bodyguard, paraded in full strength for the occasion, deployed in front of the steps and gave the royal salute, and the ceremony was at an end. At Anuti's urgent request I resumed occupation of the apartments which I had lived in during my stay in Masakisale; and as I did not wish to be further mixed up in the political situation, and was moreover somewhat fatigued, I at once retired to them and was soon sound asleep.

The following day was scarcely less strenuous than that which had preceded it, though in a different way; for it had been arranged that the obsequies of the dead queen should take place at sunset, and all day long the several Court officials concerned were busily engaged in making the necessary preparations.

The funeral pyre was erected in the centre of a spacious basin among the hills at the head of the valley, some six miles from the palace, and early in the afternoon the inhabitants began to gather in front of the palace, to witness and take part in the spectacle. Then, about four o'clock, the royal bodyguard, with their regimental banners twisted into a knot and bound to the staves with broad white ribbons in token of mourning, paraded before the palace, and the trumpeters sounded seven blasts; whereupon the funeral cortege made its appearance, issuing from the main entrance to the palace. First stalked the royal standard-bearer, carrying the royal standard, knotted and bound to its staff with white ribbon; then came the royal bier, which consisted of a platform borne by twelve men attired wholly in white—the mourning colour—and draped with white silk, heavily fringed with gold bullion, which swept the ground. Upon this platform was placed the royal throne of ivory heavily mounted in gold; and upon the throne, and securely fastened to it, was seated the body of Bimbane, fully attired in her robes of state, and crowned with a gold coronet set with uncut diamonds and ornamented with the crimson wings of the orilu, which only a monarch might wear.

Then came Anuti, alone, in his full uniform, closely followed by the nobles and chiefs of the nation—among whom the new king had insisted that I should take my place. Slowly and with solemn step we descended the broad flight of stone steps until we reached the spacious quadrangle at their foot, and here our attendants led forward our steeds and we mounted, Prince, with his glossy black coat, being conspicuous among the array of zebras which constituted the mounts of the rest.

As the bier reached the quadrangle, a trumpet blast rang out, and the royal bodyguard arranged itself into three sides of a hollow square, into which the bier passed, when, with the royal standard-bearer riding in front, the banners of the guard immediately following him, and the trumpeters between them and the mounted troops blowing long, wailing blasts at regular intervals, the cortege proceeded slowly and solemnly along the road, the bier, surrounded by the bodyguard, being followed by Anuti and the rest of us, while the inhabitants in general brought up the rear.

In this fashion the funeral cortege passed along the main road through the city to the scene of the cremation, the march occupying just two hours. We reached the funeral pyre as the last rays of the sun were gilding the tops of the trees which hemmed in the valley, when the bodyguard formed a hollow square round the pyre, with Anuti and the nobles inside it, while the inhabitants ranged themselves upon the adjacent hillside to witness, for the first time in their lives, the spectacle of a royal cremation. About a hundred priests, arrayed in long white robes, were gathered about the pyre when we reached it; and as soon as the bier, with its dead occupant, had been deposited upon the summit of the pyre, the arch-priest began the funeral service, which lasted about a quarter of an hour. By the time that this was over it was quite dark, the surrounding tree tops standing out black against the star-studded sky; and only an occasional faint, evanescent gleam here and there of starlight upon golden armour told of the presence of all that multitude.

Then, the religious service being at an end, a lighted torch was mysteriously produced from somewhere and handed to Anuti, who, approaching the pyre, thrust the burning brand into the heart of it and retired again to his former place. For a second or two the darkness continued; then here and there about the pyre small wreaths of smoke floated out, quickly followed by little tongues of flame, rapidly increasing in intensity until within a few minutes the whole of the upper part of the pyre was ablaze, and the basin, with its crowds of splendidly attired and mounted officials, was brilliantly illuminated by the ruddy glare. I think the bier, and possibly the body also, must have been treated with some highly combustible preparation, for I noticed that the moment the flames reached them they seized upon them with avidity, so that within ten minutes of the first kindling the bier and the body were both enwrapped in a roaring volume of vivid flame, in which the corpse seemed to shrink and shrivel so rapidly that when at length the top of the pyre collapsed and fell in, scarcely a vestige of bier or body was to be seen. The fire blazed so furiously—throwing out an almost unendurable heat—that within half an hour the pyre had become reduced to a heap of ruddy, dull-glowing ashes; whereupon Anuti gave a signal, the trumpeters blew seven blasts by way of final salute to the dead, the white ribbons were torn from the banners and cast upon the flickering flames, the banners were unknotted, and, forming up in military array, the mounted contingent wheeled and departed, making their way back to the palace, and leaving the pedestrians to return home at their leisure.

On the following day a golden urn, containing ashes asserted to be those of the dead queen, was deposited by the priests in the funeral chamber beneath the palace, and Bimbane, with all her faults and crimes, finally disappeared for ever from among the Bandokolo.

The accession of Anuti to the throne was the cause of general rejoicing throughout the country; and in accordance with custom the new king proclaimed a grand festival in celebration of the event. But as the festival—also in accordance with custom—necessarily consisted to a great extent of fights between condemned criminals and wild animals, especially man-monkeys, I declined to remain and be present; and Anuti, knowing my views with regard to such barbarous spectacles, did not press the point. On the contrary, he fully sympathised with me, and would very gladly have abolished the custom, but public opinion was too strong even for him; the sports were so highly appreciated that to have suppressed them would have very seriously impaired his popularity, and this he dared not risk just then, at the very beginning of his reign. Therefore he did everything he could to expedite my departure, presenting me with a beautiful team of twenty-four thoroughly broken zebras to take the place of my slain oxen, lending me a driver to instruct mine in the handling of them; also he insisted upon my retaining every one of the gifts bestowed upon me by the late queen, and added to them a second goatskin sackful of magnificent diamonds; and finally he instructed my old friend Pousa to escort me with his squadron to the frontier, more as a guard of honour than by way of protection, for by that time my fame had spread to the uttermost parts of the kingdom, and no Bandokolo would have dreamed of attempting to molest me. And, thus magnificently rewarded for services that, after all, I at least regarded as utterly insignificant, I took my departure from Masakisale on my homeward journey, exactly a week after the celebration of the funeral obsequies of Queen Bimbane, much to the regret, I was assured, of all whose acquaintance I had made.

My departure from Masakisale was a very different affair from that of my entrance into it. For, although I was not permitted to suspect it at the time, there can be no doubt that I entered the capital of Bandokolo virtually as a prisoner, and was an object of curiosity and suspicion to everybody who set eyes upon me; while now I went forth accompanied by expressions of regard and regret from the entire inhabitants of the city, who seemed to have turned out *en masse* to witness my departure and to bid me farewell. Also, excluding what remained of my ammunition and provisions, my wagon was loaded to its utmost capacity with gold and precious stones; and it no longer crawled over the ground at a bare three miles an hour, but proceeded at quite double that speed behind the sturdy, sprightly, high-spirited team of twenty-four zebras, which would have travelled half as fast again had I not determined to work them very lightly, in view of the long, toilsome journey that lay before me.

And here, for the gratification of the curious, I may as well describe the manner in which these animals were attached to the wagon. I suppose everybody by this time knows, either from pictures or from having seen the thing itself, what a South African wagon is like; and also knows that it is drawn by a team of from twelve to eighteen oxen yoked together in pairs, the cleverest pair being yoked next the wagon to the disselboom—which answers to the ordinary carriage pole where a pair of horses are driven abreast—while the remainder of the team are yoked, also in pairs, to

the trek chain, which is attached to the extremity of the disselboom. Now, oxen pull upon a yoke which rests upon their necks and is attached thereto by a strip of rein passing under their throats, and this constitutes the whole of their very primitive harness. But it was obvious that such an arrangement would be quite unsuited to my new team of zebras: consequently harness had to be especially made for them, consisting of a breast and shoulder strap, the former being made long enough to form a pair of traces attachable to a splinter bar; there was also added a headstall with a single rein, which was fastened to the trek chain. This arrangement served for all but the leading pair of zebras, the off animal of which was fitted with a saddle upon which the driver sat postilion fashion, guiding the leaders and regulating the pace of the whole team.

During the first two days a Bandokolo drove the team, while 'Ngulubi, my Bantu voorlouper, rode beside him on one of my horses, watching the process and receiving instruction; but after that 'Ngulubi himself undertook the driving, while the Bandokolo rode alongside and continued his instruction. Thus, by the time that we reached the frontier, 'Ngulubi was quite qualified to act as driver, while he, Jan, and Piet had also learned to look after the zebras when they were outspanned.

With such a spanking team to draw the wagon, we took only eight and a half days to cover the distance between Masakisale and the frontier, instead of seventeen days, as on the outward journey; and here Pousa and his squadron regretfully bade me farewell, the captain's regrets at parting from me being mitigated to a great extent by the gift of a shaving mirror and a burning-glass, the latter being esteemed by him at about the value that I attached to my two sacks of diamonds.

Our farewells were spoken at the precise spot where we had met on my outward journey, but I did not pause there, pushing some twenty miles into the defile where we had seen the man-monkeys before we outspanned for the night. Two days later we passed the grave of the unhappy Siluce, and I had the melancholy satisfaction of seeing that, thus far, it had not been disturbed by wild animals. And on the following day we arrived at the spot where, according to the vision in which Bimbane had revealed to me the route I must follow in order to find Nell LeStrange, it became necessary for us to forsake our former trail and enter upon the new one. I took up this new trail without hesitation, the conviction being strong upon me that I should be right in so doing; and the event justified me, for on the evening of the sixty-second day after my departure from Masakisale I arrived upon the north bank of the Pongola River, and was informed by an astonished Kafir whom I encountered that Zululand, the country of the redoubtable Dingaana, lay upon the opposite shore of the stream. Of course I did not accomplish this journey of two months' duration through a savage country without meeting with a few adventures, yet they were surprisingly few, all things considered, for I hunted now only for food for myself and my followers; moreover, they were of a very similar character to those of my outward journey, with a few unimportant variations in details. They may, therefore, be passed over with merely this brief reference to them, since to record them in detail would only render my story of altogether too unwieldy dimensions, without adding very greatly to its interest.

Arrived upon the Zululand border, I lost no time in dispatching a message to the formidable and somewhat unscrupulous king of the country, requesting his permission to pass through his territory on my way to Cape Colony from the north; and four days later 'Mfuni, who was my messenger for the occasion, returned with a reply to the effect that Dingaana granted my request, with the proviso that I did not linger unduly upon my journey, and that I should call upon him at his Place, Umgungundhlovu, on my way, to pay my respects—and also, as I fully understood, tribute, in the shape of a handsome present, for the privilege. This, of course, suited me admirably, as I intended to call upon the king in any case; and on the morning following the return of 'Mfuni we forded the river and entered upon the somewhat risky journey across Zululand, taking things fairly easy, as I wished to keep my team of zebras in good condition, in case it should be necessary to hurry, later on, after my interview with the king.

Two days later, about mid-afternoon, we arrived at Umgungundhlovu (or the Multitude of Houses), and before we reached it the leading features of the landscape began to assume an appearance of familiarity, until finally I beheld with my bodily eyes the entire scene, complete down to the smallest detail, which Mafuta, the Basuto nyanga, had revealed to me in a vision some six months before. There was the great "town"—containing, I suppose, quite two thousand huts—built upon the crest of a gently rising hill, and completely surrounded by a stout, high palisade with an open gateway in it through which passed a number of people going about their business, and merely pausing for a minute or two to gaze in wonder at my handsome team of zebras; and there, too, close at hand, was the singular-looking hog-backed kopje, with its straggling bushes and its tumbled masses of dark rock, upon which were perched some fifty or sixty vultures that seemed to be quite at home there. Little did I dream of the ghastly tragedy of which that weird kopje had been the scene a few months earlier, when, on the preceding sixth of February, the treacherous and ruthless king had caused the massacre upon it of the ill-fated Boer general, Pieter Retief, and some sixty of his followers; otherwise I should have been a good deal more uneasy in my mind than I actually was when I gave the order to outspan.

Yet, although I had no knowledge of it, the memory of that tragedy, and the fear lest the whites should eventually determine to avenge it, proved of the utmost service to me in my negotiations with the savage monarch; for when, adopting my usual tactics of "bluffing" boldly in my dealings with savages, I informed Dingaana bluntly that my object in visiting him was to demand the surrender of the white 'ntombozaan whom he held in captivity, I saw at once that, for some reason which I could not then guess, he was very greatly perturbed. But, like the savage he was, he also attempted to "bluff", so that the matter soon resolved itself into a "bluffing match" between us, in which, although I did not know it, I held the advantage. First the king indignantly denied all knowledge of the girl for whom I was then seeking; then, when I not only insisted that she was in his power, but also minutely described her and her two girl companions, just as I had seen them in my vision, he retorted by declaring that it was in his mind to kill me and my followers, destroy my wagon, and turn my zebras loose, so that no trace should be left of any of us. Upon this I countered by asking him whether he really believed me such a fool as to venture into his country without sending a messenger to my countrymen by another way, informing them where I had gone, and asking them to investigate my fate if I did not arrive at home in due course. This retort proved to be my winning card, for he gave in at once, acknowledging Nell's presence in the place; but insinuating that, since he had kept her alive and treated her well ever since the Tembu had sent her to him as a present, I ought to buy her of him. Of course, after this, the remainder

of our negotiation was merely a matter of bargaining, and as I was not at all disposed to prolong the agony by being over particular in the matter of price, another half-hour saw the dear child sobbing happily in my arms, in exchange for practically the whole of the “truck” that still remained to me.

Nell sat up quite late that night talking with me and telling her adventures, beginning with that awful time when she awoke to find her room full of armed Tembu warriors, who forced her to rise from her bed, dress, and go with them; but although her tale was interesting enough to me, I have no space in which to record it here.

One incident, however, struck me as being sufficiently peculiar to be worthy of mention, and it was this. She told me how, when she had been at Dingaan’s Place nearly a year, she left the town one morning, accompanied by two young Zulu girls, to go down to a favourite haunt of hers near the river; “and,” said she, “when we were passing just about here, where this wagon is outspanned, a very strange thing happened. For, although I was not thinking of you at all just then, I suddenly believed for an instant that I saw you standing two or three yards away, with your hands outstretched and your lips moving as though you wanted to speak to me. I seemed to see you so distinctly that for a moment I was quite startled—indeed I believe I actually stopped under the impression that you were really there; but, as I did so, you vanished, and although I remember looking back I did not see you again.” Now, the most remarkable thing about this occurrence is that, by carefully questioning the child, I was at length forced to the conclusion that it had happened at the precise moment when I was beholding the vision conjured up for me by Mafuta, the Basuto nyanga.

We inspanned with the arrival of the dawn on the following morning, and, pushing the zebras to their utmost capacity, swept down through Zululand into Natal, and thence more leisurely through Kaffraria to Cape Colony, arriving in Somerset East on the seventeenth day after our departure from Umgungundhlovu, to the amazement and delight of Henderson and a host of other friends who had long given me up as “wiped out”. I told them as much of my story as I deemed fit, though not all of it by any means; neither did I ask anybody’s advice, for my wanderings in the wilds had given me so much self-reliance that I felt quite able to depend upon my own judgment. In the first place I negotiated with the manager of the local bank for the exchange of five hundred pounds’ worth of gold for coin, and then, learning that there were ships loading for England at Algoa Bay, I installed ‘Mfuni, Piet, Jan, and ‘Ngulubi on my estate, leaving the horses and zebras with them to be looked after during my absence, packed up my belongings, and transferred Nell and myself to Port Elizabeth, where I engaged passages for us both on a ship which was on the point of sailing for home, leaving us just time to procure our outfit prior to our departure.

A pleasant voyage of a little under three months ended in our finding ourselves in London in the early part of February, 1839, and although we found the climate of England exceedingly cold and unpleasant after the brilliant sunshine and warmth of South Africa, we managed to enjoy ourselves thoroughly during the ensuing two months. Then, with Nell’s cordial approval, I put her to a first-rate school at Bath, where she remained until her eighteenth birthday, emerging therefrom a very beautiful, accomplished, and lovable young woman.

Meanwhile, having disposed of Nell for the time being, I next turned my attention to the disposal of my treasure. The Bank of England took all my gold from me at its current value, thus placing me in immediate possession of abundant funds; and eventually, before returning to South Africa, I succeeded in finding a firm of jewellers who were prepared, for a consideration, to undertake the task of disposing of my diamonds, a small parcel at a time, so as not to flood the market. The reader may gather some idea of the number of those diamonds when I say that now, at the time of writing, this process is still going on, yet I have nearly half of the original number left. The arrangement, although no doubt exceedingly profitable to the firm of jewellers in question, has provided me with a princely annual income, much of which has been spent in restoring and extending Bella Vista, which is now one of the finest and best-stocked estates in the whole of South Africa.

Need I add that she who was once known as Nell Lestrangle has been for many years the beloved and cherished mistress of the beautiful house that replaced the one in which the tragedy of more than fifty years ago occurred?

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