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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FORGING THE BLADES: A TALE OF THE ZULU REBELLION ***

Bertram Mitford

"Forging the Blades"

Chapter One.

The Tragedy.

The river swirled on through the heat, the sweltering, fever-breathing heat. The long, deep reach made but scant murmur, save where the boughs of a luxuriant vegetation dipped on its surface. Above, on either hand, masses of rolling verdure, tall forest trees, undergrowth in rich profusion, and, high up against the blue sky, battlemented rock walls.

Two dark objects relieved the shimmering smoothness of the surface of the reach—two minute dark objects to the ordinary observer, afloat, motionless. Yet why should these remain motionless instead of floating down with the fairly strong, though smooth, current? Well, there might have been, behind each, about twelve feet of ugly, scaly saurian, whose powerful under-water stroke kept them stationary, while watchful, against the descending stream.

A grassy glade slopes down to the bank, tailing away inland into a path something like a "ride" in an English game covert. Great trees, rising overhead, shade this, in a dimness which shuts out, save in a faint network, the glare of the molten sun. And it is at present occupied by two horses and a man.

The horses still have their saddles on, though the girths are loosened. The animals are grazing, their bridles trailing on the ground. Suddenly both throw up their heads and snort, then walk quickly away, further up the forest path. The man, who is standing up, gazing meditatively out upon the river reach, notices this and turns. Then he advances a step or two, and halts suddenly. For there is a movement in the grass a few yards in front, and immediately from this rises the head and neck of a large green mamba.

Instinctively the man's hand goes to his revolver, then he pauses. The snake is hissing viciously. More of the long neck appears, waving to and fro as though preparing for a spring. This is a peculiarly fierce and aggressive species when disturbed, and the man knows it. He knows also that the chances of being able to stop its rush with a bullet are small. He abandons the firearm and starts another plan.

He begins whistling in a low but peculiarly clear note. The effect is magical. The angry, excited waving of the sinuous neck ceases. The head, still raised, is motionless as though under some new and enthralling influence. Clearly on the part of its owner hostilities are suspended.

He sustains the spell. Tune after tune trills forth in that clear note, and the reptile, its deadly head still raised, its original fury dulled to an almost placid expression, still listens. To the performer the position now seems ridiculous, then rather interesting. He has never set up as a snake-charmer before. For now, indeed, the horror with which the much dreaded reptile had inspired him has given way to a subtle sort of sympathy. He no longer fears it. He seems to have tamed it, and feels accordingly. It is a strange and appropriate picture: the man and the dreaded serpent, the dim shadowing away of the tangled forest, the two horses snuffing with uneasy curiosity in the background, the river reach, still and deep-flowing, with the muzzles of its two voracious denizens causing a light ripple on its surface.

All thought of destruction has faded from the mind of the human actor in this weird performance. He continues to evolve his natural music, even advancing a few steps nearer to his grim listener. The latter shows no sign of fear or resentment. Then an interruption occurs.

Crash! The motionless, uplifted neck of the serpent seems to fly nearly in half, and the great coils beat and burst convulsively in the grass. The man turns. Another man is standing behind him holding a shotgun, one barrel of which is still smoking.

"What the devil did you do that for?" says the first angrily.

The other laughs, a thick sort of laugh, and by no means a pleasant one.

"Do that for?" he echoes, speaking with somewhat of a Jewish tone and accent. "Can't I shoot a blighted snake without having to ask your leave?"

"You idiot. I was in the thick of a most interesting experiment, and you've spoilt it all by your infernal and officious interference."

"Interesting experiment? I call it disgusting."

"Here, drop that gun sharp, or I'll blow your head into the river."

The Jewish-looking man with the shotgun starts. The other's revolver is pointing right at his chest, and there is no mistaking the determination in his steely eyes. He knows full well that there is every reason why his life is in mortal peril. So he drops the gun sullenly into the grass.

"Now, then. Take five steps back from it. If you move otherwise you're dead."

There is no alternative but to obey, and this the threatened one does.

"Don't know if you've gone mad," he says. "Fooling with snakes must have sent you off your chump, I reckon."

"Do you? Well, you chose to fasten yourself on to me for your own purpose—to wit, blackmail. Now you are going to write down, here and now, something which will put it out of your power to try any more blackmail on me for ever."

"I'll see you damned first. I'll see you damned before I write anything."

"Will you? But you'll have to wait for that some time—till you've had a spell of damnation yourself first. Now, then, are you going to do it?"

"No."

The pistol cracks. It is a miss. The bullet has grazed the other's ear. The assailed is standing just on the edge of the bank with his back to the river.

"Don't move. I'll give you another chance. I'm aiming lower this time. You'll get it bang amidships, between wind and water, so to say, and—it'll hurt more. You were going to stick to me till I came to your price, were you? But you've stuck rather too tight."

"Oh, but—you'll swing for this," says the other, between dry, tremulous lips.

"Not much 'swing.' Why, nobody will be any the wiser. Not a soul has seen us together. You disappear, that's all. Well, are you going to do as I tell you? I've got everything here—well-filled fountain pen, and paper; strangely out of place in these surroundings, still, here they are."

The threatened man does not immediately reply. He is calculating his chances, and in a flash it is borne home to him that he has no chances. Opposite him stands a desperate and determined man dictating terms. These he will have to accept, and will feel anything but safe even then; for well he knows that the other has every motive for sending him out of the world.

"Well? Are you going to do it? I'll count five."

But hardly has he begun to do so than the situation changes. The man on the river brink suddenly puts his hand behind him, ducking low as he does so, to avoid the shot that simultaneously whizzes over where his chest had been a fraction of a second earlier. A revolver glints in his hand, but he is not quick enough. Before he can get in a shot the other pistol cracks again, this time with effect. He topples heavily into the water.

Yet he is struggling for his chance of life, but a glance is sufficient to show that he can hardly swim a stroke even if unwounded—which he is not. The other points his pistol for a final and decisive shot. But there is something in the wild appealing scream of the drowning wretch that unnerves him, that shatters his callous desperation. And then—the crocodiles.

"Make for this stump," he shouts, running down the bank. "I'll give you a hand out. Now I'm going to fire over your head."

There is nothing now to fire at. The two motionless objects have disappeared, nevertheless he sends a bullet into the water at the place where they had been.

Splashing, kicking, panting, the drowning man makes for the stump indicated. In a moment he will have seized it and the other is running down to help him. A yard further and he will be safe. His hand is already stretched forth to grasp it, when—with a frightful scream of agony and terror he disappears beneath the surface.

The survivor stands on the bank appalled.

"The 'crops' have got him, by God!" he exclaims. A moment back and he himself was ready to take this man's life—for all he knew he had taken it. But the final method of his death is so revolting, so ghastly that he could wish him safe back again. Well, at any rate he had done what he could to save him. It was not his fault if the fool chose to topple into the river. Yet, but for his own compulsion the said "fool" would not have been standing where he was.

He stands gazing down the reach. Is that blood, floating in a dark patch upon the surface lower down? No. Only the light and shade. And now, what to do next?

If the body should be found the bullet wound would tell its own tale. Even then the natives, already in a state of unrest, would be credited with another outrage. But if, as he surmised, the dead man had been pulled under by crocodiles, why then there would be little enough left of him to tell any tale at all. But—what of his horse?

This is something of a problem, and sitting down with his back against a yellowwood-tree he proceeds to think it out. Shall he shoot the animal and leave it there, for its return anywhere without its rider will, of course, raise an alarm? Then

an idea strikes him—rather an original and ghastly one. The dead mamba? Its poison glands are intact. Can he not by some means make the dead head bite the living animal? That would look less suspicious than a bullet hole, in the event of the carcase being found. But he doubts whether the venom will inject under the circumstances. No. He must sacrifice the poor brute to his own sense of self-preservation.

The two horses have withdrawn some little way, uneasy at the sound of the firing. Now he lounges quietly towards them, and has no difficulty in securing the bridle rein of both, trailing, as that is, upon the grass. He hitches his own mount to a strong sapling and leads the other to the river bank.

But this is not so easy. The horse, by some instinct, grasps that something is wrong, and demurs to leaving its fellow. At last by dint of patience and coolness it is induced to do so, and is led to an overhanging bank similar to that whence its owner took his last plunge. A quick shot. Four kicking hoofs turn convulsively upwards and the lifeless carcase falls into the deep water with a great splash. The man looks after it for a minute or two as it sinks.

“A pity, but necessary,” he reflects. “Too much cannonading, though. Sure to have been heard.” Then he reseats himself on the grass and lights his pipe.

“This is no murder,” run his reflections. “The fool brought it upon himself. He was given every chance.” Then, as the long period of blackmailing to which the dead man has subjected him comes back, he feels ruthless. Yet the tragedy just enacted seems to have left its mark. He has taken life—human life—and somehow the consideration weighs; in spite of the feeling of relief at having rid himself, and the world, of that most pestilent thing alive—a blackmailer. Should the circumstances leak out he would have to stand his trial for murder—an ugly word. But—how should they? This wild, lonely forest valley, seldom visited even by natives, never by whites, would keep its own secret. And nobody had seen them together.

As he sits there the whole situation seems to get upon his nerves, high-strung as they are after the quick excitement of the foregoing events. The whole atmosphere of the tangled forest, of the deep-flowing river, seems to breathe death. The dank, decaying vegetation, the dimness, the very airlessness of the sweltering valley—all this is not merely heat. It is asphyxia. It is strangely silent too; only the murmur of the river, and that remindful of its voracious denizens, breaks upon the fever-breathing stillness. He shivers, then, as with an effort, starts up, and going over to his horse, he hitches it, straps tighter the girths, and mounted, rides away down the dim, overhung path.

But not until six hours later does he remember that the dead man’s shotgun has been left lying just where it was dropped.

Chapter Two.

The Mystery.

For some time the thought uppermost in the mind of the survivor was that of relief. An incubus had fallen from him; a plague spot that for the last two or three years had been eating into and embittering his life, and rendering its otherwise achieved success null and void.

He did not regret what he had done. He had given the other every chance, and the other had refused to take it. If ever an act of self-defence had been committed it was this one. Self-defence, yes; for sooner or later the dead man’s exactions would have culminated in his own ruin and suicide. Even from the physical side of it the other had drawn a weapon upon him. And, in sum, what more loathsome and poisonous animal exists in the world than a blackmailer? This one had richly earned his fate.

That was all very well, but in came another side to the situation. How would the law regard it? Well, he supposed that in this wild, out-of-the-way part things were done of which the law never got wind at all. The country, of course, was within the administration of British jurisprudence, but then, as he had told the slain man, they had not been seen together, and he had done his best to destroy all possibility of the discovery of any *corpus delicti*.

But as he held on through the dark and solemn forest path he grew less elate. The hideous end of the dead man seemed to haunt him, the agony depicted on that livid distorted countenance, the whole seemed to rise up before him again in these gloomy shades. He concentrated his attention on the surroundings, vividly interesting in their wildness and novelty, in their strange denizens, specimens of which in the shape of bird or animal would now and again dash across his way, but still the haunting face was there.

The thing was absurd, he kept saying to himself. Men shot their fellows in battle in defence of their country or of their country’s cause, and thought no more about it. Some even bragged of it. Again, in a naval engagement, when a hostile ship was sunk, did not the other side do all it could to rescue the survivors struggling in the water? Well, this was precisely an analogy as regarded his own case, with this difference, that the rescued in the naval engagement had not the power to injure their rescuers further, whereas the man he had slain had, and certainly had the will. Yet, at the last moment, he had honestly attempted to rescue him, at any rate from that horrible fate.

What was this? Had he taken a wrong path in the course of his reflections? For his way seemed suddenly barred. A fallen trunk, massive and rotting with age lay across it, and there seemed no way round it but cutting one through a dense wall of creepers and coarse grass. Even then the path seemed to end.

He dismounted and, hitching his horse to a bough, climbed on to the fallen tree-trunk to reconnoitre. A snake glided off it, hissing, but too rapidly for him to be able to distinguish the species. No, there was no way beyond the trunk. It had evidently been disused since it was blocked, and some other taken. That other way he must have missed, and the only thing to do would be to find it.

Acting upon this idea he remounted and rode back upon his trail. After going some distance it occurred to him that the surroundings were unfamiliar, for he had neglected that safe rule that in travelling on a strange way for the first time, it is well to look back occasionally to accustom oneself to it from the contrary direction for purposes of return; wherein the simile of the “hand to the plough” emphatically does not hold good.

Ah, here it was! He had left the path even as he had thought. Here was the right one. Accordingly he put his horse into it, and then discovered that his said horse was going lame. Carefully he examined all four hoofs. No, there was no

stone or anything of the kind.

This was a blank outlook. The still atmosphere of the forest seemed more fever-breathing than ever, and the sky had darkened. A boom of thunder came rolling through the stillness, not so distant either, then a gleam and then another sullen roll. He started. This was no joke. He was in for a sudden storm, and among all these tall tree-trunks too. If only he could reach some native kraal.

But, then, he had heard that the natives were restless, and that it was not altogether safe for one man alone to go among many. He was well armed, certainly, but what is one among many? He had sufficient food for one meal, and a flask. By way of putting a more cheerful light on the situation he took a pull at the latter.

"A beastly place to camp in," he said to himself, looking around. "Faugh! It simply reeks of fever. If only one could find somewhere more open."

Now the lightning began to gleam vividly down through the tree-tops, and the thunder crashed in short, angry barks; but no rain had fallen as yet. It was one of those most dangerous storms of all—a *dry* storm. Suddenly a big yellowwood, barely thirty yards off, burst into splinters and sparks as a wreath of flame ran down it into the ground. The thunder-crash that accompanied was awful. The wayfarer's steed started violently and backed, nearly throwing its rider, then stood stock still, trembling and snorting.

"Oh, blazes, that's nasty!" growled the latter. "Well, I suppose if one has to go under one has, but I'd rather not just at present. Hullo! what's that?"

Far a sound had reached him from in front—a sound uncommonly like the barking of dogs. The horse had heard it too, for it pricked up its ears and snuffed the air. By now it was going dead lame.

A few big drops came pattering through the trees, then ceased. The thunder-rolls grew less frequent and less loud. The storm was passing over.

Now the barking of dogs sounded nearer and nearer. Instinctively the wayfarer looked to the cartridges in his revolver, then, replacing the weapon, continued to advance, yet very much on the look-out.

The forest ended abruptly. In front, on a bare ridge or spur, running down from a great height, lay a small kraal, numbering four huts, enclosed within a circular thorn stockade. Beyond it again lay an unbroken mass of forest.

The appearance of the wayfarer in the open was the signal for a rush of dogs from the kraal gate. These were not of the ordinary native greyhound breed, but massive bullet-headed brutes of the Boer mastiff type, and as formidable as wolves. There were three of them, and their savage charge and deep-mouthed baying caused the horseman instinctively to grasp the butt of his revolver. He had no fancy for being pulled from his saddle. On the other hand, if he were to shoot one or all of them, would he not have human enemies to deal with scarcely less formidable? And as though to bear out this idea, three tall, savage-looking Zulus, armed with broad assegais, strode through the gate towards him.

The wayfarer began to think he had got into a bad fix. He had six revolver shots and a rifle bullet, as against three human and three four-footed enemies, and the chances were all in favour of the latter, out in the open like this, and mounted as he was on a lame horse. But the natives began by calling off the dogs, which was reassuring; yet they seemed to be barring his way, while talking to him volubly. Here again he was in a quandary, for except for a word or two of ordinary use he could understand no Zulu. There was one argument, however, which he judged to appeal to all mankind, wherefore he produced a capacious tobacco pouch.

But even that met with no response. The demeanour of the trio was the reverse of friendly, and behind them the three great, evil-looking brutes were stalking up and down, their hackles raised, and muttering and growling, as though impatient for the word to spring upon the stranger. Then after a consultation among themselves, one of the men turned and went into the kraal again.

The wayfarer was nonplussed. It was obvious that they were incapable of understanding each other, for even to signs they seemed impervious.

At last, however, the other man reappeared, and made it apparent, by very unmistakable signs, that he should dismount and enter.

This he accordingly did, trying not to show the while that he was keenly on his guard against treachery. They signed him to a hut, that he should enter it. He crept through the low door way. The interior was dark after the daylight outside, and he took a minute or two to get accustomed to the semi-gloom. Then he realised that the place contained one man, and he a European.

He was squatted on the floor, native fashion, smoking a pipe. He was an old man apparently, for his hair and thick beard were white, yet the face somehow did not seem quite to correspond. It looked younger, but there was an expression in it which was very curious, one of mingled melancholy and malevolence, at least so decided the stranger. But no word or movement of welcome did he make towards the latter, who, perforce, had to open the conversation.

"Well, this is very jolly," he began, "stumbling upon a white man. The fact is I can't talk the lingo, and couldn't ask the way for one thing."

"Where are you bound for?"

The voice, dead, dull, expressionless, was peculiar. But it was a refined voice.

"I wanted first to get to Ezulwini."

"You were going in exactly the contrary direction, that's all."

The other started. Had this mysterious personage been aware of his progress all along? he wondered. The thought was rather disquieting under all the circumstances. The man was a puzzle. He seemed to prefer his unexpected guest's

room to his company.

"My horse has gone dead lame," went on the latter. "He may be all right in the morning. But, meanwhile, I shall have to throw myself upon your hospitality, or camp outside in the veldt."

The other was silent for a moment. Then he said—

"You are welcome—on one condition."

"And that?"

"That you pledge me your word of honour—you are a gentleman, I see, and will keep it—that you mention no word to any living soul, under any circumstances whatever, that you have been here, or, in short, that you have ever seen me in your life."

"Well, of course I will, if you wish it," answered the traveller, very much mystified.

"But I do wish it," was the reply, given with some fierceness. "And you will do it. Do you know that at a word from me you would never leave this place alive? You would simply disappear."

Substantially the very words he had uttered to that other, who *had* disappeared. There was a creepy suggestiveness about it all that made him feel more than uncomfortable.

"You needn't threaten me," he rejoined, rather shortly. "If I pass you my word, as you yourself have just said, I shall keep it."

"I know you will. And let me tell you that if you had been as some others I know you would not be here at all. In fact, although you have exactly seven bullets at your immediate disposal your friends would never have seen or heard of you again."

The mystery deepened. The new arrival was conscious of a very uncanny, not to say awe-inspiring effect in the piercing, unfriendly glance from the other's eyes. The day had been a pretty eventful one and no mistake.

"Look here," he answered, in a burst of frankness. "This world's a devilish rum place, and I've lived long enough in it, and seen enough devilish rum sides of it, to have learnt enough to respect other people's secrets. So you may rely upon me when I give you the full undertaking you ask for."

The other nodded, then uttered a loud hail, in response whereto a native boy appeared, and having received a laconic direction soon reappeared, together with a large bowl of native beer.

"This is the best I can offer you. I don't know if you've ever tried it, but it's rather good, always provided it's fresh."

"Yes, I have once. Thanks awfully. Well, here's luck."

The effect on the wayfarer of this homely interchange of good-fellowship was that it seemed to put him and his strange and rather sinister host on a better footing. He took a big drink of the refreshing brew and set down the bowl. Then he lighted his pipe.

He was almost growing confidential under the influence of rest and refreshment. But it occurred to him that this strange being was unusually reticent. For instance, he had not even asked him his name or where he was from, or indeed anything. So taking his cue he confined himself to generalities, and, except that the other was rather laconic, some conversation became possible.

Finally supper appeared, in the shape of grilled beef on a woven grass mat, together with some roasted mealies, and a renewed supply of *tywala*. The new arrival did full justice to this, then suggested going to see after his horse.

"Oh, your horse is being well taken care of," answered his host. "However, come and see for yourself."

As they stood up outside the stranger noticed that his host was a tall man, who, notwithstanding his apparent age, walked without a droop. At a word from him the three big dogs, which had sprung up from somewhere with a growl, slunk back again into silence. The horse was tied to a pole inside the fence, and had evidently been eating his fill of mealies.

"You'd better turn in in my hut. You'll find it a trifle more comfortable, perhaps, than turning in with one of the Zulus, and there's no spare hut."

"Why, thanks awfully. Of course I shall," was the hearty response.

The stranger woke early, and all the events of the previous day came back upon him. He was rid of an incubus, for which now, in the clear broad light of a cloudless and sparkling day he felt unfeignedly thankful, but his eccentric host—where was he? The mat on which he had slept was unoccupied. Oh, well! The other had got up earlier, that was all. He would follow suit.

Outside he found his host, in converse with a Zulu, not one of the three men who had met him on his arrival.

"Good-morning. I wonder how my horse is to-day," he said.

"He's about all right. I've had him led up and down, and he doesn't seem to show any limp. I'll send a man to guide you over the most difficult part of the way after breakfast. You needn't mistrust him, it's sufficient that you have been my guest."

It was all that the wayfarer could do to refrain from asking for his host's identity, but something kept him from doing

so; possibly he bore in mind that his said host had refrained from questioning him as to his. They talked on commonplaces. But after breakfast, when his horse was saddled up and the guide stood waiting, his entertainer said—

“You didn’t lose this yesterday, did you?” exhibiting a double-barrelled shotgun.

He was conscious of a slight paling, but hoped it had not been observed. Yet at the same time he was perfectly certain it had.

“No,” he answered.

“Ah, well. Then I’d better take charge of it until the owner turns up. And, remember, you have given me your word.” And the straight, piercing, compelling glance seemed to scorch.

“Why, of course I have, and you may rely upon my keeping it. Many thanks for your opportune hospitality. Good-bye.”

The hand which he had put forth was taken coldly, almost limply.

“Good-bye,” was the listless answer; the speaker turning away immediately, almost abruptly.

Chapter Three.

The Girl.

The girl sang softly to herself as she worked. The said work was of the homeliest nature, being, in fact, the making of bread.

She looked up suddenly. A ray of the sun, coming round the angle of the house, had struck warm warning upon her uncovered head. Picking up the table on which were the implements of her occupation, she shifted it well into the shade. This involved no sort of an effort. Then, standing erect, she gazed forth upon the rolling waves of veldt which fell away in front.

She was a splendid specimen of womanhood: tall and square-shouldered, and built on generous lines, and if she had just missed being beautiful she was endowed with what was better—a rare power of attractiveness. She had clear hazel eyes, heavily lashed, and when these spoke, together with the smile which displayed the strong white teeth, the face would light up in a way that was dangerously irresistible.

Out on the sunlit expanse in front nothing moved, unless an odd thread of smoke mounting lazily from two or three kraals could be counted. At the back broken ground ran immediately up, in the shape of a dark kloof, bushy and rock hung, cleaving the heart of a mountain range, whose crags and krantzes soared skyward above. Below stood Ben Halse’s trading establishment, consisting of three or four native huts, a waggon shed, and two quite unpicturesque buildings of corrugated iron. One of these was used as a dwelling-house and store, the other as a stable, and in the shade of the former the girl was working. And she was Ben Halse’s only daughter.



A lonely position this, for a girl, away in one of the wildest parts of Zululand. But Verna Halse never felt lonely. She was always busy, for she was her father's right hand, and no single detail of any branch of his somewhat ramificatory business was unknown to her. Moreover, she had interests, the nature of some of which we shall see into anon. And she was healthy in mind and body, and utterly unspoiled. As for the potentiality of danger attaching to the situation Verna would have broken into one of her frank, winning laughs if anybody had suggested such a thing. She knew abundantly how to take care of herself.

Now she called to a native servant, and bidding him go to the store and fetch another pannikin of flour, her thoughts reverted to her absent father.

"He'll enjoy this, all hot," she said to herself. "I'll make some of it into *roster-koekjes* on the gridiron, Ah, there he is!"

But with the clink of stones a little way off arose the sound of native voices, deep-toned, sonorous. It was only some wandering Zulus, after all. Yet it was time he was back.

Three Zulus came into sight, filing along the narrow path which led past the store. Two saluted and passed on, while he who walked foremost came leisurely up, and, halting, gave the girl greeting in a pleasant voice. He was a magnificent sample of his race. Well over six feet, and built in proportion, he stood erect as a palm-tree, with a perfectly natural, because unconscious, dignity of mien and movement. Even from a European standpoint the man was extremely handsome, the high, intellectual forehead, and the lustrous clear eyes, with their frank, straight glance, giving to the well-formed face an air of composure and reliability. His skin was of a rich red copper colour, which rendered his short, pointed beard and the ring which crowned his shaven head the more jetty in contrast. For attire, besides the *mútya*, or kilt of catskins and hide, an ample kaross of dressed leopard skin was flung round him in graceful folds. It might have been noticeable that, unlike nearly all of his countrymen up to date, he wore no trace of European clothing or ornament.

"Where is U' Ben?" began the Zulu. This was Ben Halse's name among them, being, of course, an adaptation of his Christian name.

She told him, and then went on to talk—and she spoke the Zulu language fluently. This man, whose name was Sapazani, was the chief of one of the powerful septs which went to make up the Zulu nation, and which occupied the adjoining mountain fastnesses. He was on very friendly terms with Ben Halse, a fact which might yet stand the latter in good stead, for the secret heart of the nation was seething with unrest, although long since under British rule. Further, it ensured him the monopoly of a roaring trade.

"What is the news?" asked the chief at last.

"News?" echoed Verna, flashing at him a bright glance of merriment. "Now what, I would ask, could have happened here that a great chief such as Sapazani would care to hear about?"

"That I know not, unless that it came from the lips of *Izibu*," he answered, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

It is not as a rule respectful for a native to address the superior white by his or her nickname. But "*Izibu*"—meaning water-lily—Verna considered rather pretty and poetic, and did not discourage its use. Moreover, she had been accustomed to natives all her life, and understood them thoroughly. She appreciated, too, the position of her father and herself among this once kingly race, where they dwelt in perfect security as to person and property, so much so that they never troubled to put a lock on anything, not even on the trading store. Now she laughed gaily at the compliment which had accompanied the use of the name, and went on chatting, easily, merrily, even banteringly—that to any one unaware of the stern and rigid line of demarcation in such matters, between white and coloured, which has ever saturated public opinion throughout South Africa, it might have seemed that she was carrying on a sort of mild flirtation with this splendid savage. The latter had produced his snuff-box, and was absorbing a portion of its contents in grave silence.

"But I am forgetting!" exclaimed Verna. "The day is hot, and a visitor must not go away without food and drink."

"Why, as to the last it will be good," answered the chief, with a sparkle in his fine eyes. "For the first, I am not hungry."

Herein again in this detail the man differed from his up-to-date countryman, who will seldom, if ever, refuse anything offered.

Verna rose and went into the house, returning with a large bottle of the excellent ale they brew in Maritzburg, and a long glass.

"Good!" exclaimed the guest, as he drained the foaming brew. "*Wou!* Our people cannot make such *tywala* as this." The while he had been noting, with calm approval, every movement of the girl: the fine erectness of her carriage, the firm walk, straight from the hips. As he talked he noted, too, the quick movements of her floury hands and arms, for she had resumed her occupation. At last he rose to take leave. The sun was getting low, he said, and he had still far to travel.

"Wait," said the girl. Then she walked round to the store, returning immediately with a few unconsidered trifles, such as a large sheath-knife and belt, a packet of snuff and some brass buttons, also strings of beads.

"This is something that even a chief may find useful," she said, handing him the knife, which he accepted with a pleasant murmur of thanks. "These," she went on, handing him the smaller things, "will please Nonente and Malima," naming two of Sapazani's youngest and favourite wives.

These, too, he took. Verna, putting up both hands to adjust the pins in the large and rather untidy knot of brown hair at the back of her well-shaped head, stood contemplating him with a flash of roguish mischief in her eyes; the joke being that she was morally compelling so great a chief as Sapazani to carry something, however small, for a couple of mere women. But she reckoned without that potentate's power of resource.

"Ho, Samhlu!" he called to the stable boy, who was passing, and now turned hurriedly, obsequiously.

"Thou wilt bear these behind me," said Sapazani, handing him the other things. Then, unconcernedly belting the knife round his own exalted person, he took a pleasant farewell of his very attractive entertainer, and, followed by the boy, who was one of his own people, strode away over the veldt.

Verna, looking after him, laughed to herself. Her guest had not merely—and readily—cut the knot of his own dilemma, but had turned the tables on her by depriving her of the services of her boy for the rest of the day. But she thoroughly enjoyed the joke. Soon the tramp of hoofs struck upon her ear, and she turned with a smile of welcome to meet her father.

"Well, girlie, and what have you been doing with yourself? Busy as usual?" sung out the latter, as he swung himself from his horse and shouted for the boy.

"Yes; bread-making. But it's no use calling Samhlu, dear. You won't see him again to-day, because he's gone with Sapazani to carry five strings of beads and a couple of dozen brass buttons, which that debilitated weakling was too feeble to carry himself."

"Sapazani? Has he been here, then? Pity I missed him."

"Just gone." And then she told him about her little bit of innocent mischief, at which the trader threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"You mustn't play tricks on these big swells, darling," he said, proceeding to do his own off-saddling. "But Sapazani's a real good 'un, bang the opposite of his crusty, slippery old father."

Ben Halse was a tall, fine-looking man, with a large beard; just the sort of man to command the respect of savages; in his dealings with whom he was invariably straight and reliable. But as a setoff against this there were stories about him—stories of shady transactions in the gun-running and liquor-smuggling line, and those in charge of the administration of the country held him in no very favourable regard. Indeed, it was whispered that there was one even darker count against him, which, though a thing of a tolerably remote past, the law might take cognisance of even yet. But all these things, although known to Verna, made no difference in the affection and confidence which existed between the two. Of her—his only child—he was inordinately fond and proud; and, so far as he was concerned, desired nothing more to complete his happiness in life.

But she? In the full vitality of her splendid youth, was she not bound to "pair"? This was a question he frequently asked himself, and—it needed no answer.

Chapter Four.

The Trading Store.

Ben Halse's store was full of native women, some with babies and some without; and all were chattering. Two or three had come there to do a deal, and the rest had come to see them do it.

"*Au!* but this is not the right kind," muttered one, with a dissatisfied shake of the head, holding up a blue skirt; the others joining critically in its examination. "I want one red and striped, not spotted like this."

"Here it is, then," cheerfully returned Verna, producing another. She was presiding goddess on this occasion, as indeed she often was.

But the other, although red and striped, did not seem to please. It was examined critically by the whole committee, except one or two, who, squatted on the floor, were giving undivided attention and, incidentally, nutriment to their infants. The stripes were white instead of yellow, and they ought to be yellow. No white things were worn now.

Verna laughed good-humouredly. She knew her customers. No deal was ever effected with such without seemingly endless discussion—and objections.

"No white things!" she echoed. "Why, I wear white things."

"*Inkosikazi!*"

"Well, why not you?"

"*Au!*" and the intending buyer brought a hand to her mouth with a smothered laugh. "*Inkosikazi* does not belong to the chief."

"The chief. What chief?"

"U' Sapazani."

"Sapazani?" rejoined Verna. "But he does not like the clothing of white people at all. Yet you are buying it."

This was a fact. Though on terms of friendship with Ben Halse Sapazani was anything but fond of the trader's compatriots, and discouraged as far as he could the introduction of European customs and clothing. With the latter, in consequence, the store was but scantily supplied.

"It is for wear in the towns, *Nkosikazi*," was the answer, and then after some haggling the deal was completed. Then others came forward. Some wanted one thing, some another, but all haggled. Verna, of course, was used to this. It was all in the day's work, and took up some time. The deal completed, the buyers went outside to talk it over. Two young men came in next. One wanted a sheath-knife and one a green blanket. These were paid for without haggling, Verna throwing in a length of roll tobacco by way of a *bonsela*, or gift to seal the bargain.

The interior of the up-to-date trading store in Zululand presents a very different appearance to the old-time one. There are the knives, and strings of beads, and three-legged cooking-pots, and tobacco of the old days; but there is also a large and varied assortment of European clothing—male and female—the latter preponderating in quantity and degrees of gorgeousness. Umbrellas, too, and looking-glasses, even boots, form no unimportant items in the general "notions" displayed. This particular store, however, did less trade in such things than most; and the reason may be found in the dialogue set forward above. Sapazani, the powerful chief of that section, was the most conservative of Zulus, and discouraged any sort of aping of European ways. But if Ben Halse's trade suffered in this respect it more than gained in others.

Now Verna, for all her attractiveness, was a shrewd and practical young woman, and assisted her father materially in the management of his trade. He did more than a little cattle raising and cattle jobbing, and thus had his hands more free than would otherwise have been the case. In fact, it was a prevalent idea among the people that they could always get more favourable terms in the inevitable haggle when "U' Ben" happened to be presiding at the receipt of custom than when the same held good of his daughter.

By the way, there was a curious jagged hole in the thin plank lining of the corrugated iron wall of the room, about a yard to the right of the door and less than twice that measure from the ground, and its history was this: One day a Zulu had come in to buy things. He was a big man and unringed, and hailed from the other end of the country. Moreover, he had been away working at Johannesburg and so had lost much of his inherent awe of the white man, and still more of the white woman. This fellow's demeanour, at first bold and off-hand, became insolent, even threatening. Verna was alone, and he knew it.

He flung down a pair of boots that he was haggling over, flung it violently onto the counter, so that one of the pair almost hit her, using the while loud and violent language. But he was out of his reckoning.

There crashed forth a loud report, and with a whizz and a scatter of splinters the bullet pierced the wall planking, but so near that the aggressive ruffian felt the breath of it on his arm.

"That for a warning, *ishinga*," (rascal), said the girl. "The next carries death."

The startled savage stood as though petrified. He stared at the tall, fine, commanding figure. He took in every detail—the compression of the lips, the hard glint in the dilated eyes, the uncommonly dangerous-looking "bull-dog" revolver, held in a firm grip without a tremor, and pointing direct at his chest. Then he uttered a single word—subdued, respectful

"*Inkosikazi!*"

Verna looked him steadily in the face for a moment. Then she said—

"Now go. Go, do you hear, before I change my mind. People who insult me are not safe. Go."

And he went.

Some time afterwards she mentioned the incident to Sapazani, quite in a light, casual way. The chief was strangely angry, far more so than the occasion seemed to warrant, she had thought, with a mild, passing astonishment.

"I would I had known of this at the time, Izibu," he had said. "That *ishinga* might have found some difficulty in returning to his own part of the country. He is not one of our own people, he belongs to Induba. But those coast dwellers—*Hau!* They are only half men. All the *man* is burnt out of them among the sugar canes and the fever." Then, with bitterness, "But what is a chief in these days? I am no chief. Every white man is chief now, if he is sent by Government—every white *boy*, rather. There are no chiefs left in the land of Zulu. Even those of our people who act as dogs to the courts of the white magistrates think they are chiefs over us. *Hau!*"

And Verna had answered consolingly—

"No one, in all the land of Zulu—white or not—could mistake Sapazani for anything but a chief."

Now, her customers having retired outside, and there being no sign of others arriving, Verna betook herself outside too. The rich glow of sunshine filled the air, seeming to envelop the fine form of this splendid daughter of the wilderness in its sensuous embrace. She stood for a moment gazing forth—her clear eyes dilating upon the glories of the far-spreading landscape. Then her glance rested upon her father, who, seated under a tree a little way distant, was engaged in apparently earnest converse with a single Zulu.

The latter she recognised as one Undhlawafa, a man she knew well, and the favourite and trusted induna of Sapazani. What were they talking about? she wondered. Well, whatever it was she would not interrupt them, so she passed on into the dwelling-house.

Undhlawafa, who up till then had been talking preliminary commonplace, half turned to make sure she was safely out of earshot. Then he went on to expatiate on a very large koodoo bull that was always to be met with of late in the same haunts down yonder in the Lumisana forest. And now the moon was nearly at full. Horns? Such horns, went on Undhlawafa. *Whau!* Horns of such a size had never been seen. His listener was vividly interested.

The matter touched Ben Halse on two points of his character—love of sport, and love of money-making. For the first, he, an old up-country man, resented the restrictions as to the killing of game that had come in with the British occupation of Zululand. These were all very well up to a certain point, but when it came to being obliged to obtain a magisterial permit to kill one head of anything in particular, why, then it became a bit chafing. It was one thing to restrict big shooting-parties from outside coming in and slaughtering everything indiscriminately, but to prohibit an old pioneer like himself from shooting a buck of any sort when he wanted to, was another. Prohibition or not, however, many a head of game did fall at the full of the moon, when Ben Halse chose to take the war-path; and every such head would have entailed upon him a ruinous fine did the circumstance come to the ears of the authorities, together with sufficient evidence to support a prosecution. Well, as to that, he took chances, as he had done all his life with regard to everything. One thing was certain—none of the natives would give him away, and there were no whites in the neighbourhood within a long distance. Now and again a patrol of mounted police would pass that way, but he would always be informed of the approach of such at least half-a-dozen hours before its arrival. Then, when it did arrive, why, Ben Halse's hospitality was a household word among the Field Force division of that useful corps, the Natal Police.

So much for the first. But for the second, wherein did the love of money-making come? In this way: The trader was in touch with a wealthy and enthusiastic collector of every kind of natural history specimen. The latter was resident in England, and would pay almost any price for a record specimen of anything, and in this way Ben Halse had made quite a little income. Now the horns of this koodoo, as described by Undhlawafa, and even allowing for native exaggeration, sounded like a very "record" pair indeed. It would fetch a long price, apart from the fun of a bit of night-poaching, which last appealed to the adventurous side of the old pioneer. But not out of sheer love of money for its own sake did the latter never let slip an opportunity of making it. No; it was on Verna's account, and up till now he had done very well indeed. So Ben Halse and the induna agreed to stalk the big koodoo bull with the "record" horns on the following night.

Then Undhlawafa began to talk about other things. He had produced a sovereign and was playing with it. The round gold which the whites had brought them was good, he said presently. Every one desired it, white or black. There was a spot down in the Lumisana forest where twenty times ten of such pieces were hidden. They were, in fact, hidden there for U' Ben to take out when he pleased—upon certain conditions.

Upon certain conditions! Yes. Two hundred sovereigns made up a very comfortable haul. There were two or three packages, the Zulu went on to explain, that U' Ben was required to bring from a certain quarter for Sapazani and one other. U' Ben had a waggon, and he had ridden loads for them before. Had he not always been paid promptly and well? And the trader answered unhesitatingly that he had. Yet he seemed in no hurry to close with the offer. The other, as the way of his race is, manifested no impatience.

"The money is there. It can be taken before anything is done," went on Undhlawafa. "U' Ben's word is as certain as that the sun will rise. The conditions will be fulfilled."

We have said that Ben Halse's record was not quite clear; that there were dark hints whispered against him with regard to liquor-smuggling and gun-running. As for the latter, whatever had been done in that line had been done during the civil war in the country what time the Usutu party and Sibepu were striving for the mastery. In common with all others of his class and tradition, and with many others besides, he held that if the natives chose to get up a fight among themselves that was their look-out, and, in fact, so much the better, in that it would serve the dual purpose of keeping down their numbers, and giving them the opportunity of letting loose the spirit of Donnybrook upon *each other*; wherefore if they wanted firearms for that purpose he had no scruple in supplying the side that would pay the highest price. Now, however, the case was different. Undhlawafa's "dark" talking was clear enough to him. Such a bribe as two hundred pounds could only mean one thing, and that was not liquor-smuggling.

"The load is there," went on the Zulu. "It is only for bringing it in—the price. Is it not high enough?"

Still Ben Halse did not reply. Yes, the circumstances now were different. The country was now fairly populated with whites, among them hundreds of women and children. All of these he knew were virtually sitting on the crater of a volcano, and he had often said so, only to be derided as a scaremonger. He, however, knew that sooner or later the eruption would take place.

As Undhlawafa had said, this man's word was as certain as that the sun would rise; and this held good equally among white and black. But when it came to a question of making money—though never known to go back upon his word—Ben

Halse was not scrupulous as to how he made it. In dealing with natives of authority or position, or both, and, indeed, with many others, he had found them absolutely reliable. He knew now that were he to demand double the price of the service asked of him he would almost certainly receive it; yet he was in no hurry to close with the offer. The induna, the while, sat placidly taking snuff. Then Verna's clear voice was heard.

"Father, come along in. The dinner will be spoiled."

"We will go after that big koodoo bull to-night, Undhlawafa," he said, rising to go inside.

"*Nkose!*"

"Whatever have you and old Undhlawafa been yarning about all this time, dear?" asked Verna, as they sat at table.

"He says there's a thundering big koodoo bull down in the Lumisana, one with record horns. We are going after him to-night."

Verna half started from her chair and her eyes sparkled.

"What fun! Why, so we will."

"Hallo! *We!* Now my 'we' didn't include a girl."

"No? It included this girl, though," was the tranquil reply.

"Did it? I've only got one girl, and I'm not going to have her breaking her neck over stones, or scratching her eyes out in the dark, in that infernal tangle, or getting bitten by some beastly black mamba, or something of that sort."

Verna's eyes danced.

"Since when have you discovered that I was made of sugar, dear?" she said sweetly. "I've never been into the bush with you before, have I? Never helped you to defy the game laws of—I was going to say *our* country, but it's hard to tell exactly whose country it is. Never—have I?"

"Oh well, I'm getting old now, and the part we are going into isn't adapted to a skirt. Besides—"

"Besides—what?"

"Nothing."

Perhaps that other consideration had occurred to him. Decidedly she would be in the way—under certain circumstances.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter," rejoined Verna tranquilly. "I'm going, anyhow."

Chapter Five.

The Temptation.

Tall tree-trunks, straight standing or curved; a tangle of creepers and undergrowth; long rank grass, and a general effluvium of decay and stuffiness unpleasantly suggestive of fever—such were the general features of the Lumisana forest.

Its depths were gloomy and desolate to the last degree, and seldom penetrated. The natives carefully avoided the place, and if they did enter it would never do so except in groups. It was the haunt of dangerous snakes, of fierce and aggressive specimens of the mamba tribe, and of abnormal size, they held; and these there was no avoiding among the long grass and tangled undergrowth. Further, it was the especial haunt of the *Inswelaboya*—a species of hairless monster, half ghost, half human, given to strangling its victims on sight; and this was a more weighty consideration even than the fear of venomous reptiles.

This feeling on the part of the natives had its advantages, for the forest constituted part of one of the large tracts utilised as game preserves. Here koodoo were plentiful, with a sprinkling of the splendid sable antelope. Buffalo, too, haunted its gloomy depths, where the reed-fringed pools in the clearing afforded them a wallowing-place—and there was even a specimen or two of the rare white rhino. All these, of course, were rigidly protected, so far as it was possible to police so wild and difficult a tract of country at all. But the larger kind of game flourished. The natives, as we have said, shunned this gloomy wilderness, nor were the means of destruction at their disposal adequate. White men seldom came here, for permits were rarely given, and, failing such, the very act of getting the spoils away would have led to certain detection. But with Ben Halse the case was altogether different. He had exceptional advantages. He was resident on the spot, and knew every corner of those remote fastnesses. Then, too, he was hand in glove with the powerful chief of the district, and not a man of that chief's following would have dreamed of giving him away.

Now he was making his way along a narrow game path. Verna walked immediately behind him—they had left their horses at a kraal on the high ground, for this stuffy, forest-covered valley bottom was not altogether devoid of the tsetse fly. Behind her again walked Undhlawafa, followed by several Zulus in single file.

"I'm going to have first shot, dear," whispered Verna, over her father's shoulder.

"Don't know. What if you miss?" he returned. "Those horns'll be worth a devil of a lot."

"But I shan't miss. No, you must let me have first shot. I so seldom get a look in at anything big."

She carried a light, sporting .303, its magazine loaded with Dum-dum cartridges. She knew how to use it, too, and hand and nerve were steady as rock. She was arrayed in just the costume for an expedition of the kind, a plain blouse and short bicycle skirt, and looked exceedingly ready and sportsmanlike; and after some couple of hours' walk over anything but easy ground, her step was as elastic as though she had just sallied forth.

Night had fallen, and though a glorious moon was sailing in the clear sky, so thick were the tall tree-tops that, meeting overhead, they plunged the pathway into gloom, networked here and there by the penetrating moonbeams. But here was none of the stillness of night. Large owls hooted loud and spectrally, and the nursery-like squall of the "bush-baby"—a species of lemur—was thrown forth, and echoed and answered from near and far. Now and then a sudden scuffle and rumbling retreat told that a buck had been disturbed and was making himself hurriedly scarce; or, not so harmless, perchance, a stealthy rustle in the grass would bring the party to a standstill.

"That's the worst of this walking in the dark," said Ben Halse. "You never know when some infernal black mamba may jump up and hit you bang in the face. Then—good-night! Or you may tread on his tail while he's getting out of the way. Which amounts to the same thing."

There was always the risk of this, of course, but risks have to be taken. Verna, for her part, was keenly enjoying this clandestine night-poaching expedition. There was that about it which appealed powerfully to her, and every fibre of her strong, healthy being thrilled with the sheer joy of life. Then, suddenly, the moonlight burst in through the trees in front. They had come to the edge of an open space.

Undhlawafa whispered caution. Then he ordered his followers to remain where they were—if anything to retire a little way back. He did not want to set up any more scent than was necessary. Then, cautiously, they advanced to the edge and peered forth.

In front lay an open space. It was swampy ground, caused by the trickle of a small stream which here expanded into reed-fringed pools. These were barely a hundred yards from where the stalkers lay concealed. At present there was no sign of life in the clearing, unless it were the occasional croak of a frog. Then something moved, and a small shape came stealing across the open to the water. It lapped a little, but was evidently uneasy, for it kept lifting its head and listening. Then, having hurriedly completed its drink, the jackal made for dark cover as fast as its legs could carry it.

"Wonder if it could have wined us," whispered Ben Halse. "Yet we are on the right side for wind, too."

"I'm to have first shot, remember," returned Verna. Her father nodded.

A large owl floated across the open, hooting loudly and dismally. There was a hot stuffiness in the still, yellow, moonlit air, which was depressing. Then two hyenas came out to drink at the pool. They, at any rate, were under no misgivings, for, having drunk, they sat on their haunches and bayed the moon long and hideously. This performance concluded they began chasing each other, to the accompaniment of much snarling, till they, too, disappeared within the depths of the farther forest.

Now came a period of tense waiting, during which nothing stirred. Conversation, even in the faintest of whispers, was of course out of the question. Then a sound, unmistakable to these, bred among the sounds of the wilderness, was borne to their ears, the tramp of approaching hoofs.

"More than one," whispered Ben Halse.

He was right. Advancing from the upper end of the open space were three large animals. Nearer—and lo! standing forth in the moonlight the splendid koodoo bull paced slowly down to the water. He was leading the way—half as large again as the two cows. A thrill of irrepressible eagerness ran through the watchers, the younger of them especially.

At the edge of the water the noble animal paused a moment before lowering his head to drink. His immense spiral horns reached far over his broad back, and the white stripes upon his dark hide were visible in the clear moonlight. Then Verna's rifle spoke.

The effect, crashing through the stillness of the night, was almost appalling. The echoes roared through the silent forest from point to point, and the rush and thunder of flying hoofs seemed to shake the ground as the two cows sped for cover at lightning speed. But the bull—the splendid "record" bull—he made one mighty, powerful plunge into the air, then dropped over onto his side, and after one harsh half-bellow, half-groan, lay still.

"Well done, little girl, well done!" cried Ben Halse enthusiastically. "I never saw a cleaner shot. He's got it bang through the heart, by the way he fell."

"That's where I aimed, dear," she answered, flushed with the feeling of the thorough sportsman, that life could hardly contain better moments than this.

"*Inkosikazi!*" ejaculated old Undhlawafa admiringly. "*Mamé!* A wonder!"

They went over to the fallen animal, which lay motionless and stone dead. It was even as her father had said; Verna's bullet had drilled clean through the heart of the mighty beast—a neat and sportsmanlike shot as ever was delivered.

"*That* pair of horns'll stand us in for close on a hundred pounds," pronounced Ben Halse. "Why, they must be the world's record! I never saw any to come up to them in all my experience."

"So the world's record has been accounted for by only a girl," said Verna merrily. "But you were a darling to let me have first shot."

"Oh, as to that I was afraid you'd miss—women are so nervy and excitable."

"Especially this woman!"

"Well, it doesn't much matter who fired the shot, the point is we've got the horns, and they'll be worth quite what I said, if not more."

"Father, I'm ashamed of you. That's a nice sportsmanlike way of talking, isn't it?"

The other Zulus had now crowded up, and were firing off many ejaculations of amazement and admiration. It is possible that some of them remembered the occasion on which the bullet hole had been drilled in the wall of Ben Halse's store. The butchery part of it devolved upon them. But this was a form of amusement they thoroughly enjoyed, and, moreover, they would have a big meat feast. The larger kind of buck, with the exception, perhaps, of the eland, is apt to be coarse and tasteless, and except for the more delicate part of this one, such as the saddle, Ben Halse wanted none. He, however, waited to see that the head, with its invaluable pair of horns, was properly taken care of. So they went to work merrily, and in an incredibly short space of time the carcass was duly quartered, and a big fire was lighted and a big roast started, by way of a preliminary, for there was no chance of interruption. There was nothing on earth to draw a patrol of that fine corps the Natal Police into the depths of the Lumisana forest at that ungodly hour of the night, short of very strong and very definite "information received." Ben Halse and Verna, after their hours of tramping and the tension of waiting, took their share of the roast with keen and healthy appetites.

"Oh, I love this!" said the latter, cutting into a strip of the hissing grill with a pocket-knife and a sharpened stick for a fork. "Why, it's worth all the sitting-down meals in the world!"

"Isn't it?" rejoined her father. "Here, Undhlawafa. Here is something to send it down with." And he produced a large flask of "square face" gin, and poured a goodly measure into the cup. The old Zulu's face lit up.

"*Nkose!* It is good, *impela!*" and he drained it at two gulps.

"The worst of it is," went on Verna, "the record pair of koodoo horns can't be ticketed with my name. Because this is a poach, you know."

"Oh, but it can—and shall. Denham has undertaken to indemnify me in any risks I run in procuring him specimens. This'll stand us in for a hundred pounds at least. Why, the horns are a record! And I shall stick out that he placards on them a notice, that they were shot by you—shot fair and clean, by God! as I've never seen anything better shot."

"All right, dear," answered the girl. "Then some fine day the record leaks out that we have been shooting koodoo on a Government game preserve without a permit. What then?"

"What then? Why, I'm fined—say a hundred pounds. Denham makes that good, and—makes good the other hundred for the horns. But the chances are a thousand to one against the news ever reaching the proper quarter over here, for all purposes of prosecution, I mean. You see, it doesn't specify *where* the thing was shot."

"No; there's something in that," said Verna. "But I'd like to figure, if only in a rich man's private museum, as having shot the record koodoo in the world." And she laughed merrily.

The Zulus were busy cutting up the great antelope, which task they accomplished in a surprisingly short space of time, chattering and laughing among themselves as they devoured various portions of the tid-bits raw. In process of the talk Undhlawafa contrived to say something to Ben Halse—something "dark." That worthy nodded.

"Stay here, Verna. I shall be back directly," he said.

She looked at him for a moment full in the moonlight. Some instinct was upon her. Once before, the same instinct had moved her to intervene in a certain transaction of his, to intervene right at the critical moment, with the result of saving him from a disastrous fate as the outcome of what that transaction would have involved. The thing had hung in the balance; but her instinct had rung true, her intervention had availed. He had been saved. Now that same instinct was upon her again. She could not for the life of her have defined its meaning, still—there it was.

"I'll be back directly," he went on. Then he and Undhlawafa disappeared within the black shades of the forest.

Verna, left there, set herself out to await her father's return with that tranquil philosophy which was the result of her wild life and no particular upbringing. She watched the butchery proceedings in the clear, full moonlight, but with no interest. They were rather disgusting, but she had seen enough of that sort of detail for it to have little or no effect on her. She gazed forth upon the swampy, miasmatic open space and the sombre forest line bounding it, and gave a direction or two to the natives as to the head and horns of the trophy. Then she began to wonder when her father was coming back.

The latter and Undhlawafa had reached a spot in the forest where the trees were thin at the top, letting through a broad network of moonlight. Bending down the induna drew forth from some place of concealment a bag made of raw hide. It was heavy, and its contents clinked.

"Count these, U' Ben," he said, untying the *reimpje* that fastened it.

The trader's eyes kindled and his pulses quickened somewhat as he picked up a handful out of the mass of golden sovereigns, letting it fall back through his fingers in a stream which flashed in the moonlight. This he did again and again—and the rich metallic clink of the falling coins was music to his ears. All this could be his for the taking—his, now and here, and in return an easy and not particularly risky service. Undhlawafa, the while, was reading his face.

"Is it not enough?" he said, in a tone that implied that more might conceivably be forthcoming in the event of a negative reply. "Yet—count the pieces."

But Ben Halse did not do this. He continued to trickle the coins through his fingers, without replying. Why should he let go this opportunity of making a rich haul? If he did not take it somebody else would, and the result would be the same. Besides, no Zulu, or any other native for that matter, could hit a house with firearms unless he were locked up inside it, and then his bullet would probably miss it and go through the window. He was far more dangerous with his own native assegai—in fact, the possession of firearms rendered him less efficient with even that. These were the salves he applied to his conscience as he looked upon the mass of sovereigns shining in the moonlight, and played lovingly with them, and longed to possess them.

But the other side of the argument would obtrude itself. The mere possession of arms breeds the desire to use them—and this holds good especially of savages. He thought of the women and children scattered about at different centres

throughout the land, and realised, as he had often done before, how any carefully planned, concealed and concerted outbreak would simply spell massacre for the lot in a single night. He thought of Verna—his Verna—and the land contained other people's "Vernas." No, he could not do it. He knew, of course, that he could send her out of the country at any time if things became too sultry—he would receive ample warning. But that consideration struck home. He could not do it.

"Where are you, father? Oh, there."

The sweet, clear, fluty voice came upon him like an omen, and then the girl stepped to his side where he sat. One quick glance at the bag of gold, another at her father's face, and instinct supplied the rest. She knew his particular weakness, but she said nothing then.

"We were talking over a certain deal, dear, Undhlawafa and I. The terms are good."

"Well, I've interrupted you. But to-morrow will do as well, won't it?" she answered carelessly. "Let's go home."

The induna sat tranquilly taking snuff. He, for his part, felt pretty sure that his offer would be closed with—if not to-night, why, then, to-morrow. Verna, for her part, felt rather more sure that it would not. But Ben Halse got up to leave, and the bag containing two hundred golden sovereigns still remained in the possession of Undhlawafa.

Chapter Six.

The Police.

Sergeant Meyrick and First Class Trooper Francis, of the Natal Police, were riding at a foot's pace along the rough and sandy waggon track which skirts the Lumisana forest, and they were proceeding northward.

Both men were excellent samples of that efficient corps: young, athletic, hard as nails. Neither was of colonial birth, but had been some years in the force, and by now thoroughly knew their way about. To-day they were doing a patrol, for which purpose they had started from their isolated station the previous afternoon and had camped in the veldt towards midnight. A thick mist, which had come down during the small hours, blotting out everything, had delayed their morning start. Now it had rolled back, revealing great bushy Slopes, and rocks shining grey and red in the moisture, which moisture the sun was doing his best to parch up.

The two men looked thoroughly smart and serviceable in their khaki-coloured uniforms and helmets, each with a regulation revolver slung round him in a holster, but no rifle. Their mounts were wiry, hard-bitten nags of medium height, and in good condition.

"I'm still puzzling over that shot we heard," Meyrick was saying. "Why, it seemed to come from bang in the thick of the bush; but who the deuce would be letting off guns right there at that time of night. No nigger would go in there then for a bribe. It's too much *tagati*. They funk it like the devil."

"*Tagati!* I should think so," laughed Francis. "I still don't believe it was a shot at all. I've a theory it was a sort of meteorite exploding. Seemed to come from up in the air too."

"Sound travels the devil's own distance at night. What if it was beyond the forest belt? There are kraals out that way."

The other was unconvinced.

"Sound does travel, as you say," he rejoined. "But for that very reason no blooming nigger would lash off a gun in the middle of the night to give away that there was such a thing in existence among the kraals. An assegai or knobkerrie would do the trick just as well, and make no noise about it. No, I stick to my meteorite theory."

"Right-oh! It's going to be damned hot," loosening his uniform jacket. "Let's push on or we shan't get to old Halse's by dinner-time, and he does you thundering well when you get to his shebang. Whatever they may say about old Ben, he's the most hospitable chap you'd strike in a lifetime."

"Isn't he a retired gun-runner—if he *has* retired, that is?" said Francis, who was new to that part of the country. "At least so the yarn goes."

"The said yarn is very likely true. There are 'no witnesses present,' so I don't mind recording my private belief that it is. But there's this to be said—that when he did anything in that line it was only when the niggers were fighting each other, and in that case he rendered humanity a service by helping to keep their numbers down. I don't believe he'd trade them a single gas-pipe if they were going for us. I've a better opinion of old Ben than that."

"Don't know. I haven't been up here so long as you; but I've heard it said, down country, that gun-running gets into the blood. 'Once a gun-runner, always a gun-runner.' What-oh! Suppose Dinuzulu were to start any tricks, wouldn't our friend Ben see his way to making his little bit then?"

"I don't believe he would; and what's more to the point, I don't see how he could. But I say—hang gun-running. Don't you get smashed upon his daughter. She's a record of a fine girl."

"So I've heard from you chaps until I'm sick. You all seem smashed on her."

"By Jove! She can ride and shoot with any of us," went on Meyrick, rather enthusiastically, which caused his comrade to guffaw.

"I don't freeze on to 'male' women," he said.

"You just wait until you see her," was the rejoinder. "Not much 'male' about her."

"What a chap you are on the other sex, Meyrick. What's the good of a fellow in the force, with no chance of promotion, bothering about all that. Much better make ourselves jolly as we are."

"Good old cynic, Frank," said the other. "Wait till you see Verna Halse, and I'll bet you get smashed. Nice name 'Verna,' isn't it?"

"Don't know it's anything out of the ordinary. But cynic or not, here we are, a brace of superfluous and utterly impecunious sons of two worthy country parsons, bunked out here to fish for ourselves. You'll be made a Sub-Inspector soon, you've got it in you. I shan't, and I haven't. So I'm not going to bother about 'skirt.'"

They had reached the spot where the tongue of forest points off onto the road edge and there ends. The ground was more open here.

"Hot as blazes!" commented Francis, swabbing his forehead. "What's this? *Au! Gahle—gahle!*"

The latter as three native women, squatted in the grass by the roadside, stood up to give the salute, the suddenness whereof caused the horses to shy. In the grass beside them lay several bundles such as native women often carry when passing from place to place, only these were unusually large.

The two police troopers fired off a humorous expostulation—they had both qualified in their knowledge of the Zulu for extra linguistic pay—and passed on their way. The track grew steeper and steeper, and the sun hotter and yet more hot. They would soon be at Ben Halse's store, with the prospect of an excellent dinner and a welcome rest before them. And behind them, in a contrary direction, laughing to themselves, travelled the three women they had just passed, bending under the burden of the loads poised upon their heads—the said loads containing each a goodly quarter of koodoo meat, of the meat of the lordly koodoo bull, the possession of which would have entailed upon them, and upon all concerned, if detected, the direst of pains and penalties. Yet there was nothing suspicious-looking about those bundles, nothing to make any reasonable being under the sun think it worthwhile investigating their contents.

"I wonder what sort of a man this Mr Denham is, father?" said Verna, as she stood, in the middle of the morning, watching the cleaning and preparation for preserving the great head, which was being effected by a native under the critical supervision of his master.

"Quite all right," was the answer. "He pays down on the nail, or rather, by return mail; never haggles or votes the prices too long. It's all I can do to resist the temptation to put them up."

"Well, then, go on resisting it, dear. I'm sure it'll pay in the long run," said the girl decisively.

"Yes, I've always had an instinct that way myself. Denham gives thundering good prices as it is, and, I tell you, we've made a pretty good thing out of him."

"But I wonder what he's like personally," went on Verna. "I wish you hadn't lost that photo he sent you when I was away."

"Yes, it's a pity, but for the life of me I can't think what the devil became of it. He was a good-looking chap, though, and I should think by the look of the portrait, a fine, well-built chap too. Well, we shall probably never meet. It's certain I shall never go to England again, and he's not likely to turn up here."

"I suppose not."

"Well, long live our trade together, anyhow. He'd give anything, by the way, for a good specimen of the *indhlonhlo* (Note 1), but they've become so jolly scarce, which is just as well. Anyhow, that's a beast that isn't affected by these cursed silly game laws. But it's a sort of joker you don't get a chance of killing except with a charge of buckshot, and that spoils the skin."

"Well, then, it's better left alone. I've always heard they are the most fiendish brutes to tackle. It isn't worth throwing away one's life for the sake of a few pounds more or less."

"Few pounds more or less!" echoed Ben Halse. "Why where would I—where would *we*—have been if I had always run on that notion? Little girl, it's for you that I want to screw out every penny I can, no matter how I do it. For *you*."

"Then knock off doing it, dear, especially in some directions. That won't bring me any good, to put it on that ground. Now that deal with Undhlawafa is off, dead off? Isn't it?"

The last rather anxiously.

"Well, I don't know—yes, I suppose it is," somewhat undecidedly.

The girl shook her head.

"Of course it is," she returned. "It's not to be thought of for a moment. We are not in dire need, remember, though even then such a thing would be out of the question. Yes, quite off. My instinct has been right before, remember."

"So it has. No, I shan't touch this affair. They'll have to get somebody else."

"*Nkose! O' Nongqal!*" (The police.)

Both started. The interruption came from the trader's other boy, who had slipped into the yard in a state of some consternation.

"Where, Panjani?" said his master.

"Down yonder, *Nkose*," pointing to the lower country. In a moment both were outside and in front of the dwelling.

Far below, on the plain, which looked humpy from this altitude, two mounted figures were approaching. There was no need to get out a field-glass; the native eyesight, as well as their own, was keen enough. But the two arrivals could not arrive for the best part of an hour. Ben Halse went calmly back to the yard, and further directed the preparation of the great head, with its record horns. Then, rubbing a lot of salt and pepper into it, he covered it with a waggon sail. Verna, watching this proceeding, was struck with a sudden thought.

"Father, what about the koodoo sirloin I've got on the roast?" she said.

"Keep it there till it's done. They won't know it from beef. Howling joke, eh?"

"Rather," she laughed. "They'll all unconsciously aid and abet us in breaking the laws of Cetywayo's country."

The police horses were toiling up the slope, then standing with heaving flanks in front of the store. Their riders were not sorry to dismount.

"Well, Mr Halse, how goes it?" cried Meyrick, shaking hands. "Miss Halse—why, you are looking better than ever since those two dances we had together at Ezulwini."

"Oh, thanks," laughed Verna. "But that's a poor compliment. You ought not to have allowed the possibility that I could look better than ever."

"Sharp as ever, anyhow," retorted Meyrick. And his comrade broke into a guffaw.

"This is Francis," he introduced, "commonly known in the force as Frank. It's shorter, you see, and means the same thing. Now we all know each other."

"Not got your step yet, sergeant?" said Ben Halse. "Thought you'd have been Sub-Inspector next time I met you."

"Don't chaff, Mr Halse. It's a sore point with me. The powers that be are so dashed ungrateful."

"Well, anyway, come inside and have a refresher after your ride. I'll send my boy to off-saddle for you. Scoff will be ready directly."

"We kept it back on purpose when we saw you toiling up there beyond Lumisana," said Verna. "If the sirloin is overdone it's due to that."

"Sirloin! By Jove! that's royal!" cried Meyrick. Whereat Verna laughed mischievously.

Assuredly Ben Halse's *ménage* kept up its reputation for hospitality, thought these two guardians of law and order, as they sat there doing full justice to the result of the midnight poaching expedition.

"Why, this beef is A1," pronounced Meyrick, beginning upon a second helping. "You couldn't get anything like it even in Old England."

"I'm sure you couldn't," assented their host, with a touch of dryness, while Verna's eyes danced. "The bottle's at your right elbow—help yourself. What's the latest from down country, by the way?"

"All sorts of yarns. They are brewing *up* for a row in Natal. There's a sweep called Babatyana inclined to make trouble. Now, Mr Halse, you ought to be an authority. If there's a bust-up there do you think it'll spread up here?"

"Sure to. But, to what extent is another thing."

"How does feeling run in these parts? Sapazani, you know, doesn't carry a particularly good reputation."

"Depends on how it's handled. By the way, if I were you I wouldn't name names," for the boy had just come into the room to change the plates, and the swift look of interest that had flashed across his face as he caught the name of his chief was not lost on the experienced up-country man. "This boy here belongs to his tribe, and he'll connect his chief's name with the police uniform. See?"

Meyrick felt small, and said so.

"Did he hear? What an idiot I am. Well, Mr Halse, you were chaffing me about the Sub-Inspectorship, but it's obvious I'm not ripe for it yet."

Ben Halse passed it off with a tactful and consolatory remark, and they talked about other things. Not until afterwards did it occur to Meyrick that his host had given him no information whatever on the subject of the loyalty of Sapazani.

"He's got some cheek, that same party whom we won't name," said Francis. "He flatly refused to salute his magistrate with the '*Bayéte*' when he went to see him—hailed him as '*Inkose*' instead; said the '*Bayéte*' was the salute for kings."

"He's about right," said Ben Halse. "There's a precious deal too much of that '*Bayéte*' joke going along. Every waggon-builder's apprentice seems to expect it. What did Downes say? I'd like to have been there."

"He nearly died of rage. Then he asked Sapazani, rather sneeringly, which king he would give the '*Bayéte*' to, and the answer was, 'Any *king*,' which was rather smart. Downes talked of arresting him for treating his court with insolence, but there were only three of our chaps in the place, and Sapazani had a following with him big enough to have captured the whole show, even with kerries, so he chucked that plan."

"Well, he was wise there," said Ben Halse. "There's no law in existence here or anywhere else I know of, that compels a native to address his magistrate as 'Your Majesty,' which is what giving him the salute royal amounts to. And this particular chief—to name no names—is quite knowing enough to get hold of a lawyer to stick up for him. There's more than one that would be glad to, and could do it too."

The fact was that the speaker knew all about this incident as well as did the narrator—and a good deal more connected with it which the latter didn't, but this he kept to himself.

"Sapazani is a great friend of ours," said Verna; "but I should think he'd be quite capable of making himself disagreeable if he was rubbed the wrong way."

Then they talked on, about other things and people, and the afternoon wore on. Suddenly Meyrick was seen to start as if he had been shot, and to grope wildly and hurriedly in his pockets.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Mr Halse, for being such a forgetful ass," he said; "but I forgot to give you this"—producing a letter. "Two of our chaps came back from Ezulwini and brought it out."

"That's all right. I dare say it isn't a matter of life and death," was the characteristic answer. But the speaker's face was not wholly guiltless of a look of astonishment as he saw the envelope; and this was evoked not so much by the sight, of the handwriting as by the fact that the missive had never been through the post. While his guests were saddling up he quickly mastered the contents, and his astonishment did not decrease.

"How should you like a run down to Ezulwini, Verna?" he said, after the police had gone.

"To Ezulwini?"

"Yes; perhaps to Durban."

"I'd like it a lot. Makes a change. I'm quite jolly here, but still, a change bucks one up a bit."

Her father smiled to himself. That letter had given him an idea which tickled him, for he had a very comical side.

"But what's on?" she said. "Are we clearing out? Has it become time to?"

"No, no. There's no row on—as yet. That'll come, sooner or later, all in good time. Only business."

"Oh! What kind?"

Verna was so completely in her father's confidence in every department of the same that there was no inquisitiveness underlying the query. There was a joke in the background of this, however, which he was not going to let her into. It would keep.

"What kind?" he repeated. "Oh, general. I say, though, Meyrick and Francis are nice chaps, aren't they? but, good Lord! their faces would have been a study if they could have seen through that heap of waggon sail in the yard that was staring them in the eye through the window all the time they were scoffing the other bit of the owner of that head, which was browsing away in Lumisana this time yesterday. Eh? Beef! Roast beef of Old England! That was killingly funny. What?"

"Yes, it was," rejoined Verna, who was gazing after the receding figures of the police, growing smaller and smaller on the plain below. "Still, the mistake was excusable. There's not much difference between either. When are we going to Ezulwini, dear?"

"H'm. In a day or two."

Note 1. A snake of the *mamba* species, which grows to a considerable size, very scarce, and with a proportionately bad reputation.

Chapter Seven.

The Chief.

Sapazani's principal kraal was situated in a bushy hollow, shut in on three sides by a crescent of cliff and rock abounding in clefts and caves. It contained something like a hundred dome-shaped huts standing between their symmetrical ring fences, and the space immediately surrounding it was open, save for a small clump of the flat-topped thorn-tree, Sapazani, as we have shown, was ultra-conservative, and the slovenly and slipshod up-to-date formation of a kraal—or rather lack of formation, with huts dumped down anyhow—did not obtain among his clan. They kept to the old-fashioned double-ringed fence.

Now this very conservatism on the part of Sapazani rendered him an object of suspicion and distrust among the authorities administering the country, for it pointed to "aims." The other chiefs were content to come into the townships in grotesque medley of European clothing—as required by law—trousers, a waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, or long overcoats and broad-brimmed hats, that give to any savage an absurd and undignified appearance, but this one not. He was obliged to wear clothing on the occasions when his presence was officially required at the seats of administration, but when he did so he wore a riding suit of unimpeachable cut, and boots and spurs accordingly, but under no circumstances had he ever been known to wear a hat. He would not cover up and conceal his head-ring, as did the others. The fact of his not "falling into line" rendered him open to distrust, as a man with a strong hankering after the old state of things, and consequently dissatisfied with the new, therefore a man who might become dangerous. And there were not wanting, just then, circumstances under which he might become very dangerous indeed.

Sapazani's kraal was remote from the seat of magistracy of his district, for which reason he was required to present

himself in person, on some pretext or other, rather more frequently than was usual. To such summons he never failed to respond without delay. But also he never failed so to present himself without a considerable following. This fact sorely puzzled the authorities. They did not like it; yet to remonstrate would seem to argue that they were afraid of him, an attitude absolutely fatal to the prestige of the ruling race. And the said ruling race needed all its prestige just then, when there were less than a hundred mounted police in the whole of Zululand, and not much more than three times that number of Volunteer Rifles, but scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country pursuing their ordinary civil avocations.

Sapazani was just old enough to have fought as a mere youth in the Zulu war of '79, and quite old enough to have fought well, and with some distinction on the Usutu side during the struggle which culminated in the exile of his present chief to Saint Helena. Now his relations with his said present chief—repatriated—were something of a mystery to the ruling race, and there were those who thought that given the opportunity he would not be averse to usurping his present chief's position and authority; for he, too, came of royal stock, in that he was of the Umtetwa tribe and could claim descent from the House of Dingiswayo. His relations with Ben Halse dated from the time of the above-mentioned struggle in which his father, Umlali, had been killed, thus leaving him in undisputed succession to the chieftainship.

The sun was dropping over the lip of cliff-ringed crescent which shut in the hollow. Sapazani sat outside his hut, surrounded by three or four indunas, taking snuff; in this, too, he was conservative, not having yet come to the European pipe. The cattle were being brought in for milking, and the frantic bellowing of calves, and the responsive "moo" of their mothers, mingled with the shrill-voiced shouts of the young boys who were driving the respective herds. His thoughts were busy. News—great news—had come in. Down in Natal events were stirring. The tribes there were arming, and they were looking towards Zululand. No longer were they the white man's dogs, as during the great war, when they had dared to come into the Zulu country to fight for the white man, and side by side with him. Now they were looking towards the House of Senzangakona, and—the representative of that House was dumb.

The song and clear laughter of women and girls bringing up water from the stream sounded pleasant and melodious upon the evening air, and the deep-toned voices of men, criticising the condition and well-being of the cattle in the kraal.

Blue reeks of smoke rose from the huts. The whole scene, in short, was one of quiet and pastoral peace; but in the chief's plotting brain peace was the last consideration that entered. Peace! What was he but a mere slave—obliged to go here, or go there, at the bare official word? Peace! All the blood in his warrior veins fired at the word. Peace! on those terms! Every downy-faced youth among the whites expected him to salute him as a king: he, the descendant of kings. The black preacher of another race, who had stealthily visited his kraal two moons back preaching "Africa for the Africans," had inspired him with ideas. He had listened, had turned the man, so to say, inside out; but one idea had taken hold. Sapazani was shrewd. He knew that by force of arms, by sheer force of arms alone, his people were incapable of holding their own. They could "eat up" every white in the country, and that in a single night. But they could not hold it afterwards. The whites could pour in such reinforcements as to eat *them* up in turn. But the one idea which the preacher had left in his mind was that the whites were so divided among themselves that there would be those high in the councils of the dominant nation who would compel their countrymen to concede to the Zulus their own land. It was rather mysterious, but he had heard it from other sources, from one, especially, of weight and knowledge, and more than half believed it. If that were so, and they could make a fight for it, why, then, all this officialdom might soon become a thing of the past, and he—Sapazani—a chief of weight, and in the full prime of his intellectual and physical gifts, and the descendant of a royal house, he saw himself king. As well as shrewd, Sapazani was ambitious.

"And the last word of U' Ben was 'No,'" the chief was saying.

"That was it," answered Undhlawafa. "But that his child came up while we talked I think it would have been 'Yes.'"

"Ha!" ejaculated Sapazani, now vividly interested. "What said she?"

"That I know not, son of Umlali, for I understand not the tongue of the Amangisi. But I spoke again about it yesterday, and again he refused."

"Strange!" said the chief. "U' Ben loves money."

"Who does not, son of Umlali, since the whites have brought it into the country? But though U' Ben loves money, I think that he loves his child more."

The chief made no reply. A very curious vein of thought—for a Zulu—was running through his mind, of which, could Ben Halse have had the smallest inkling, that estimable trader would have cleared out at very short notice and have set up in business in some other part of South Africa considerably remote from this.

"U' Ben is a fool," he rejoined after a pause. "He must be growing too rich. We can get them brought," he went on, talking "dark," "and for less money. But he has always been a friend, and I wanted to give it to him. Is his mouth really shut, think you, Undhlawafa?"

"It is, I think. Besides, there is that about him which does not incline him to move other people to talk," answered the induna meaningly. "And now, son of Umlali, what of the messenger?"

The chief's face grew heavy, deepening into a scowl.

"Who are these that they are to order us hither and thither?" he said. "It is only a day ago (figurative) that I was required to attend. Let the dog come forward."

In compliance with this mandate the said "dog" presently did appear, in the shape of a well-looking, middle-aged Zulu, wearing a long coat with brass buttons, also the head-ring. He saluted the chief respectfully enough, but Sapazani gazed at him sourly.

"So thou art here again, Manyana-ka-Mahlu, and still as the white man's dog? *Hau!*"

The point of which remark was that the man addressed was court messenger at the magistracy in whose jurisdiction Sapazani was resident.

"*Nkose!* A man must live," was the answer, with a deprecatory smile. "And we are not all born chiefs."

Sapazani's eyes blazed into fury, and gripping his stick he half rose. But a whisper from Undhlawafa restrained him—that, combined with another thought.

"Dog of the Abelungu," he answered, now cool and sneering. "It is well for thee that although some of us were *born* chiefs we *are* chiefs no longer. *Hau!* Yet state thy message."

The man was apologetic. Who was he to offend one of the great House of Umtetwa? he protested. He meant no such thing. He was only showing how he himself was forced to receive the white man's money. Had there been any other way of living he need not have done so, but he was poor, and the white man ruled the land.

Then he proceeded to deliver his message. The attendance of Sapazani was required three days thence, to give evidence in a rather intricate case of disputed ownership of cattle then pending between certain of his own followers. The chief's temper did not improve.

"Ho, Manyana. I wronged thee just now," he said, "I called thee the white man's dog, but we are all the white man's dogs—I among them the most. Well, so far thy message. I will be there, as how should it be otherwise since we lie beneath the heel of these little great great ones who rule the land?" he concluded, bitterly sneering.

"*Nkose!*"

"Well, there are those who will give thee food and drink. Withdraw."

"*Nkose!*"

The messenger obeyed, and the chief sat moodily. Would anything come of the unrest that was seething on the other side of the Tugela? He—to be summoned to take a long journey on account of some trumpery cattle case! Yet, was that only a pretext? was the sudden suspicion which flashed through his mind. Well, if it was not much was likely to come of it. No armed force had been mobilised by the whites as yet in any part of the country, and in case of any attempt at arresting him, why, as we have said, he was not in the habit of going into civilisation exactly alone. The voice of Undhlawafa broke in upon his musings.

"It is not well, son of Umlali, to shake sticks at those who come from the court," he said drily. He was an old man, and privileged. "Manyana grows from a good tree, but what if some other had been sent, and had returned to say that he had been received with roughness, and that Sapazani was not loyal?"

"Loyal!" echoed the chief, in bitter disgust. "Loyal! *Hau!* Loyal—to whom?"

Beyond a murmur which might have meant anything, the other made no reply. Sapazani looked up and around. It was nearly dark. The sounds of evening had merged into the sounds of night. Most of the inhabitants of the kraal had retired within the huts, for there was a chill feeling in the air. He arose.

"The other messenger," he said. "Now we will talk with him."

He, too, went into his hut, and drawing his green blanket round him proceeded to take snuff. Undhlawafa, who, after a whispered injunction to some one outside, had followed him, proceeded to do likewise.

Soon a man crept through the low doorway and saluted. In his then frame of mind the chief noted with double irritation that the new arrival wore that abomination, in his eyes, the article of European clothing commonly called a shirt. Squatted on the ground the latter's mission unfolded itself bit by bit. All the tribes in the north of Natal were ready. Those in the south of the Zulu country were ready too. How was it with those in the north?

In reply to this Sapazani and his induna put a number of questions to the emissary, as the way of natives is. These were answered—some straightly, some crooked.

"And He—what is *his* word?"

"He is dumb," replied the emissary. "There are those who have spoken in his ear, and He is dumb."

Sapazani sat, thinking deeply. "He" applied to the head of the royal House. More than ever did the insidious poison of the Ethiopian preacher of whom mention has been made, come back to his mind. Now he saw his own chance. Not by force of arms alone could a change be effected; but by the dissensions among the ruling race. Now was the time—before it should pass.

"Tell him who sent you," he said, "that at the moment I shall be ready. That is my 'word.'"

"*Nkose!*"

Chapter Eight.

The Prospectors.

"I've got some news for you, Stride."

He addressed was just dismounting. Obviously he had returned from a journey. His steed was flecked with sweat and had rather a limp appearance, as though ridden through the heat of a long day, and, withal, a hot one. A tent and a makeshift native shelter, together with a roughly run-up stable constituted the prospectors' camp on the Mhlungwana River.

"Well, spit it out, then, if it's worth having," returned the other, with a light laugh. He was a tall, well-built young fellow, bronzed with the healthy, open-air life.

"Man, but there's no that hurry," said the first speaker, with a twinkle in his eyes. "First of all, what's the news Grey Town way?"

"There you are, with your North Country tricks, Robson, answering one question with another. Well, both our news'll keep till scoff-time. I suppose it's nearly ready, anyway I hope so, for I want it badly, I can tell you."

The other smiled to himself. He thought his partner would not be quite so placid if he really knew what there was to impart. There was a pleasant odour of frying on the evening air. The sun had just gone down, and the fading beams still lingered on the green, rounded tops of the Mhlungwana hills. The native boys, a little distance off, were keeping up a low hum of conversation round their fire, one being occupied in frying steaks upon that of their masters'. The new arrival was splashing his head and face in a camp basin.

"Well, what *is* the news?" he said, coming forward, vigorously rubbing his head with a towel.

"Ay; you said yourself it'd keep till scoff-time, and I'm going to take you at your word, lad. But, buck up. It's nearly ready."

Soon the two were discussing supper with the appetite engendered by a healthy, open-air life. Then Robson remarked—

"What would you say to Ben Halse and his girl being at Ezulwini?"

"No, by Jove! Are they really, though?"

"Well, the night before last they slept at Malimati, so they'll be at Ezulwini now, won't they?" And the speaker laughed to himself, as he noticed the start and eagerness of tone on the part of his younger companion. The latter relapsed into unwonted silence.

"Ay, he's a good chap, Ben. You'll like to be seeing him again, I'm thinking."

"Yes—yes, of course. A thundering good chap, as you say. I'd rather like to see him again."

"*Him?*" drily.

"Of course. Didn't he get me out of a jolly big mess, when I'd already captured a bang on the head from an infernal nigger's kerrie, and herd me back to life?"

"Ay; but now I think of it, I believe the boy said it was only him who was going to Ezulwini. Ay, I'm sure I must have made a mistake when I said it was both of them."

There was a moment of chapfallen silence on the part of Harry Stride. Then he said—

"Robson, you villainous old humbug. Is the whole thing a yarn, or any part of it, or what?"

"Well, Sipuleni told me. He had it from some other nigger. You know how these fellows gossip together, and how news spreads. Ho, Sipuleni!" he called.

"*Nkose!*"

The boy came. Him Harry Stride began volubly questioning, or rather trying to, for Harry Stride's Zulu was defective. Sipuleni turned, puzzled and inquiring, to his other master.

"Oh, damn it! these silly devils don't understand their own language. You go ahead, Robson."

Robson did, and soon elicited that Ben Halse and his daughter had slept at Malimati *en route* for Ezulwini, just as he had told the other. He was enjoying the latter's eagerness and uncertainty.

"Yes, I'd like to see old Halse again," repeated Stride, when the boy had been dismissed. "He's a thundering good old chap. I say, Robson, we don't seem to be doing over-much here at present. Let's take a ride over to Ezulwini for a day or two. What do you say?"

Robson was a big, burly north-countryman, and the very essence of good-nature. He shook his head and winked.

"Ye'd better go alone, lad, if your horse'll carry you. And he won't, I'm thinking, if you try to make him do it in a day and a half."

"He'll jolly well have to. I think I'll start to-morrow. Sure you won't come?"

Robson shook his head slowly.

"Dead cert.," he answered. "I'd like to have a crack with Ben Halse; but Ezulwini's rather too far to go to see—*him*. Fine girl that of his, ain't she?"

"Rather. I can't make out how she gets through life stuck up there in that out-of-the-way place."

"Well, she does, and that's all in her favour; women being for the most part discontented, contrarious things—especially discontented. You'd better sail in quick, lad, if you mean biz. There's bound to be a run on her when she gets in among other folks."

"Hang it, don't I know that," was the answer, given with some impatience. "The fact is, Robson, she was too awfully good to me when I was hung up at Ben's place after that crack on the nut. I haven't been able to get her out of my system ever since. Look here. Shall I tell you something I never let out before? She—refused me."

The other nodded.

“Ay! She wouldn’t jump at anybody. But why not try your luck again? Go in and win, lad, go in and win.”

“By Jove! I’ve a devilish good mind to—to try my luck again, I mean.”

Robson nodded again, this time approvingly.

“That’s the way. Ye’ll be no worse off than before. But I’m thinking there was the news from down yonder getting cold.”

“Oh, of course. I was forgetting. Well, they seem in a bit of a stew over the river there. A sweep named Babatyana is beginning to give trouble. Some think the Ethiopian movement is behind it, and others don’t. But there’s certainly something simmering.”

“He has been troublesome before. They ought to get hold of him and make an example of him, same as they did with those fellows at Richmond.”

“Wonder if we shall have a war,” went on Stride.

“I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve been in these parts a good many years, and I was up in Matabeleland in ’96, when they started there, as you know. We were in a prospecting camp just like this, and I shan’t forget the nine days three of us had dodging the rebels. Others weren’t so lucky. Well, it’d be pretty much the same here, only we couldn’t dodge these because there’s no cover. It’d simply mean mincemeat.”

“Gaudy look out. In truth, Robson, a prospector’s life is not a happy one.”

“No fear, it isn’t. Here I’ve been at it on and off over sixteen years in all parts of this country pretty well. I struck something once, but it petered out, and still I’ve kept on. Once a prospector, always a prospector. Learn from me, Harry Stride, and chuck it. You’re not too old now, but you soon will be.”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s a sort of glorious uncertainty about it—never knowing what may turn up.”

“Except when there’s the glorious certainty of knowing that nothing is going to turn up, as in the present case. Yet, I own, there’s something about it that gets into the blood, and stays there.”

“Well, what d’you think, Robson? We don’t seem to be doing much good here. How would it be to change quarters?”

“If there’s any stuff in the country at all it’s here. I’ve located it pretty accurately. The stuff is here, there’s no doubt about that, but—is there enough of it? We’ll try a little longer.”

“All right, old chap. I’m on. I say, I’ll tell you a rum find I made on the way up yesterday afternoon. I’d just got through the Bobi drift—beastly place, you know—swarming with crocs. I lashed a couple of shots into the river to scare any that might be about. Well, on this side, just above water level, and stuck in the brushwood, I found—what d’you think?”

“Haven’t an idea. A dead nigger, maybe.”

“No fear. It was a saddle. What d’you think of that?”

“A saddle?”

“Yes, or what remained of one. The offside flap had been torn off, so had both stirrup-irons, the stirrup leather remained. Now comes the curious part of it. While I was looking at the thing and wondering how the devil it got there, I suddenly spotted a round hole in the flap that remained. It looked devilish like a bullet hole, and I’m dead cert, it was.”

“That’s rum,” said Robson, now vividly interested.

“Isn’t it? It took me rather aback. What’s more, the saddle looked as if it hadn’t been so very long in the water. What do you make of it?”

“What did you do with it?”

“Do with it? I loaded it up and left it with Dickinson at Makanya. He’s the sergeant of police there, and has a name for being rather smart.”

“Well, and what was his notion?”

“We talked it over together and agreed the affair looked uncommonly fishy. It had evidently been a good saddle too, not one that a nigger would ride on. But how had it got there, that’s the point?”

“Ay, that’s the point.”

“You see there’s no drift for miles and miles above the Bobi drift. It’s all that beastly fever-stricken Makanya forest, and there’s nothing on earth to induce a white man to go in there. And, as I said, there’s no doubt but that the saddle had belonged to a white man. Both Dickinson and I agreed as to that.”

Robson sat puffing at his pipe for a few minutes in silence. He was thinking.

“I wonder if it spells foul play,” he said eventually. “Quite sure it was a bullet hole, Harry?”

“Well, I put it to Dickinson without mentioning my own suspicions, and he pronounced it one right away.”

"I wonder if some poor devil got lost travelling alone, and got in among a disaffected lot who made an end of him. They may have shot his horse to destroy all trace, or in trying to bring him up to a round stop. Anyway, why the deuce should they have chucked the saddle into the river? It isn't like a nigger to destroy assetable property either. No. As you say, Harry, the thing looks devilish fishy."

"What about the stirrup-irons being gone, Robson?"

"That makes more for my theory. Metal of any kind is valuable to them. They can forge it into assegais. Besides, anything hard and shining appeals to them."

Stride started upright.

"By Jove!" he cried suddenly. "There's one point I forgot. The girths were intact. That horse had never been off-saddled."

Again the other thought a moment.

"Now we are getting onto fresh ground. The poor devil must have missed his way and got into the river. The crocs, did the rest. They took care of him and his gee, depend upon it."

"But the bullet hole?"

"Dash it! I forgot that. Well, here's a mystery, and no mistake. We'll think it out further. But Dickinson has it in hand, and he knows niggers down to the ground—was raised here, you know. Harry, if you're going to start for Ezulwini first thing to-morrow you'd better turn in."

Chapter Nine.

The New Arrival.

"I suppose you couldn't tell me where to find a man named Halse, could you, Mrs Shelford? He lives somewhere in this country."

The pretty and popular hostess of the Nodwengu Hotel at Ezulwini looked up quickly from her plate. So did several others seated at table.

"Yes," she answered, a little surprised. "Do you know him, then, Mr Denham?"

"Well, in a sort of a way," was the answer. "That is, I've heard a good deal about him, and was rather interested to make his acquaintance."

Now the expression "heard a good deal about him" raised a covert smile on more than one face round the table.

"Ben Halse lives up in the Lumisana district," answered the hostess. "But it's an out-of-the-way place, and not easily got at."

"All the better. I like out-of-the-way places. They're so jolly interesting. That's why I pricked out a cross-country course here."

The speaker was a tall man, broad-shouldered and well set up, with a square, intellectual head; fair, clear-eyed and self-possessed, and might have been in the late thirties, i.e. in his very prime. He had arrived at Ezulwini the evening before, on horseback, and his baggage for the present consisted of what that unreliable animal could carry strapped across the saddle.

"By the way," said another man at the table, "I heard something about Ben Halse being due here just about now. Heard anything about it, Mrs Shelford?"

"No."

"Perhaps he's going to the opposition shop," said the other mischievously.

"He can if he likes," was the crisp retort. "Only Ben Halse and ourselves have known each other all our lives, so I don't think there's much fun in that remark."

"That's all there was in it, anyhow," was the answer. "Now I think of it the report came through some of the police."

"Now, Mrs Shelford, you mustn't say it," cut in another man, in mock warning, he, incidentally, holding rank as Inspector in that useful corps.

"Say what?"

"That they are always 'talking through their necks.'"

"Wait till I do," she retorted, with a laugh, the fact being that she was exceedingly popular with the police, rank and file, and had two brothers in it. "Well, what about Ben Halse, and where had they seen him?"

"At his own shop."

"Who were they?"

"I'm not sure. Meyrick, I think, was one."

"Well, if it's true it'll save you a journey, Mr Denham," she said.

"I'll hold on here for a day or two, then, and see. I'm in no violent hurry."

He was inclined to do this in any case. There was a homelike friendliness about these people among whom he had dropped only the night before, which very much appealed to him. Eight or ten of them would gather at table three times a day, and there was not one among them with whom he had not some idea in common. Most of them, too, had been in the country for years, and he had sat quite late into the previous night listening to some of their experiences—experiences narrated with no tom-fool idea of "cramming" a stranger, but, if anything, set in rather too matter-of-fact a frame, at least so it had struck him. And in the said capacity of stranger each and all had laid themselves out to show him courtesy.

Breakfast over, the other boarders went off to their respective avocations, and Denham, lighting a cigar, strolled outside. It was a perfect morning. The sky was a vivid, unclouded blue, the sun, though hot, was not oppressive, and there was just sufficient stirring of the air to make against sultriness. At the back, dropping abruptly from the compound itself, was the first of a series of densely forested kloofs, whose tumbled masses of dark foliage seemed to roll like the irregular waves of a sea, and beyond, just glimpsed through the golden haze, a range of green, round-topped hills rose on the skyline. Immediately at hand a non-indigenous profusion of trees and hedges, giving bosky shade to the snug bungalows and official buildings which constituted the township.

Denham, strolling leisurely up and down the broad, clean-swept garden path flanked by its red lines of Jerusalem thorn, was inclined to think that his lines had fallen in pleasant places. Over and above the beauty of the surroundings and the exhilaration of the clear and ambient air his naturalist soul had already begun to find interest in the unfamiliar birds and insects, which fluttered or crept. Bright butterflies alighting coquettishly upon the rose-blooms, the clumsy "whirr" of some ungainly beetle, winging blindly for nowhere in particular, all these were strange to him, and opened out a vista of boundless interest; but what he looked forward to was getting farther into the haunts of strange birds and beasts. He felt light-hearted as a school-boy just escaped for his holidays, lighter-hearted than he had felt for years.

A strange insect motionless upon a rose-stem attracted his attention. Deftly he captured it by the back of the neck, and holding it lightly but firmly proceeded to examine it. The stick-like joints jerked and struggled slightly, but on the whole the captive seemed to accept the situation with philosophy. So absorbed was he in the examination of the "specimen" that the steps of his hostess, tripping down the garden path behind him, were unheard.

"Beetle-catching, Mr Denham?" she laughed, becoming alive to his present occupation. "What have you got there?"

"It isn't a beetle. It's a fine specimen of the 'praying' amantis. They are the most hypocritical scoundrels in the insect world. They stand for hours motionless in an attitude of intense prayer, ready to grab the first butterfly or anything else that comes in reach."

"Ugh, I don't like crawling things," she laughed. "But I suppose you collect them, do you?"

"Yes; but I shan't keep this one," replacing it upon its stalk, where it at once resumed position as if it had never been disturbed. "Why, you do look workman-like," as he took in the kind of long, artist blouse which she had got on over her dress. "As to which I couldn't help admiring your energy—here, there and everywhere—while taking my own lazy stroll."

She laughed again. "You have to be, if you want to keep a place like this on the go."

"Well, I must say, as far as I've seen, the result is a success."

"Oh, thanks. Well, if you're not always looking after these boys they'll shirk. You don't know what Kafirs are, Mr Denham."

"Not yet. I doubtless shall—in time."

"Are you out here for long, then?"

"Well, that depends. In fact, I don't know what it depends on," he added, with a laugh.

"That's fortunate. It must be jolly to be able to go about as you like. Wouldn't I like it! But what I came out to tell you was that Inspector James sent round to say that he'll put you up at the club as an honorary member if you'll meet him there at twelve. You were talking about it this morning, weren't you?"

"Yes; that'll be very kind of him. I'll be there. Where is it, by the bye?"

"Right opposite the Court House. Any one will tell you. It's only a small affair, of course, but you'll meet every one there, and it's handy if you're here for a few days to have somewhere to turn into and see the papers. Well, you must excuse me, I've got lots more to do this morning." And she left him.

Denham, going forth presently, could hardly realise, as he strolled along the broad macadamised road fringed by tall eucalyptus-trees and high hedges, through which were glimpsed snug bungalows embedded in flowering gardens, that this was in the heart of what he had always supposed to be a savage country. Yet in even his brief experience he had had opportunity of knowing that in parts still it could be a very savage country indeed. A gang of native convicts, in their white prison dress—undisfigured, however, by the abominable broad arrow—passed him, in charge of three or four native constables; the latter, stalwart fellows in their smart uniforms of dark blue and red, each with a pair of handcuffs in his belt and armed with very business-like assegais. These saluted him as they passed. Then one or two groups of native women, mostly with bundles on their heads. These did not salute him.

This was obviously the Court House. He had time to spare, so decided to investigate it. Several natives, squatted outside, gazed curiously at him, but they, too, saluted him. The white man's rule seemed pretty well established here at any rate, he thought; in which connection he also thought of a strange experience or two of his own in this very country, which contrasted with this show of law and order.

The rather bare room seemed dim and cool in contrast to the glare outside. The magistrate looked up, and seeing a stranger, courteously signalled him where to find a seat. There were only trivial cases that morning, and except the court officials Denham was the only white man there. A few natives at the back of the room stood listening to the proceedings! or not finding these interesting enough crept noiselessly out. Denham, to kill time, followed the evidence as it was interpreted by the clerk, and heard the prisoner fined for not paying his dog tax, and the succeeding one sent to gaol for deferred payment of his hut tax, and metaphorically rubbed his eyes. Here was the white man's rule with a vengeance. Witness box and dock, gaol and fine, where a few years back, comparatively speaking, the spear-and-shield armed impis swept, in all the bravery of their war array. A touch on the shoulder interrupted his meditations. Looking up he beheld Inspector James.

"Didn't find you at the club," whispered, the latter. "Shall we go over now?"

"It's a curious contrast," began Denham, when they got outside, "all this law and order in a country with the traditions of this one."

"Well, it's an improvement for these devils, anyhow," was the answer. "Where we fine them a pound or so Cetywayo would have had them knocked on the head, and I'm not sure his way of doing things wasn't the best."

"You don't like them, then. Now it struck me some of these chaps with the head-rings on were rather fine-looking fellows."

"Damned scoundrels, if you only knew as much about them as we do!" was the somewhat sour reply.

"They seem civil enough, anyhow."

"Just here they are, because they've got to be. But they are not everywhere. In fact, they are getting more cheeky every day. It's just possible you may have come up here in time to see some 'scrapping'."

"Well, I'll take a hand if there's any going. What's up?"

Inspector James had suddenly stopped. A Zulu was approaching them down the road, a tall man, ringed, and clad in a long overcoat.

"There's one I'd like to have by the heels," he said. "He's up to no good, I can tell you."

The man saluted as he passed them, and then astonishment was in store for Denham. To new arrivals the faces of natives are very much alike, but the face of this one he had good reason to remember. He knew, too, that the recognition was mutual.

"Who is he, then?" he asked.

"Oh, he's a sweep from Makanya way; but we've got an eye on him."

"I mustn't try and get behind police secrets," laughed Denham. But the sight of that particular native set him thinking. Among other things he had reason to think that the Inspector's estimate was very likely a correct one.

The Ezulwini Club was somewhat primitive, consisting of a corrugated iron building containing three rooms, the smallest and most important of which was the bar. Here they found two or three other members to whom Denham was duly introduced, and the usual libations were poured out. At this stage the door was darkened, and a tall man entered.

"Hallo! Blest if it isn't Halse. How are you, Halse?"

"How's yourself, Starmer? And you, James?" and there was general handshaking all round. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he went on, as Denham's introduction was effected. Then, to the native bar-tender, "Mabule. Set 'em up again. Here's luck."

"He's staying at our shop, Halse," said James, "so you'll be able to-stroll back together. I shall have to be a bit late, I'm afraid. So long."

"Well, it's time we did stroll back, then," said Halse, looking at the clock. "I just thought I'd drop in and see who was alive or dead. Ready, Mr Denham?"

"Quite."

"I was a good bit surprised to get your letter saying you were actually here," began Ben Halse, when they were outside. "I'm rather of a cautious disposition—suspicious, some folks call it, but it's the upshot of experience, so I avoided any reference to our ever having heard of each other before."

"I'm afraid I've given the show away, then, Mr Halse, for only this morning I was asking them at the hotel where you were to be found."

"Ah, well; it can't be helped. Besides, it doesn't greatly matter."

Denham had been sizing up this new—yet not new—acquaintance, and the process took no time at all. His impression, at first sight, was altogether a favourable one. They had been in correspondence together—had done business together—for quite a long time, and often had he speculated as to the up-country trader's individual personality. One thing was certain—the man beside him had always been as straightforward, in all their dealings, as any one could be.

"I've got a rare record head for you now, Mr Denham," went on Ben Halse. "A koodoo bull. Just as I'd got it, I got your letter, saying you were here. I thought I'd drive in, and if you care to come and stay out at my place a bit I'm sure you'd find a lot to interest you. It's precious wild and also a bit rough, but if you can put up with that, you're very welcome. By the way, don't say a word to any one here or anywhere else about the head. The Lumisana's a royal preserve, and

there's a hundred pound fine for shooting anything there without a permit."

"By Jove! is there?" answered Denham, his interest kindling. "I'll keep dark, never fear. I shall be delighted, though, to take up your invite. Here we are at the Nodwengu."

"*Amakosi!*"

It was the same Zulu Denham had noticed when with Inspector James. Him Halse now stopped, and began conversing fluently in his own tongue.

"You'll have to pick up the lingo, Mr Denham," he said, as the man went on. "You'll find it mighty useful."

"And mighty difficult, I expect," laughed the other.

In the verandah of the hotel a girl was standing. Denham looked at her with furtive interest. He had certainly not seen her there since his arrival.

"This is my daughter, Mr Denham," said his companion.

"How do you do, Mr Denham?" she said, putting forth a hand. "I seem more than half to know you already through the post."

Such a straight, frank, welcoming hand-clasp; such a straight, frank glance of the hazel eyes. Denham acknowledged the introduction with outward composure, but inwardly he was perturbed. What a splendid girl! he was thinking. He had no idea that Ben Halse owned a daughter; in fact, had never given a thought to anything of the kind. And then the trader's cordial invitation seemed to take on an entirely new aspect. If his first impressions of the father had been entirely favourable, precisely the same held good with regard to the daughter.

Chapter Ten.

Impressions.

If Denham's impressions had been thus with regard to Verna, hers had been the same with regard to himself. She had seen him first, as he came up the garden path with her father, and the tall, fine figure, and clean-cut face had taken her imagination at once. She remembered, only the other day, asking her father what sort of man this would be likely to be, never expecting to set eyes on him, and now here he was.

"Got any room at the bigger table, Emmie?" said Ben Halse, as they went in. He had known the hostess of the Nodwengu—herself the daughter of a fine old up-country trader and pioneer—ever since she was born. "I like being among folks when I break away, which isn't often."

"Plenty. We're anything but full now, worse luck. Here, next me. Verna, you sit there."

"There" meant next Denham, an arrangement of which the latter thoroughly approved. "Verna!" So that was her name, he thought. It sounded pretty, and seemed to suit her.

"You've only just arrived, I hear, Mr Denham," she began. "Well, I'm not going to ask you what you think of this country, because you haven't had time to form an opinion."

"I like what I've seen of it," he answered. "Ezulwini seems a delightful spot."

"Mr Denham collects butterflies and beetles, and all sorts of things," struck in Mrs Shelford. "I came upon him this morning with a horrid leggy thing he'd just caught. What was it, Mr Denham? A praying—praying—something?"

"Amantis."

"Yes. He'll be catching snails next."

"Shouldn't wonder, Mrs Shelford. I'm keen on capturing the skin of the *indhlonhlo*."

"He's jolly rare," said Ben Halse, with a twinkle in his eyes. "We might find one up my way, but it isn't certain."

"What did you call that snake, Mr Denham?" said Verna.

He repeated the word. Then, as something struck him—

"Now that's not fair, Miss Halse. Remember I've only been in the country a few days."

"Why? What? Oh, I see. No, really, I wasn't making fun of the way you said it; on the contrary, you pronounced it so well I wanted to hear it again to make sure. Aren't I right, father?"

"Right—as usual. But joking apart, I noticed the same thing. You'll have to learn the lingo, Mr Denham, as I said."

"I'll try. By the way, what's the meaning of the name of this place—Ezulwini?"

"In the heavens," answered Verna. "Pretty name, isn't it? It was named after the kraal of an old-time chief which stood on its site."

"Why, yes. It's rather good," said Denham. "It's much better to stick to the old native names instead of inventing British and new ones."

"I agree with you. But the worst of it is there are so few that the British tongue can get round," said Verna. "That makes rather a difficulty at a railway booking-office, for instance, when you have a newly-imported Britisher issuing tickets."

"Such as myself," laughed Denham.

"I didn't know you issued tickets," rejoined the girl mischievously.

"But the newly-imported Britisher!"

"Well, yes. I suppose you are that. But it isn't incurable."

There was a laugh at this. Denham was delighted. There was something about the girl at his side that was infinitely taking. She, for her part, talked on and talked well. How had she acquired the art, he marvelled, spending life in a place which her father had described as "precious wild." But perhaps she had been home to England for educational purposes. But to a question to that effect Verna promptly replied in the negative. She had once been to Johannesburg, and that not for long; beyond that she had never been outside Zululand and Natal.

"I am utterly uneducated, you know," she added frankly, but with the most taking smile.

"You don't expect me to take that seriously, Miss Halse?" said Denham.

"Well, it's true."

He shook his head, of course unconvinced. In rough and out-of-the-way parts a girl might suffer from want of educational opportunities, but this one had not. Her speaking voice was refined and her grammar flawless. Perhaps she had a clever and refined mother, he thought. And then it occurred to him for the first time that he was in entire ignorance as to what Ben Halse's household consisted of. He had made no inquiries on the subject, and now he was going to be a temporary member of it.

"You won't believe what I say?" she went on mischievously.

"No."

"All right, you'll see. Just get me on to Shakespeare and Byron, or is it Bacon? and all that lot that you learned people like talking about, and then you'll see where I don't come in."

Denham was more and more delighted. There was such a charming frankness about this daughter of the wilderness that was clean outside all his experience. There was no affectation about it either. At the same time he could see that this was no ordinary type of womanhood. She had character, and plenty of it. Here was an object of interest—of vivid interest—he had by no means bargained for.

"But I'm not a 'learned' person, Miss Halse," he answered, with a laugh. "Anything but. I like collecting things. That's all."

"Mr Denham's coming up to stay with us a bit, Verna," said Ben Halse. "He'll be able to 'collect things' there to the top of his bent."

"Are you, really? Oh, that'll be delightful," she said, turning upon Denham a sparkling, pleased face. "We can take you where you can find everything that creeps, or flies, or runs, down in the Lumisana forest."

"That'll be more than good. I shall enjoy it above all things," he rejoined. "I suppose you are a good bit of a sportsman yourself, Miss Halse? Shoot and all that?"

"Oh, I haven't always time," she answered. "What with running the house and looking after things, and helping father in the store—that takes some time and patience, I can tell you. The people in these days have got so civilised and thoroughly understand the value of money, why, they'll haggle for half-an-hour over anything, from a striped skirt to a packet of snuff."

"Will they?" said Denham, more interested than ever. This girl—this splendid-looking girl with the fine presence and striking personality—sold striped skirts and packets of snuff to natives, and, moreover, had not the slightest hesitation in volunteering the fact. More and more did she rise in his estimation.

"Miss Halse nearly shot a Kafir once in that same store, Mr Denham," struck in the hostess, who, while talking to the trader, had taken in the other conversation.

"Not really?"

"Oh, it was nothing," explained Verna. "A man came in once to trade—not one of our people, but a stranger. I was alone and he got impudent, not merely impudent, but violent, began to throw things about, and all that. So I just gave him a scare shot, you know, a shot that shaved him near enough to scare him badly. I let him know that the next one would be nearer still and that I had five more. Then he subsided and became civil. But—it was nothing."

"Well done! Well done!" cried Denham. "I suppose in those wild parts you have to know how to take care of yourself." He had noticed, too, that there was no trace of brag in her narrative: it was utterly matter-of-fact.

"I've never known any trouble with our people, and I've been among them the best part of my life," she answered. "This one was a stranger."

"How d'you do, Miss Halse," said Inspector James, who entered at that moment, "I thought your father wouldn't have left you behind. Well, Halse, I knew I'd be late, and I am. It's precious hot, though. What's the latest?"

"Latest? I came here to hear the latest," answered Ben Halse, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh, of course. If you didn't know what was going on before we did I'd be—well, astonished."

"No, there's no *indaba*—none fresh, that is, and what there is you know as well as I do, James."

"Oh, those brutes are hatching no more mischief than usual," grumbled the latter, who was hot and tired. "How's your friend Sapazani, Halse?"

"Same as before. I'm going to have another drink, James. You cut in—you, Mr Denham?"

"Don't mind. That sweep's not trustworthy," answered James, meaning not Denham but Sapazani.

"Is any one on this earth?" returned Ben Halse, while Verna remarked sweetly—

"Sapazani is a great friend of ours, Mr James."

Denham, the while, listened amused, but said nothing.

"Oh, that's all right, Miss Halse," answered the Inspector. "Meanwhile, it's a great thing to know who one's friends are."

"Who is Sapazani?" asked Denham, after a little more discussion.

"He's our chief—I mean the big chief near us," explained Verna. "We'll introduce him to you when you come."

The police officer was a trifle surprised. Denham was going to stay with the Hales, then! Now who the deuce could this Denham be? he began to wonder. There had been dark suspicions of gun-running in the part inhabited by Sapazani's tribe, and now here was a stranger, about whom nobody knew anything at all, going on a visit to Ben Halse. Then it occurred to him that the said stranger had arrived unexpectedly at Ezulwini, not by the usual road and in the usual way, but alone, on horseback, from a different direction and through some of the most disaffected and out-of-the-way parts of the country. It also occurred to him that the said stranger's previous movements might bear some looking into.

"Well, I shall leave you to take away poor Sapazani's character together," said Verna presently, rising from the table—the hostess had already retired.

"Going to have forty winks, Miss Halse?" laughed James.

"Perhaps."

The men sat on for a little while longer, then the Inspector left them to return to his work. Ben Halse and Denham adjourned to the verandah to smoke another pipe or so.

"I'm glad you've found your way out here," said the former. "We've done business together for quite a time, and it seems as if we ought to know each other."

"And very satisfactory business it has been to me, Mr Halse—"

"Glad to hear you say so. Yes, go on. I interrupted you. I'm sorry."

"Oh, not at all. Well, what I was going to say is this: I trust we shall continue it on the same satisfactory terms—er—I mean—of course it is most kind of you to offer me hospitality, and I assure you I look forward to my visit with keen pleasure. But you will understand that anything rare you may obtain for me in the way of specimens while I am with you, is obtained on exactly the same terms as before. You don't mind?"

We have somewhat emphasised the fact that Ben Halse was fond of money, but also that there was no sort of meanness about him. He had a code of his own. Moreover, he had taken a very great liking, at first sight, to the man beside him.

"I don't mind, Mr Denham," he answered. "But I don't think I'll agree. While you are my guest we won't go on the business tack over any thing."

"Now you don't want to cut my visit short, do you?" said the other, with a pleasant laugh.

"Certainly not. But this time you must let me have my own way. We haven't known each other long, Mr Denham, but I don't mind telling you there are people in these parts who say things about me; but whatever they say, there is one thing they are bound to say—unless they are liars—and that is that I have my ideas of what's what, and I stick to them."

"Very well, then, Mr Halse. You shall have your way, and I assure you I am looking forward to an altogether new and delightful experience."

Then they talked on about veldt-craft and forest-craft, eventually coming round to the record koodoo head, which Denham was dying to see.

"Verna shot it," said Ben Halse, somewhat lowering his voice. "As neat and clean a shot as ever was delivered."

"No!" in delighted surprise.

"Fact. Verna shot it."

"What did Verna shoot?"

Both started at the voice behind them, and turned their heads. The girl stood erect, smiling, in every way winsome and attractive.

"You shouldn't talk so loud, father dear. You're giving away our secrets to any passer-by. It doesn't matter about Mr Denham, of course, because he's in them: an accomplice, an accessory, both before and after the fact—isn't that the correct expression?"

Denham was set wondering. "An accessory, both before and after the fact," he repeated to himself. And this was the girl who had described herself as "utterly uneducated."

"I'm going for a stroll," she went on. "Will you come, father?"

"I think not, dear. I promised to meet one or two of them at the club about now."

"All right."

Denham started up, with an abruptness somewhat unusual in him.

"Might I accompany you, Miss Halse?" he said, as she was turning away.

"I shall be delighted," she answered, flashing a smile at him, "We'll go down through the bush—they've cut out some paths through it, and it's lovely down there. We can come out again just below the Nongqai barracks. That'll make just a nice round. So long, father."

Ben Halse sat back in his chair, watching them down the garden path.

"They look well together. A fine pair, by Jove!" Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him, and again he ejaculated to himself with emphasis, "A fine pair, by Jove!"

Chapter Eleven.

Developments.

The dictum of Ben Halse with regard to his daughter and their new friend was unconsciously echoed by more than one passer-by, as the two strolled leisurely along the broad road which constituted the main "street" of the township, between its lines of foliage, Verna nodding to an acquaintance here and there. Denham was rather an out-of-the-way kind of stranger to drop suddenly into their midst, and again, he seemed to be "in" with the Halses. Could he be an English relation of theirs? they wondered, for there was an unmistakable "out from home" stamp upon him.

"Do you know, you are rather a puzzle to me, Miss Halse," he suddenly broke out, with regard to nothing in particular.

"Am I? In what way?"

They had reached one of the winding forest roads which had been artificially cleared, and thus made into delightful drives or walks. High overhead the tall tree-tops met, and in the shade beneath, the gaze, turning to either side, met nothing but actual "forest primeval."

"Why, in this way," he answered, "Your own surroundings at home, from your account of it and your father's, must be uncommonly like this; yet when you *get* here, among a lot of other people, and houses and gardens and tennis, and all that sort of thing, the first thing you do is to start off for a lonely walk in the forest."

"Lonely walk? But I don't feel lonely. You—are fairly good company." And she flashed at him an uncommonly captivating smile.

"I? Oh, I am an accident. You would have gone anyhow, with or without me."

With the words something struck him. Was he such an "accident" after all? Denham was not a conceited man, but he was no fool. He was a man of the world, and was perfectly well aware that from a "worldly goods" point of view he would be regarded as a "catch" by most women. Yet somehow, even if the fact of his being here was not accidental, the idea did not displease him—anything but. And he had known his present companion exactly three hours and a half.

"I suppose I should," she answered. "As for the 'other people,' I don't know that I care much about anybody. They're a very good sort, and we're civil to each other when we meet, and so on. But that's about all. I've been so much alone, you see."

"You remind me of the standing joke about the London 'bus driver—when he gets a day off he spends it riding about on top of another 'bus as a 'fare,' likewise the actor, under similar circumstances, goes to other theatres."

Verna laughed. "Yes, I suppose I'm like that, too. But, do you know, I'm rather energetic—must always be moving."

"So I should judge. It's lovely here, but these dense growths of vegetation, especially down in a hollow like this, always strike me as miasmatic."

Verna looked surprised.

"But this is the first time you have been into—in this country, at any rate."

He smiled. He could have told a different story.

"I have been in South America, and the forest belts here are a joke to that. But tell me now about the shooting of the record koodoo. Your father wasn't joking when he said it was your work?"

"No, it's true." Then she stopped. A sudden idea had struck her. She did not want to pose as an Amazon before this acquaintance of just three hours and three-quarters. She wished her father had said nothing about it.

"Well done. Why, you're a regular Diana," said Denham enthusiastically.

"A regular what? I told you I was utterly uneducated."

"So you did, and I didn't believe you, nor do I now. Ladies are not expected to be up in the classics, except the 'advanced' ones, and they're none the better for it. Well, the party I mentioned was a mythical female given to shooting stags with a bow and arrows that wouldn't damage a mouse—at least that's how she's represented in sculpture and painting. Likewise with an incidental cur or two thrown in."

Verna laughed merrily.

"Oh, is that it?" she said. "Well, I told you I was an ignoramus."

"Yes; but tell me now about the shooting of the record head."

She told him, told the story graphically and well, but so far as her own part in it was concerned rather diffidently.

Denham was interested with a vengeance, and in his own mind could not but draw contrasts. This girl, walking beside him in her neat, tasteful attire, why, they might have been walking on an English country road or in an English park! She would have fitted in equally well there. She might have been giving him an account of some dance or theatrical performance, yet just as naturally did she narrate the midnight poaching expedition and the shooting of the large animal by the light of the moon—by herself. The naturalness of her, too, struck him with astonishment: the utter self-possession, living, as she did, a secluded life.

"What are you thinking about?" she said, for he had relapsed into unconscious silence.

"About you," he answered.

"About me? I expect I can guess what you were thinking."

"Try."

"Very well. You were thinking: Here's a boisterous, sporting female, who rides and shoots like a man, and who fires pistol shots at natives when they offend her; and who probably smokes and swears and drinks, into the bargain."

"Go on. Anything else?"

"No; that's enough to go on with."

"All right. I was thinking nothing of the kind. I was thinking of your pluck, for one thing, and your naturalness for another. I was also thinking that we were having an awfully jolly walk."

"Yes, it is jolly, isn't it?" she answered, with that very "naturalness" that he had applauded. "I'm enjoying it no end. Was that all you were thinking?"

"Must I answer that question?"

"Certainly."

"I was thinking what a delightful speaking voice yours is. It must be great as a singing one."

A slight flush came over her face.

"You must not pay me compliments, Mr Denham. I had a better opinion of you. But I'm not musical at all. I haven't even got a piano, and if I had I couldn't play it. 'Utterly uneducated,' as I told you."

This was met by the same unbelieving head-shake.

"By the way, how many of you are there in the family?" he asked.

"You've seen all the family. My mother died when I was quite a wee kiddie, so did a brother. I can't remember either of them. So you see there are only the two of us."

"I suppose you get girl friends to visit you sometimes?"

"They'd be bored to death in a week. Besides, I haven't got any."

"How strange!"

"Yes, isn't it? But then, you see, I've never been to school, and am seldom away from home. So I have neither time nor opportunity to make them."

"You are a problem," he said, looking at her with a strange expression.

"Am I? Well, at any rate, now you know what to expect. But I don't think you'll get bored, because you have strong interests of your own."

Denham was above uttering such a banality as that he could not get bored if she was there, but he felt it all the

same. A problem he had called her. Yes, she was a problem indeed; and he would be surprised if she were not the most interesting one with which he had ever been faced.

"Look," went on Verna, coming to a standstill and pointing with her light *umzimbiti* walking-stick. "That's not bad for a view."

They had emerged from the forest ravine and now stood on high ground. The plains swept away to a line of round-topped hills, whose slopes were intersected with similar forest-filled ravines to that behind them, making dark stripes upon the bright green of the slope. It was a lovely evening, and the sky was blue and cloudless.

"No; it's beautiful," he answered. "I came here that way, round the back of that range."

"But that's the way to Makanya. You didn't come from Makanya?"

"No; I left it on the left. I wanted to find my way across country. All that forest part is splendid, but rough."

"Were you alone?"

"Yes, except when I got a native as guide for what looked like some of the most difficult parts."

Verna's pretty lips emitted a whistle, as she looked at him in astonishment.

"You did rather a risky thing," she said. "The people down there are none too well affected, and it's hardly safe in these days for a solitary white man in some parts of the country. And the Zulus are not what they used to be. But how did you manage about talking?"

"Oh, I had picked up an ordinary word or two, and the potent sign of a half-crown piece did the rest. It was quite interesting as an experience, really."

Verna still looked at him astonished; then she remembered he had said something about South America; still, his undertaking was at that time, as she had said, a risky thing. He, remembering one experience, at any rate, thought she was very likely right.

"Well, you mustn't take any risks when you are with us," she said.

"Why? Are the people your way disaffected, too?"

"It isn't so much that, but you might get lost wandering about by yourself. The forest country is flatter, and there are no landmarks, at any rate, that would be of any use to a stranger."

"Oh, I'm not much afraid of that," he answered lightly. They had resumed their walk, which lay back through the forest by a different way, chatting freely about anything and everything, as if they had known each other for years, at least so Denham looked upon it. He had had a most delightful walk, he told her, and she said she was glad. What he did not tell her was that he had found in her personality something so alluring, in her propinquity something so magnetic that it seemed ages ago when he had never known her. And now he was due to spend an indefinite time in a wild and unfrequented place, with herself and her father as sole companions. Assuredly the situation was charged with potentialities, but from such Alaric Denham, recognising, did not shrink.

Two figures were walking a little way in front of them as they drew near the hotel garden gate.

"Why, who can that be with father?" said Verna. Then, as they got a little nearer, "Why, if it isn't Harry Stride!"

"Who's he?"

"A prospector. He's a nice boy. A little while ago he got into a difference of opinion with some of our people and learnt which was softest—his head or a knobkerrie. We mended him up, but it took a little while."

"Poor chap. Is he all right now?"

"Oh yes." And the other two, hearing them, turned and waited.

During the greetings which followed a mere glance was sufficient to make Denham acquainted with two things—one, that the newcomer was over head and ears in love with Verna Halse, and the other that Verna was not in the least in love with him. She greeted him with frank, open-hearted friendliness, while his face, in that brief moment, spoke volumes.

Then the two men were introduced, and Denham became alive to the fact that the other regarded him with no friendly eyes.

"Poor boy," he thought to himself. "He is handsome, too, very, in the Anglo-Saxon, blue-eyed style, manly-looking as well. I wonder why he has no show."

As the evening wore on this subtle antagonism deepened, at any rate such was obvious to the object thereof. Yet Denham laid himself out to be friendly. He made no attempt to monopolise Verna's society, but spent most of the time chatting and smoking with her father, leaving the other a clear field so far as he himself was concerned. And of this the other had laid himself out to make the most; as why should he not, since he had ridden a two days' journey with that express object?

Once, when the conversation was general, and turning on the probability of a general rising, the subject of the state of native feeling in the Makanya district came up; Verna said, "Mr Denham came right through the Makanya bush all alone."

But it happened that several people were talking at once, as is not unfrequently the case when a topic of public interest is under discussion, and the remark was lost. Verna did not repeat it. Some strange, unaccountable instinct kept her from doing so. It could be nothing else but instinct, for certainly Denham himself gave no sign of having so much as heard it. But the time was to come when she should look back on that instinct with very real meaning indeed.

Chapter Twelve.

Treachery.

The Lumisana forest covers many square miles of country, and that the roughest and most impenetrable country imaginable. Huge tree-trunks, dense undergrowth, impenetrable thickets of *haak doorn*, that awful fishhook-like thorn which, like the sword of the Edenic angel, turns every way, and growing in such close abattis that any one trying to force his way through it would in a second find not only his clothes but his skin torn to ribbons and could not get through even then. Where the ground was comparatively level a way might be made by the following of game paths; but there were broken, tumbled masses of rocks and cliffs, and dark ravines falling away suddenly, with lateral clefts running up from these for long distances, the said clefts so overhung by dense foliage as to form actual caves into which the light of day could hardly straggle. A terrible, an appalling place to get lost in, save for those with a lifetime of veldt-craft at their back, and the means of procuring wild food. To a new and inexperienced wanderer such a position would be well-nigh hopeless. Snakes of the most deadly varieties were abundant, the hyena and the leopard prowled at night—the latter abnormally bold and fierce, and giant baboons barked raucously from the rocks. Even in full, broad daylight, with the sun glancing down through the network of the tree-tops, there was an awesome stillness and an oppressiveness in the air, breathing of fever; at night the dense solitude and mysterious voices and rustlings were calculated to get upon the nerves.

To the natives the place was very much *tagati*. It exuded witchcraft and uncanniness. Even in the daytime they did not care to penetrate very far into its mysterious depths, and then only in twos or more. At night they were unanimous in leaving it severely alone.

Yet, here are two of them, threading its most untrodden recesses, under a broad, full moon, and they are walking as men with a set purpose. One is a man of tall, splendid physique, the other shorter and older, and both are flagrantly transgressing the laws of the administration under which they live, for each is armed with a rifle as well as two or three assegais.

They hold on their way, with that light, elastic, yet firm Zulu step. A white man would be tripping and stumbling and floundering here in these misty shades, but not these. A sort of instinct enables them to grip the ground, to duck where a great overbranching limb bars the path. And the air is hot and heavy and feverish, and even their nearly naked bodies glisten with perspiration.

“Au! The way is long. I, who am old, am tired, my father.”

The speaker was nearly old enough to be the other’s father, but the title was given in respect to rank.

“I, who am young, am tired, Undhlawafa. Tired of being the white man’s dog,” was the sneering reply.

“Yet Opondo is a white man,” answered the induna.

“Name him not here; he is great. No, he is not a white man. He was once.”

“He is but little older than me, son of Umlali. Do I not remember him when we were a nation? He was our friend then, the friend of that Great One who has gone into night.”

“He is our friend now, Undhlawafa,” said Sapazani. “That is why we are answering his ‘word’ to-night.”

Another hour of travelling—time is nothing to savages, nor distance either—and the sudden, deep-toned baying of dogs smote upon both men’s ears. They continued their snake-like course through the dense foliage and the gloom unhesitatingly. Then the sky lightened. They had emerged from the forest, and in the moonlight a few domed roofs stood forth staring and pale. Within the thorn stockade surrounding these the dogs mouthed and roared. Some one came forth and quieted them, and the two entered, the gate being immediately closed behind them.

The man who admitted them saluted with respect. Then he dived into a hut, presently returning with an intimation that they should enter. Prior to doing so both deposited their weapons upon the ground outside.

This kraal was deep away in the heart of the forest. It was overhung by a crescent formation of craggy rocks, but over this the growth was so thick that nothing short of hewing a way for days could have brought anyone within overlooking range on that side. In front nearly the same held good, and but that the two who now came to it were past masters in the art of finding their way through apparently impenetrable undergrowth they would have missed it again and again. Besides, they had been here before.

The chief occupant of the hut was a white man.

He was old. His face was hard and worn, and tanned nearly to the duskiness of the Zulus around him, especially that of Sapazani, who was light-coloured. He wore a long silvered beard, and his blue-grey eyes were bright and glittering. There was a light of magnetic command in them, and indeed in the whole countenance. A strange personality and rather a terrific one. Him the new arrivals saluted with deference.

“Welcome, son of Umlali. Also Undhlawafa.”

The voice was deep-toned and strong. The utterer seemed not as old as he looked.

“We are here, my father,” said Sapazani. “And the news?”

“Give it,” turning to a man who sat at his left. Sapazani had been awarded the place of honour on the right.

He addressed, who was no other than the subsequently famous Babatyana, did so. His own tribe, the Amahluzi, were armed, so, too, the Amaqwabe, and several other powerful tribes in Natal were also ready. It was only a question of acting in concert. And the great parent stock—that of Zululand—was it ready?

“He has not yet spoken,” said Sapazani, referring to the head of the royal House.

“He is dumb,” said Babatyana, “so far.”

Sapazani did not immediately reply. He was pondering. This was the first time he had seen Babatyana, and he was not impressed by him. There was an irresponsible frothiness about his manner which did not appeal. Moreover, as a Zulu of the old stock—and a very conservative one at that—Sapazani could not for the life of him quite throw off the traditional contempt for a “Kafula,” i.e. a Natal native. And the latter wore European clothes.

“So far it is like a broken chain,” he said; “like the white man’s chain. If one link is broken, of what use is the chain?”

“And that link?” asked Babatyana.

“Sigananda and Mehlo-ka-zulu,” returned Sapazani.

“Those links can be forged,” said the white man. “There are others, too, which will render the chain a double one.”

The plotting went on, till a whole scheme for a simultaneous rising was most carefully elaborated. It was curious with what solicitude this white man threw himself into the plan for the slaughter of his own countrymen. The cruel face grew more hard and cruel as he arranged or disposed of each detail. Its cold ruthlessness struck even the Zulus, as he went on elucidating the scheme; would have struck them with astonishment, but that they knew his history. And yet the presence of this man in the country at all was barely suspected by those who administered the said country.

By linking up all the tribes from central Natal right to the north of Zululand, a sweep downward could be made. The wavering ones would join, and then—no more officialdom or pass-laws or taxes. They would be free again, not as the white arch-plotter was careful to explain, by their force of arms alone, but because those who ruled them from across the sea were divided among themselves. It was difficult to understand, but Opondo, (The Horns) for that was his native name, knew everything. He had been known among them formerly by another name, but that for good reasons was *hlonipa*, i.e. hidden, now, and the present substitute was, darkly, near enough to it.

For upwards of an hour they sat listening, hanging on his words, showing their assent by emphatic exclamations when he made a special point. And no one was more emphatic than a man who had said very little during the *indaba*. He was not a chief, but a follower of Babatyana, and his name was Pandulu; and he had not said much—had only listened.

Now *tywala* was brought in and distributed. The white man lighted a pipe, so, too, did Babatyana, a proceeding which brought an ill-concealed sneer to Sapazani’s face, for that conservative chief and his induna confined themselves to the good old custom of taking snuff. Pipe smoking and clothes wearing went together, they decided, contemptuously. With a white man, of course, it was different. Such things were his custom. But it affected them even further. What about joining forces with such a decadent as this? A *Kafula!* who wore clothes—dirty clothes at that—and smoked a pipe!

The *indaba* had dropped; but now Pandulu, who had spoken but little before, seemed anxious to revive it. He, too, came under the mistrust of Sapazani. He, too, smoked a pipe and wore clothes. Then food was brought in—the usual beef and roast mealies, and all took a hearty hand at the trencher. By this time the night was wearing on.

Sapazani and his induna got up to leave. They did not wish it to be known they had been in converse with Opondo, wherefore it was just as well to be out of the forest before dawn.

Outside in the clear moonlight the dogs began to raise a great clamour, in the midst of which the white man put an injunction upon Babatyana, who was sleeping at the kraal, to the effect that he should send his follower, Pandulu, with Sapazani. He gave no reason—his word was sufficient.

The trio started.

The owner of the kraal stood alone, gazing forth into the night, and the hard and cruel expression deepened upon his strong face. His was a lifelong feud—a feud deadly and vengeful—with his own race. He lived for that, and for nothing else. His was a terrible and mysterious personality. He could sway tribes and nations, and yet not appear himself. Even among the natives themselves there were comparatively few who had actually seen him, yet every disturbance or rumour of disturbance he was at the back of.

“Just such a night as this,” he murmured to himself, gazing at the full moon, then at the great sweep of forest with its weird, nocturnal noises. “Just such a night.”

The face softened somewhat at the recollection, then hardened again more than ever. More blood was to flow, more blood to be poured out upon the altar of a never-dying vengeance.

The three wended through the labyrinthine shades, finding their way with almost the instinct of wild animals. Pandulu talked volubly about the coming rising, but the other two, beyond putting a question or so here and there, said not much.

“*Whau!*” he exclaimed, looking up. “The moon is sinking. Shall we not rest and make a fire? This is a place for evil things to happen in the black darkness.”

“For evil things to happen,” repeated Sapazani. “For evil things to happen. *Eh-hé*, Pandulu.”

There was that in the tone which the man addressed did not like. Or could it be that a whispered word or two between the chief and Opondo had not escaped his notice, though he could not hear its burden?

As he had said, the moon was dropping, and more than an hour of black darkness lay between this and daylight. And darkness under these shades could be very black indeed. Anyway, he did not like the chief’s tone—no, not a bit. Perhaps

he had some secret reason of his own for not liking it, anyway he suddenly realised that he was in deadly peril.

"Here will we rest," said Sapazani, coming to a sudden halt. They had gained an open space, which was lighter beneath the dying moon. The stranger agreed with alacrity.

"I will go and gather sticks for a fire," he said, making a move towards the thickest part of the bush.

"Move not," said the chief sternly, covering him with his rifle.

This was unanswerable. Yet quick as thought, in sheer desperation, Pandulu turned and fled. But no bullet stopped his course or whizzed past him. Dropping his rifle, Sapazani sprang in pursuit.

It was something of a chase. The hunted man fleeing for life itself, as now he knew, twisted and doubled like a hare, and in running had just as good a chance as his pursuer. The latter, for his part, realising what enormous odds were at stake upon this man escaping, put forward every effort. Even then it is doubtful whether he would have been successful; but a forest game path is an awkward place for a sprinting match, and the fugitive's foot catching in some tangle of undergrowth he fell headlong. In a moment his pursuer was upon him.

Pandulu realised that his end had come. His struggles were useless beneath the weight and against the powerful grasp of Sapazani, for he had fallen face downward, and his pursuer had taken care he should not move from that position.

"Well, traitor! Well, white man's dog!" snarled the chief. "I am going to pass the remainder of the dark hours beside a fire, and on that fire thyself. Ha! it will be a warm one. But to begin with—how likest thou that and that?"

"That and that" represented two long cuts of Sapazani's sharp assegai, drawn across the fallen man's shoulders. The flesh quivered convulsively, but no groan escaped the tortured man. Even then he was calculating his chances, for he still clung desperately to life. In a few minutes it would be pitch dark, could he not, by a sudden movement, wriggle himself free? The chances of flight under such conditions would be all in his favour. And the stakes! He had been promised reward such as would have made him rich for life, and could he have made such a discovery as that Sapazani was a leading figure in the plot, why, it would have meant still more. But another sharp dig from the assegai again made him writhe.

"Now white man's little-dog who would have betrayed us," went on the chief in a growling tone, like that of a wild beast. "That other will find us directly, and then we will make a fire and have a merry roast. Hå! And that roast shall be thyself. Ha!"

"Spare me the fire, my father, and I will name thee others who have more to do with this than I," pleaded the captive.

Sapazani was on the alert. He saw through the other's plan. It was a question of a sudden relaxation of muscle on his part and his victim would slip through his fingers, and away into the darkness. Ought he not to kill him at once? If only Undhlawafa were not so old and slow-footed! He could hold his victim for ever if necessary, but he could not tie him up and light a fire single-handed.

"Who are 'others,' and what part had they?" demanded the chief, with another admonitory prod.

The victim named two names. Sapazani nodded. Then he could easily get into his power. Pandulu then began to give details of the scheme under which the plotters were to be brought within the white man's net, all unconsciously, and there arrested. He also entered into considerable detail as to the reward they—the traitors—were to receive. But this did not hoodwink Sapazani. He felt the creeping tension of the muscles of his victim, knew that the latter was reckoning on the listener's physical tension growing merged in his mental interest, so that at the right moment he should make a spring for life and liberty. He took a quick glance upward. He could tell by the sky that the moon had nearly disappeared. No, he could not afford to wait any longer for Undhlawafa. Just then two tiger wolves howled, answering each other, very near at hand.

"They wait for thee, Pandulu," he snarled. "Already they smell blood. Well, go. *Hamba gahle!*"

With the words he drove his assegai down hard between the prostrate man's shoulders. The body and limbs quivered convulsively, beating the ground. Hardly had they stilled than the faint light disappeared. It would not have been safe to have delayed any longer. And in the black gloom of the grim forest the dead man lay, and before morning the ravaging beasts would have left nothing of him but crunched and scattered bones.

Those few last words whispered to Sapazani by the white arch-plotter had contained a death warrant.

Chapter Thirteen.

Discomfiture.

"Well, girlie, and what d'you think of our prospective guest now that you've had time to form an opinion?" said Ben Halse, a few days after their arrival at Ezulwini.

"Candidly," answered Verna, "I think him one of the nicest and pleasantest men I ever met."

"Or *the* nicest?"

"Perhaps that."

"Well, that's lucky, because it'll be much jollier for you to have some one fresh to talk to for the next few weeks. Shall we get Harry Stride along too—on the principle of the more the merrier?"

"N-no; I don't think in this case the more would be a bit the merrier, rather the reverse."

"Same here. But I thought perhaps a young un about might be jollier for you while we old 'uns yarned," answered her father, with a spice of lurking mischief.

"Old 'uns?" echoed Verna, raising her eyebrows. "Why, you don't call Mr Denham *old*?"

"Oh, that's drawn you, has it?" cried Ben. "Quite right, dear. He isn't old."

Under her father's straight gaze and quizzical laugh Verna could not for the life of her restrain a slight change of colour.

"I shall have to give you such a pinch, dear, if you talk like that," she said. "One that'll hurt."

The two were standing among the rose-bushes in the garden of the Nodwengu Hotel. It was a lovely morning, though Alp-like masses of cloud in the distance gave promise of thunder. Ben Halse had been detained longer than he had reckoned on, but had found it unnecessary to go on to Durban. In a day or two he expected to return home. The time at Ezulwini went by pleasantly enough. The trader had several old friends in the place, and Verna was in request for tennis, here or there. So, too, was Denham, who had at once been made free of the ready friendliness of a small community.

"Talking of Denham," went on Ben Halse, puffing at a newly lighted pipe that would only half draw, "it's a rum thing, Verna, that just as you had been wondering what sort of chap he was he should have turned up here."

"Yes, isn't it? But I hope he won't find it too rough with us," she added somewhat anxiously.

"Not he. Didn't he say he'd knocked about in South America? I expect it's a sight rougher in parts there than here. He's a man who takes things as they come, rely upon it. And he doesn't put on an atom of 'side.'"

Incidentally, "side" is *the* unpardonable sin among our colonial brethren, and rightly so.

"No, that he certainly doesn't," assented Verna decisively. "Oh, I dare say it'll be all right."

At the same time she was wondering as to this anxiety on behalf of this particular guest's comfort. She had never done so on behalf of any other, had never dreamed of giving any such consideration a second thought. They must just take them as they found them, or, if not, stay away, was her rule.

"Why, here comes Harry Stride," said Ben, looking up. "He seems a bit cross by the way he's walking. You can nearly always tell a man's mood by the way he walks. Hallo, Harry!"

The young prospector turned to join them, only too delighted. He was a handsome and manly-looking young fellow, as Verna was not slow to recognise as she noted his tall form coming down the garden path.

"Come from the club, Harry?" said the trader.

"Yes, I couldn't stick it any longer. That man Denham's there, laying down the law, as usual. I'm fed up with Denham. It seems that a man has only to come out from home with enough coin, and crowd on enough 'side,' and—"

"But this one doesn't crowd on 'side,'" interrupted Verna quietly.

The other stared.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he said. "I forgot he was a friend of yours. I ought to have remembered."

"We most of us suffer from lapse of memory at times, Harry," said Ben Halse kindly. "Often two people don't take to each other, and that through no fault on either side. Now the sun's over the yard-arm and I'm going in to wet the bosun's whistle. You join?"

"No, thanks, Mr Halse. It's rather too early for me."

"Sure? Well, I'll have to do it alone, then. So long." And he strolled off, leaving the two young people together.

"What a splendid chap your father is, Verna," began Stride, for on the strength of his former "refusal," with which we heard him acquaint his partner, she conceded him the use of her Christian name—at any rate, in private. "So kind and tactful."

Verna smiled. The encomium holding good of herself, she refrained from lecturing him on the subject of the vilified Denham. As a matter of fact, since Stride's arrival she had been about with him far more than with the other, so that really there was no ground for the younger man's jealous irritation—as yet. As yet? Exactly. But he, for his part, was looking ahead. Would she not be under the same roof for an indefinite time with the objectionable stranger? He knew by experience that it was impossible to be under the same roof for an indefinite time with Verna Halse and go forth again heart-whole. And this stranger seemed to be "coiny," and, to give the devil his due, was a fine-looking fellow, poor Stride allowed, whereas he himself hardly had a "fiver" to his name, and lived mainly on the great god Hope. In fact, remembering this he was inclined to abandon the resolution we heard him express to his partner—trying his luck again. It was hopeless. He had better make up his mind to throw up the sponge. But Verna's next words acted upon him like a spur.

"We start for home to-morrow," she said.

"No!"

"Yes." She could not help smiling a little at his crestfallen look. All the woman within her accepted the tribute, and at the same time felt pitiful towards him.

"Do you know why I came over here now, Verna?" he burst forth suddenly, impulsively. "It was because I heard you

would be here, and I couldn't help trying my luck again."

His animated face and eager eyes held her. Yet her reply was unequivocal, though kind.

"Your luck is elsewhere, Harry," she answered softly but firmly. "Try it. I don't want to hurt you, but there is no other way out."

He began to plead. He was at low ebb now, but luck might change. Beyond that he had expectations; nothing very great, but substantial. Would she not wait? And a great deal more he poured forth, there in the golden sunshine among the roses, and the bees humming from flower to flower, and the flitting butterflies. But Verna's answer was the same steady shake of the head.

"It's of no use, Harry," she said. "I like you very much, as you know, but not in that way. People are drawn towards each other—in that way—or they are not. I mean, you were talking about luck changing, and so on, but if you were ever such a millionaire I'm afraid it would make no difference in that way. Now do you see?"

He said nothing. He looked at her with misery in his eyes. Never had she seemed so all-alluring as here under the burning midday sun, so cool and fresh and self-possessed. And it was hopeless.

"Well, I suppose I'm nothing but a born idiot," he said, but not resentfully.

Verna laid a hand upon his arm.

"No, you're not," she said. "Only—your luck is elsewhere. You'll find it some day sooner or later, and remember my words."

Then she looked at him in astonishment, for a scowl had come over his face. Following his glance she saw the reason. Denham was walking along the path which led to the house. He must have seen them, but looked as if he had not, and passed on without any attempt to join them. Verna's astonishment was dispelled, but she made no remark as to it or its cause. Tactfully she led Harry Stride on to other topics, and his jealous eyes noted that she made no excuse to return to the house, in fact, she drew him off down a little-used path under the trees; nor was it until an hour after that they returned, a little late for lunch, Verna declaring, publicly, that they had had a most delightful walk.

Yes, but for all that, she and Denham would be for weeks beneath the same roof, thought poor Stride. How lucky some men were, how unlucky others. This one apparently had not a care in the world, and now he was going to rob him, Stride, of all that made life worth living. How he hated him, sitting there beside Verna, chatting easily to her.

"What's the matter with your appetite, Mr Stride?" remarked the hostess, noticing that he sent everything away almost untouched.

"Oh, I don't know, Mrs Shelford. It's too hot, I suppose. Or it may be that I tried a new concoction at the club that some fellow left them a recipe for. It's supposed to be an appetiser, but I thought it vile. Heard any more about Shelford coming back, by the way?"

"I'm expecting him next week."

"Sorry, because I shall miss seeing him. Am starting back to-morrow."

The other smiled faintly to herself. She thought she knew what was wrong with Stride's appetite.

"You're making a short stay this time," she said.

Harry mumbled something about "rough on Robson being left alone," which caused the smile to deepen.

"How are the niggers out your way, Stride?" asked a man who had only arrived that morning.

"Getting bumptious. A boy of ours came at me with a pick-handle the other day because I threatened to hammer him. Only threatened, mind! hadn't started in to do it. I did it then, though—had to, you know."

"I should think so," said the hostess emphatically. "They want all the hammering they can get."

"Rather. Well, we cleared this dev—er—this chap out. When he got to a safe distance he turned round and sang out that it didn't matter now, all the whites in the country were going to be made meat of directly, and he and some others would take particular care of *us*. I got out a rifle, but that didn't scare him. He knew I daren't fire."

"Quite right. Mustn't take the law into your own hands, Stride," said Inspector James humorously. "Only, if you do, see that you abolish the *corpus delicti*."

"Talking of *corpus delicti*," said the man who had first spoken. "Is there anything in this rumour that a white man has been killed in the Makanya forest? I heard that something had been found that pointed to it, but not the remains of the chap himself."

"You mustn't swallow every yarn you hear," said James.

"We've been killed at least three times this year already on those terms," said Ben Halse.

"I suppose I shall be included in the fourth," laughed Denham, alluding to his approaching visit.

Stride, however, had suddenly grown silent.

The Ezulwini Club was not large, as we have said; however, it would sometimes get lively at night, but not always. To-

night it was lively, very; the circulation of whiskies-and-sodas brisk.

"Anything more been heard about that yarn from the Makanya?" began the man who had sprung the subject at the hotel table. Others asked, "What yarn?"

"*You* ought to know something of it, Hallam," went on the first speaker, the point of the emphasis being that the man addressed was an official holding an important post.

"Why?" curtly.

"Because you're in a position to."

This was all the other wanted.

"Exactly," he retorted. "But if I'm in a position to know, I'm in a position not to tell. See?"

There was a laugh, in which the offender, who at first looked resentful, joined.

"What's the joke?" asked James, who at that moment entered.

"Joke? Oh, Slingsby's putting up idiotic questions," answered Hallam shortly. "Here, Mabule," to the Bar-keeper, "set 'em up again—you know every one's pet poison. What's yours, Mr Denham? You'll join?"

"Thanks. All right," answered Denham, who had come to the conclusion that the hospitality of this club required a strong head, which, fortunately, he possessed. But Harry Stride, less fortunate, did not.

"I can tell you all about that yarn," he broke in. "Slingsby's not so wide of the mark either. Some one has come to grief in the Makanya, and a white man too, for I picked up a saddle in the Bobi drift, and it had a bullet hole through the flap, an unmistakable bullet hole."

"You picked it up?" said some one, while Inspector James, who was "in the know," muttered to himself, "Damned silly young ass!"

Then followed a considerable amount of questionings and discussion. When was this, and where, and how would it have happened, and what had he done with the saddle, and so forth? Hallam, it might have been noticed, stood out of the discussion altogether. Perhaps he was "in the know" also; at any rate, as an official, he was instinctively averse to making public property of this kind of thing. But Harry Stride had got outside of quite as many whiskies-and-sodas as were good for him, and the effect, coming on top of his then state of frothy mental tension, was disastrous. Now he said

"You must have crossed just above the Bobi drift, Mr Denham. I hear you came through the Makanya that way."

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder if it was somewhere about there," answered Denham easily. "But, you see, I didn't know any of the names of drifts and so on. I just 'drifted' on."

"Were you alone?" queried Stride, with a marked emphasis on the last word, and looking the other full in the face.

There could be no possible mistake as to the meaning. A scarcely perceptible start ran through those present. This was getting too thick altogether, was the general opinion.

"Very much so, except when I could get hold of some black chap for a guide," answered Denham, easily again. "I suppose, though, in the light of your discovery I must consider myself jolly lucky to have come through with a whole skin."

The ease and tactfulness of the answer saved the situation. The tension relaxed. Stride had been having a little too much whisky, was the consensus of opinion. But, by a strange instinct, one, or even two there present were not prepared to swear to themselves that there could be nothing in it.

Chapter Fourteen.

Forging the Blades.

Malemba, the assegai-maker, sat plying his trade busily. Around him, interestedly watching the process, squatted several young Zulus.

Malemba was an old man, and grizzled. He wore the ring, as well he might, for his trade was a profitable one, and he had wives and cattle galore. He had made assegais for the fighting men of Dingana and Mpande and Cetywayo, and as a skilled craftsman his repute was great. In those days his remuneration had been rendered in cattle or other kind, now it was in hard English money, and nothing else would satisfy him.

Such blades he turned out, such splendid blades, keen as razors, the fluting in perfect symmetry—broad blades for close quarter, stabbing purposes; long, tapering ones, which would bring down a buck at forty yards if well thrown, or an enemy at the same distance. Why, Dingana had commanded them more than once, indeed when a more powerful but less skilful rival had sought his destruction that king had ordered the death of that rival instead. Cetywayo had even more keenly appreciated his skilful craftsmanship, so that Malemba might safely have put up a notice over his primitive forge: "Assegai-forger to the Royal Family."

His son, Umjozo, did the stick-making; and the binding of the blades, and the plaiting of the raw hide which should secure these within their hafts to last for all time, was a work of art in itself. By and by Birmingham-forged blades were imported, surreptitiously, by the traders; but the assegai turned out by old Malemba and his son never fell in reputation. It was to the imported article as the production of a crack firm of gun-makers would be to the cheap gun purchasable at

six or seven pounds in an ironmonger's shop. And yet it was forged mostly out of old scrap iron—cask-hoops, nuts, bolts, anything thrown away by the roadside, but carefully collected.

For years Malemba's trade had been in abeyance, if not practically extinct. There had been occasional rumours which threatened to call it forth again, but nothing had come of them. Well, it didn't matter. He was a rich man, in short, a successful manufacturer who had made his pile and could afford to retire. And yet—and yet—the hard English money flowed into the country, and it represented everything that should render a man's declining years comfortable and pleasant; and further, Malemba loved his craft, and took an artist's pride in it; wherefore even his prosperity left something further to wish for.

Then sporadic rumours began to creep about, and the atmosphere became charged. In the midst of which Malemba was sent for by a powerful chief, and offered such tempting inducements that he decided to open his forge again. And that chief was Sapazani.

For Sapazani had wielded weapons of Malemba's manufacture with his own hand, had wielded them to considerable purpose, too. He desired nothing so much as to wield them again.

Sapazani, the ultra-conservative, had no use for assegais fabricated across the seas. He knew the balance and the temper of the home-made article to a nicety, especially that made by Mklemba. Wherefore he sent his invitation to the latter, and lo! under the noses of the civil officials and the half-dozen police who represented or carried out law and order in the district, Malemba's forge was set up, and turned out its score of assegais *per diem*. But the Lumisana district was a very wide, wild and, in parts, inaccessible tract, and in one of its most remote and inaccessible ranges was Malemba's forge set up.

"Ah, my sons," said the old man, as he paused in his work to take snuff, while his assistants were arranging their primitive bellows. "Ah, my sons, I fear me that what I do is useless. What are these poor weapons beside the thunder and lightning wherewith the Amangisi and the Amabuna poured death upon each other from distances further than a man can see? How then will ye get near enough to use these?"

"But, my father," answered one of the spectators, "what if the *izanus* put *múti* upon us which render the white man's bullets of no avail?"

The old man chuckled, and his face crinkled up.

"Will the *izanus* doctor themselves and then stand up and let themselves be shot at?" he answered. "Will they do this? *Ou!*"

This was a puzzler. His hearers were pretty sure they would do no such thing, yet so ingrained is this stale and flimsy superstition, that notwithstanding the numbers of times its utter fallacy had been proved, there is no getting it out of the native system.

"I made blades for that Elephant who fell by 'the stroke of Sopusuza,' when your fathers were children," went on the old man, "Dingana, who scourged the Amabuna as a whip-lash scourges an ox, until he had to take flight when our nation was divided. But then the guns of the Amabuna shot but feebly and there was opportunity to run in and make an end. But now, when the white man's bullets fall thick as the stones in the fiercest hail storm, what chance have ye with these?" pointing to a row of blades which awaited the binding. Whereby it will be seen that Malemba was progressive.

Even this argument did not impress the group. They were inclined to make very light of it.

"We will not allow them time to fire their bullets at all, my father," laughed another of them. "We shall eat them up while they sleep."

"But will they sleep?" said the old man, his head on one side.

"Will they not? They are asleep even now," came the answer. "We need not even wait until night. They are scattered. We can take them at any time—when 'the word' is given."

"When 'the word' is given! Ah! ah! When the word is given." And the old man chuckled darkly.

"What means our father?"

"What I mean? What if 'the word' is given too late? Or worse still—too soon? *Ou!*"

"That will not be, my father. The chain is now forged, even as these blades. And the whites are scattered—scattered. They lie in our hands."

"Let them not lie there too long, or perchance they may spring out," returned Malemba quizzically. "Well, I have nought to do with it, I who am old. I can but make you the weapons, it is for yourselves to wield them. And most of you have never learned the art. You were born too late."

A laugh went up at this. The old assegai-maker was looked upon with the greatest veneration. His wisdom was recognised and appreciated. But to these young bloods, fed up of late on conspiracy, and yearning to prove themselves worthy of their warrior ancestors, mere wisdom was at a slump just then.

"I can but make you assegais," repeated the old man. "I am too old to wield them."

And he resumed his work, crooning, to the strokes of the hammer, a snatch from an old war-song—

"Nantsi 'ndaba—
Indaba yemkonto!
Ji-jji! Ji-jji!"

("That is the talk. The talk of the assegais." "Ji-jji" is the stabbing hiss.)

"These whites, they are not so powerful as we are told," said one of the group. "I have been among them—have worked for them, where they dig the gold, the gold that is turned into round money that makes them rich—and us. *Whau!* They will do anything for money! Ha!"

An evil laugh went round among his listeners.

"Their women," echoed another. "When 'the word' goes forth we shall take their women, when the rest are dead. It will make a pleasant change."

But the old assegai-maker went on crooning his old and appropriate war-song—

"Nantsi 'ndaba—
Indaba yemkonto."

"That is not much change, except for the worse," said another. "Their women. A set of hut poles!" Whereat a great laugh went up from the gathering. "Sons of my father, I would not pay half a calf in *lobola* for one white woman I have ever seen."

"Half a calf! *Au!* What of Izibu?" This, it will be remembered, was Verna Halse's name.

"Izibu?" returned the first speaker. "She is for one greater than we."

A gurgle of bass laughter ran through the group.

"There are others at Ezulwini," went on the one who had worked at the Rand. "Also at Malimati and Nongoma. It will be great to obtain wives we have paid no *lobola* for. White wives! Ha! That will be a change indeed."

"You have got to get them first, my sons," said the old assegai-maker. "I remember in the days of Dingana, when I was young, wives were plentiful even without paying *lobola*. That king had an open hand, and after an impi had returned from raiding the Amaswazi, or the Basutu, he would distribute the captive women with a free hand. *Whau!* I not only made assegais in those days, I wielded them."

"*Baba!*" (Father.)

"*Ye-bo!* Twice did Dingana send me a wife, for he said that a man who could make assegais like mine deserved a share of what those assegais could procure. But that is now all a thing of bygone years. It is dead, dead and buried. We are the white man's dogs to-day, and always shall be."

"And always shall be, *Hau!*" echoed his listeners. "And always shall be. My father, I think not."

"I am old, my sons, and I shall end my life peacefully," answered the assegai-maker—"shall end my life as the white man's dog. There are those among you who will end your lives in blood."

"Ha! And what then?" cried the man who had worked at the Rand. "We fight for our father and chief, and for—" and here he suddenly stopped. He would name no names, but all knew what was in his mind, and the same thought was in theirs. "I would I had lived in the time when we were a nation indeed, when our assegais bit deep and drank blood. My father lost his life in blood at Nodwengu, but he had washed his spear in the blood of the whites twice before that. And I, his son, I have to turn out and work at mending the white man's roads. *Hau!*"

"You will get all your chances of a death in blood—a glorious death in blood—presently, my sons," said the old assegai-maker, his face puckered up quizzically. "The whites will take care of that."

"*Au!* I like not this talk," growled one of the group, a much older man. "It is as if our father were putting bad *múti* upon the weapons he is making."

"No *múti*, good or bad, put I on them, Sekun-ya," returned the old man tranquilly. "The *múti* is for those who use them."

There was a laugh at this, and then the group fell to talking, and their topic was the former one—the capture of the white women in the coming rising. It was not a pleasant conversation. The man who had worked at the Rand was giving voluble impressions and even experiences of the great gold town, and his hearers listened delightedly. Such experiences, however, were not calculated to deepen their respect for the white man, or for his womenkind. The while the old assegai-maker worked on. At last he deposited the last blade to cool.

"There, my sons. You will have as many as you can carry—when darkness falls," he said. "Sapazani has an open hand, yet I would like to have what comes out of it before these are used, for thereafter nothing may there be to have. Say that unto the chief."

This they promised to do, amid much merriment. But the old sceptic did not controvert them; he merely reiterated—

"Say it."

Suddenly a change came over the attitude of the group. They were suddenly silent, and sat tense and listening.

"*O' Nongqa!*" exclaimed more than one simultaneously.

For to their keen ears was borne the far-away sound of horse-hoofs, and it was that of several horses. The inference was clear. A police patrol.

The assegai-maker's kraal was situated in a hollow on a densely bushed and rugged hillside. Even the smoke of his fire would hardly show above the tree-tops, yet it was just possible that the secret of its existence and of its whereabouts might have leaked out. But such a contingency had been provided against, and Malemba would have had ample time to conceal all traces of his craft by the time horses could make their way up that rugged hillside. Quickly the group had

melted away and were speeding for a point whence they could overlook the country beneath.

Three horsemen were advancing along the rough track down on the level, over two miles distant. The ordinary civilised gaze would have required glasses to make out their identity, but to the telescopic eyes of these savages that was plain enough. So plain that they could even distinguish the sergeant from the two troopers.

One man was dispatched to warn Malemba, and the rest crouched there, and watched—watched with some anxiety. Were they coming up the hill? No, they held straight on, heading away in the direction of Ben Halse's store. And the watchers laughed and chuckled among themselves.

"O' Nongqa! Three out of five here. Four there; ten elsewhere. *Whau!* We shall eat them up easily."

Nevertheless they continued to watch, even after the patrol was out of sight.

Chapter Fifteen.

The First Day.

They were inspecting the great koodoo head in Ben Halse's yard. Denham was delighted.

"Why, it's perfect," he declared. "Perfect, simply perfect."

"Yes, I believe it's an absolute record. But we'll have to be a bit careful how we get it away; however, there's no hurry about that."

"There's an old saying, you know, Mr Halse," said Denham: "'short accounts make long friends.' So you won't mind taking over this now," and he handed the other a folded cheque.

Ben Halse opened it, and started. Then he handed it back.

"It's too much," he said. "The head's worth a good deal, but not as much as that. No."

"It's worth it all to me," was the answer. "Well, then, name your own figure."

Ben did so.

"Right," said Denham, "you shall have your way. But I'd rather have had mine," he laughed.

"A very common complaint," answered his host. "What would you like to do this morning? In the afternoon Verna could take you down into the forest, or anywhere else you like. She's busy this morning, and I have things to see to."

Denham declared that that would be a delightful programme. He could get through the morning easily enough, he said. They must on no account make a stranger of him, or put themselves out in any way. The while he had been keeping one ear open for Verna's voice, which came to them, raised in snatches of song, from the other side of the house.

It was the day after his arrival at the store. They had all travelled up together, having borrowed some extra harness and inspanned Denham's horse as "unicorn," so that the extra weight didn't count so much, and he was conscious of having thoroughly enjoyed the journey. Nor would he try to disguise to himself the fact that this result was largely due to the presence of Ben Halse's daughter.

It had taken all of three days; two nights being got through in such scanty accommodation as could be obtained at lonely wayside stores similar to that of Ben himself, though infinitely rougher, and the third night camping in the veldt; during which, by the bye, Denham had started out of his sleep declaring that a whacking big spider had just run over his face, which was more than likely the case. But through heat and dust and discomfort Verna's spirits never flagged, and her cheerfulness remained unruffled. Now a three days' journey under such circumstances is a pretty good test of character, and her attitude throughout was thoroughly appreciated by her fellow-traveller and guest. She was unique, he decided, unique and splendid.

He found her now engaged upon exactly the same homely occupation as that on which she was engaged on the occasion of our first making her acquaintance—bread-making, to wit.

"Useful as always, Miss Halse," he remarked. "Why, I don't know how we should have got on coming along but for you."

She flashed a smile up at him.

"How did you get on without me when you came along through the Makanya bush?" she said mischievously.

If there was that in the allusion that brought a change into Denham's face it was only momentary.

"I had to then, worse luck," he laughed. "But I managed it somehow." Then they both laughed—easily, happily.

Denham, looking down at her as she sat there, came to the conclusion that she was more charming than ever. The sheen of her abundant brown hair, carelessly but becomingly coiled, the dark semicircle of the eyelashes on the cheek, the strong, supple figure so splendidly outlined, the movement of the shapely arms as she kneaded the dough—why, this homely performance was a poem in itself. Then the staging—the fall of wooded slope to a deep down vista of plain below—dim in the noontide haze where on the right a darker line in contrast to the open green showed part of the great mysterious forest tract. Even the utterly unaesthetic dwelling-house hardly seemed to spoil the picture.

"Well, and what is the subject of all this profound thought?" she asked suddenly, with a quick, bright, upward glance.

He started, looked at her straight, and told her. Yet, somehow, he did it in such a way as to avoid banality, possibly because so naturally.

"What did I tell you once before?" she said, but she changed colour ever so slightly. "That you must not pay me compliments. They don't come well from you—I mean they are too petty."

It might have been his turn to answer with a "*tu quoque*." But he did not. What he said was—

"I was answering your question. I was describing the picture I had seen in my own mind. How could I have left out the principal figure in it?"

Again she glanced up at him, was about to speak, then seemed to change her mind. If her personality had struck Denham as unique, the very same thing seemed to have struck her as regarded himself. The intellectual face, the tall, fine frame, the easy, cultured manner, half-a-score other things about him—all these rendered him a personality clean outside her own experience. Whereby it will be seen that the atmosphere around Ben Halse's remote and primitive dwelling was, even at this early stage, charged with abundant potentialities.

"And 'the principal figure' in it is all flourey and generally dishevelled," she said at last, with a light laugh.

"That makes the charm of the study."

"Do you paint, then, Mr Denham, in addition to your other scientific accomplishments?"

"No; I thought I could dabble in it at one time, but had too many serious irons in the fire. Still, I'm given to drawing mental pictures, and this is one of them, that's all. By the way, your father was saying you were going to be kind enough to act as my guide this afternoon. Is that so?"

"Oh yes. We were talking about it before you came out. Where would you like to go?"

"That I leave entirely to you. By the way, yes. Will you show me the spot where you shot the record head?"

"It's rather far, I'm afraid, for one afternoon. However, we'll see. Well, I'm through with this job now. I'll put it inside. Look! there are some people coming to the store, I expect. Yes, they are. Come and see me shop-keep, Mr Denham."

She took the tin of dough into the kitchen, and returned in a second with some keys.

Two women and a youth were approaching. Verna unlocked the door, and, as he entered, Denham looked curiously around and above at the multifold variety of trade goods. The atmosphere was inclined to be musty, and, by virtue of the nature of some of the things, not over-fragrant.

The natives entered, rather shyly, giving the salute. They stared curiously at Denham. His fine physique and general bearing impressed them. There could only be one opinion as to what had brought him there. He had come to offer U' Ben *lobola* for the *Inkosazana*. But they would make a fine pair! This they told each other afterwards.

"Well, what is wanted?" Verna asked.

"Tobacco. Smoking tobacco such as white people use," answered one of the women.

"Sapazani's 'children' indulging in white men's customs? Ah, ah!" answered Verna, with a shake of the head. The woman looked somewhat subdued, and managed to convey that it was a thing they did not wish talked about.

The while Denham was taking in the whole scene, keenly interested. Never had the liquid Zulu sounded so melodious as when it flowed from Verna's lips, he decided to himself. Then other things were requisitioned. Yards of calico were unfolded, and critically examined by the intending purchaser. He watched the deftness and patience with which Verna handled the things and bore with the intending purchasers, who would look at the articles and then go and squat in a corner of the room and talk over the transaction with each other in an undertone. The boy was looking at him sideways, with staring eyeballs.

"That's their way," said Verna, with a merry glance at him. "You can't rush these people. If you did you'd lose all your trade."

"By Jove! but I never thought there could be so much poetry in handing things out over a counter," he burst forth.

"Thanks. But remember what I told you just now, also on a former occasion," she answered, her eyes sparkling with fun. "You must not pay me compliments, especially ironical ones. I am only an up-country trader's daughter, who helps her father, up to her little best."

"Upon my conscience there was nothing ironical about it," he replied somewhat vehemently, "It was dead, sober earnest."

She smiled again and nodded; then turning to the native women suggested they had been a good while making up their minds. They took the hint, and the deal was concluded.

Denham, the while, was in something of a maze. Most girls situated as she was would have rather tried to keep him off witnessing this phase of their everyday home life—in other words, would have tried all they knew to "sink the shop." This one, on the contrary, had actually invited him to witness it, just as she might have invited him to come and have a look at the garden.

"Well, Mr Denham," said Verna, as the red-painted top-knots of the two women vanished round the doorpost, "and what do you think of me in my capacity of shop-girl?"

"If I were to tell you I should lay myself open to another rebuke," he answered, with a laugh in his eyes.

"Have I been so hard on you as that? I didn't mean to be. By the way, you are not smoking. Try some of this," reaching down an open bag of Magaliesberg from a shelf.

"Thanks. I say, what's this?" looking at the bullet hole in the wall.

"Oh, that's nothing," she answered rather shamefacedly. "At least, you heard all about it down at Ezulwini. Anyway, it's nothing to brag about. Let's go outside."

"Certainly," acquiesced Denham, grasping, with ready tact, that she did not wish to pursue the subject. And he was right. Even as in the matter of shooting the koodoo she shrank from dwelling upon anything that would tend to set her forth in his eyes as a strong, self-reliant Amazon type of woman; more so now than then.

"I wish I was more like other girls, Mr Denham," she broke forth with that winning, breezy naturalness which had so struck him. "If I were musical, for instance, and all that, I could play to you of an evening. I'm afraid you must find the evenings so slow."

"I've only had one evening here, and I didn't find that a bit slow," he answered. "Incidentally, the other evenings we have spent together have been anything but slow."

"Together!" There was something in the word, and the way in which he said it, that struck curiously upon her ears.

"I'm glad of that," she answered. "One always thinks that anybody out from England, accustomed to the livelier sides of life, must become hideously bored in an out-of-the-way wilderness such as this really is."

"It's a very beautiful wilderness, anyway," he said, looking out over the great panorama of mountain and plain and forest, extending over fifty miles, and misty in the heat of the unclouded sunlight. "But that's where you make the mistake. The very contrast is so infinitely restful. Not only restful, but invigorating. Slow! Think, for instance, of all the vividly interesting stories and reminiscences your father has been telling me since we first met, and especially during our journey here. Why, they make this wonderful country simply glow with life—and such life! The life which puts those 'livelier sides of life' you were just quoting into a dull, drab groove of monotony. No, don't for a moment imagine there is the slightest possibility of a chance of my feeling bored."

There was a vehemence, an intensity, about this deliverance that rather astonished Verna. This man had another side, then? She had read him wrong, or at least not quite right, when she had just sized him up as an even, prosperous man of the world, one whose self-possession nothing could ruffle, a charming companion, but one past anything in the shape of a great enthusiasm. Now she began to realise that she had not seen every side of him, and the discovery in no way diminished her interest in him.

"Well, that rather relieves me, from the responsibility point of view, at any rate," she answered, flashing up at him one of those bright smiles of hers. "So now, on the strength of it, I'll get you to excuse me. There's a lot to do inside. But we'll have such a jolly time of it this afternoon." And with a bright nod she left him.

Denham lit a fresh pipe, and strolled out a little way from the house. It seemed to him that something had been withdrawn. He missed Verna's presence and gracious companionship. To the full consciousness of this he awoke with a start. He was too old and experienced to do anything that might seem like "hanging around" her, wherefore he took a walk. But as he looked out upon the panorama spread out in front and around, revelled in the glow of the ambient air, even found something to interest his naturalist soul, in the bushes or grass, he was still thinking—well, he had better not think. Yet, why should he not? The question pressed itself practically home to him. He was his own master, and in every way in a position to please himself. Why should he not do so?

What a rare "find" this was! he told himself, his thoughts running on Verna. And if he missed her presence because she had been obliged to withdraw for an hour or so, what did it mean? A phrase ran uneasily through his mind, "Can't bear her out of his sight." And this was the first day of his arrival. No, assuredly it was time to pull himself together. And then, her brightly uttered words of parting, "We'll have such a jolly time of it this afternoon." Well, it should be no fault of his if they did not.

Chapter Sixteen.

Drawing in.

"Mr Denham, I think we'll change the programme, shall we?" said Verna, as she came out, got up for the ride. "Instead of going down we'll go up, if you don't mind. Do you?"

"Why, of course not. I am in your hands entirely."

The horses were waiting, saddled, the boy walking them up and down. Verna was in a sort of khaki-coloured riding habit, with a hat to match. In it was a subtle combination of the fashionable and civilised build with the congruous costume of the locality and surroundings that sat her altogether charmingly.

"All right, then. I'll take you where you will get a beautiful view; and the road is delightful. If you feel like getting off to look for a specimen, do so at any time. Now, will you put me into that saddle?"

The smile she beamed at him recalled him to himself. The naked truth of it was that Denham had about shed himself, as a snake sheds its skin. He was a hard-headed man of the world—a keen, successful financier, yet by now he was dimly realising that he scarcely knew himself. Experiences came back to him—crowded up galore; yet it seemed to be reserved for him that he should meet, in the wilds of Zululand—and the wilds of Zululand can be very wild indeed, even up to date—an experience utterly outside of all that had gone before.

"Thanks," she said, gathering up her reins. "Now we must go exactly where we like, and do exactly what we like. We are going to make an easy afternoon of it."

"Certainly," he answered. "I am very much in luck's way. I never reckoned on being taken so much care of."

"No? Well, you shall be. But I don't think you require much taking care of after having picked your way all through the Makanya bush alone."

That allusion again. Denham felt a droop all of a sudden. Yet it was only momentary. He had been alone with Verna practically the whole day. Ben Halse had not returned for the midday dinner, and they had got through it *à deux*. Thus together alone, the situation had set him thinking a great deal. In fancy he had pictured her sitting opposite him, as in that plain, rather primitive room, for any time, and the idea was pleasing.

Their way lay upward, the track so narrow in parts that they had to ride one behind the other, an arrangement fatal to conversation, for you cannot conveniently shout back over your shoulder. Now it led through some deep kloof, where the tall forest trees shut out the light of the sun, and the green depths were stirred by mysterious noises; now up a rocky steep, but ever at a foot's pace. Verna was leading the way, and the other was admiring with all his might the poise of her splendid figure, sitting her horse so perfectly and gracefully; and though the surrounding bush was teeming with all sorts of strange life, dear to the naturalist, this one, for once, forgot to notice it, so engrossed was he in the contemplation of his guide.

"This is where I wanted to bring you," said the latter at last. "We'll hitch up the horses here and walk the rest of the path."

They had emerged upon an open gully, high up on the range. A short climb, and they gained a great natural window in a tooth-shaped rock which overlooked a vast, tumbled mass of crag and valley and crater. Forest and open country lay spread out beneath, extending away in billowy roll for miles upon miles into dim, misty distance.

"By Jove! but it's splendid!" cried Denham, as he gazed out over this. "I vote we sit here a bit and look at it."

"I thought you'd like it," she answered. "Yes, let's have a rest."

They sat down within the great rock-window, drinking in the splendid air, the world, as it were, at their feet. But somehow, and all of a sudden, a constraint, a silence, seemed to have fallen between them. It was perfectly unaccountable on any ground whatever, still it was there all the same. Could it be that by some mysterious phase of telepathy both were thinking the same thing? and that each knew that the other knew it? For there existed a tremendous mutual "draw" between these two, and yet they had only known each other a few days.

Then by some equally sudden and unaccountable phase of telepathy the constraint was mutually broken. The same idea had come into both their minds. It would never do to let this sort of thing take a hold on them thus early. Verna began to point out various landmarks, near and far.

"Look," she said, turning from the open view, and pointing to a particularly tumbled and bushy range of hills about six miles off. "That's where Sapazani's kraal is. We'll ride over some day and pay him a visit. How would you like that?"

"Very much indeed. I'd like to study these fellows a bit. They seem interesting. By the way, do you know what I've done, Miss Halse?"

"What?"

"Why, I've buried myself. I mean that I've put myself clean out of communication with the old country, except on the part of one confidential man in my business, and even he can't communicate beyond Durban. How's that for a prime way of taking a change?"

"Quite good. But what about the business side of it?"

"Oh, that's all right. I've thoroughly fixed up all that. But it's rather a joke, you know, effecting a complete disappearance."

Then he went on to tell her a good deal about himself, yet without seeming to do so egotistically, of his early struggles, of his now assured position, of many an incident and more than one crisis in his life. To all of which she listened with vivid interest, with appreciation and sympathy.

"I am boring you, I'm afraid—" he broke off.

"No, indeed. I am very much interested. What a hole and corner sort of life mine must seem to you!"

"Do you know you are a very great puzzle to me?"—he had nearly said "Verna."

"Yes. Why?"

"You might have been everywhere, seen everything, from the way in which you talk. How on earth did you pick it up?—and you say you have never been outside Natal, except to the Rand."

"Well, it's true," she answered, looking pleased. "I accept your verdict—as another compliment—and feel only proud."

The constraint was broken down between them now, and they talked on and freely. There was that in the fact of her companion having told her so much about his life that wonderfully fascinated Verna. What was there about her that this strong, capable man of the world should take her into his confidence, especially on such short acquaintance? More and more she felt drawn towards him. How strange it must have been, she was thinking, before this new companionship had come into her life! And yet it was barely more than a week old.

And Denham? As he sat there chatting easily, the rings of blue smoke floating off lazily upon the still air, he too was thinking—and thinking pretty much the same thing. Again this new experience had come to him just at the right time. There was nothing to mar his enjoyment of it. A very short while earlier—well—there might have been. But not now. Yet while they talked he was studying his companion keenly. There was no posing, no little coquettish touches. She was perfectly natural.

"What a splendid thing it is to feel quite easy in one's mind!" he went on, in pursuance of the subject of having, as he said, "buried" himself. "I can afford to feel that way just now, and it's real luxury. I haven't always been able to, no, not by any means."

He broke off suddenly, then, as though moved by some strange impulse, went on—

"I wonder what moved me to tell you so much about myself. It wasn't for the mere love of talking."

"Of course not. I was so interested—*am*, I ought to have said." Verna's eyes grew wonderfully soft as they met his. "It might, too, have been a certain sympathy."

"That's it," he answered. "There was one thing I did not tell you, though. I wonder if I ever shall."

"That rests with yourself," she answered. "But why should you?"

"Upon my soul I don't know."

They were looking straight at each other. The atmosphere seemed highly charged. To Verna, in her then frame of mind, the enigmatical nature of the remark opened all sorts of possibilities. She was strongly taunted to reply, "Yes, tell me now, whatever it is." But she remembered their short acquaintance, and the fact that this man was only a passing guest to make whose stay a pleasant one was only a part of her duty. The sympathetic vein cooled, then hardened.

Somehow her mood communicated itself to the other, perhaps another sign of the unconscious bond of sympathy between them. What had he so nearly done? he asked himself. Let out one of the most momentous secrets that could lie on any man, and to an acquaintance of a few days. But somehow the last expression rang hollow in his mind. Yet still, here was he, a hard-headed, experienced man of the world. He must not allow himself to be thrown off his balance under the influences of sunlight and air, and the drawing sympathy of a very rare and alluring personality. So they drifted off upon ordinary topics again, and at last Verna suggested it was time to be going home.

"Well, you have brought me to a lovely spot, for a first ride," said Denham, as they took their way down the hill. "If you go on as you have begun I may be in danger of camping in these parts altogether. Hallo," he broke off. "It's as well we came down when we did. That fellow might have gone off with our horses."

"He wouldn't have," answered Verna. "They are more like the old-time Zulus up here, when you could leave everything about and not a thing would disappear. Now, of course, civilisation has spoiled most of them."

The man referred to, who had been squatting with his back towards them, now rose. He was a tall Zulu, and ringed; and he carried a small shield and a large assegai, the latter of which he had no business under the laws of the ruling race to be carrying at all. And Denham could not repress a start, for this was the same man he had run against twice at Ezulwini—and once before. He felt thoughtful. There seemed to be some design behind the fellow's sporadic appearance.

"Who are you?" said Verna. "Not of Sapazani? I know all his 'children.'"

"*Inkosazana!*"

"What is your name?"

"Mandevu."

"Mandevu!" she echoed thoughtfully. "Ah, now I remember."

"*Inkosazana!*"

"Where from?"

The man looked at her, and shook his head whimsically. He was rather a good-looking savage, decided Denham, especially now that he had discarded European clothing.

"From nowhere," he answered, but with a curious glance at Denham, which the latter understood, and it set him thinking more deeply than ever. He remembered the bad character given him by Inspector James. He likewise remembered something else. Things were thickening up a bit. Verna talked a little longer, and then the Zulu resumed his way, when they followed his example.

"Is that your name among them?" asked Denham, as they rode along. "Inkosazana?"

"No," answered Verna, laughing merrily. "It's only a title. Inkosikazi is 'chieftainess,' and would be used for the principal wife of a chief. Inkosazana is a diminutive of it, and would be used for a chief's daughters. In a word 'Miss.'"

"I see. I shall really have to learn—under your tuition."

"You really will," she answered. And then they talked on as they rode home in the drooping day; and the evening lights shed full and varying upon the roll of landscape, the voices of wild Nature coming up from mysterious forest depths on either side, and the presence of this splendid girl beside him set Denham again thinking that this first day was nearly, if not quite, the most marvellous experience he had yet known.

Ben Halse had returned before they had. At table Verna was giving an account of their ride, mentioning, of course, their meeting with the Zulu. Denham could not help noticing that his host's interest quickened at once.

"Mandevu!" he repeated. "What's he doing in these parts, I wonder? Did he say, Verna?"

"Not he. He was as close as an oyster."

"Why, he was at Ezulwini the other day."

"Who is he, Mr Halse?" asked Denham. "A chief?"

"In a small way, yes. But—Well, this is a rum part of the world—far more so than you'd think, coming in upon it from the outside, and there are rum things done every other day that nobody knows anything about. I wouldn't tell every one that, but, then, we seem to be standing in together, you and I, or rather the three of us. So I don't mind letting on that the presence of Mandevu in these parts just now does set me thinking a bit."

Denham didn't care to push his inquiries, not then, at any rate. But the appearance of the mysterious Zulu had set *him* thinking too. Of which, however, he said nothing to his host.

Chapter Seventeen.

Retributive.

The rumble of unrest was rolling like the wave of an earthquake. It was hard to say where it began, but the tribes throughout the northern half of Natal were saturated with its spirit, and it was widespread in Zulu land. The authorities watched it with more anxiety than they cared to disclose, but even they had not fathomed the extent of its ramifications. They knew, for instance, that Sapazani was disaffected, but they did not know that Malemba the assegai-maker was kept busy day and night, and that a bevy of young men was ever present at his kraal, to bear off, under cover of darkness, the bundles of weapons barely cool from the forge. They did not know, either, of the weighty and mysterious loads delivered stealthily at another kraal of Sapazani's, a small one, in the most inaccessible recesses of the Lumisana forest. These had been delivered independently of the agency of Ben Halse, who on this occasion had held out firmly against the tempting offer. In fact, Ben Halse did not know himself, he only suspected.

The said authorities were fully alive to the desirability of arresting Sapazani, but between desirability and advisability there is something of a gulf fixed. For such a course would be tantamount to firing the train. That chief and his powerful following up in arms—for it was certain that he would not submit to arrest tamely—would simply mean that other plotting tribes would throw off all disguise and join him without reserve. The position was growing acute.

In the small kraal just mentioned sat Sapazani at night, and others with him. Before him, on the ground, were several of the loads referred to, and as their wrappings were undone the chief's eye glistened as they fell on the contents. The young men who had brought them in were squatting in the background, drinking large draughts of *tywala*. A fire burning in the centre of the open space illuminated the domed huts, and the broad face of the full moon threw an additional light upon the dark group. Not a soul could have surprised the place, for armed pickets were stationed all round at out lying distances.

"This is good, Mandevu," Sapazani was saying. "Now when we get them among the trees and rocks will these do their work? For my part I like not such way of fighting, but did not Opondo tell us of that nation in the north—that which went forth under Umzilikazi? When they fought the whites in the old way they were shot down before they could get near enough to strike a blow, but when they waited for their enemy to come to them in the mountains, instead of going to him first, then they killed many with such as these. Ah, ah! and so it will be again."

"And when we have fought enough, and each killed our white man, there are those across the seas who will give us peace," said Mandevu. "Opondo has said it, and others."

"The White King is angry with the people of this land," went on Sapazani. "He has withdrawn his soldiers, and there are only *Nongqai* left. Those we shall easily eat up. They are scattered about in threes and fours."

"I know not, brother. There are those who say that we shall not surprise the whites, that they know more than we think they do—that they can bring all the *Nongqai* together in a moment, and pour other forces upon us as well."

"Not if we all strike together. The people beyond Tukela should be able to give them plenty to do while we eat up all the whites on this side."

"Not if our plans are made known to them as fast as they are laid, brother," said Mandevu, meaningly. "There is treachery in our midst."

Sapazani's face grew grim, and he and the other continued their conversation in a lower tone still. Then the chief gave some orders, and in accordance therewith the rifles and pistols and ammunition were carefully and cunningly hidden beneath the floors of two huts. And the band prepared to march. No cheap "trade" guns were these, but up-to-date magazine, .303's for the most part, and the ammunition was mostly the deadly, expanding Dum-dum. The agency that caused all these to be supplied—crafty, cruel, vengeful—may readily be guessed at.

The party filed through the gloom, the latter lighted here and there by a silvery network of moonlight piercing through the tree-tops. All were armed, but presently they would deposit their weapons in a safe hiding-place just on the outskirts of the forest. There was not much talk, and presently the glow of a fire was seen in front. Instinctively the band came to a halt. The apparition was patent of two interpretations. Either it meant a police patrol, and if so, their own presence here at such an hour was somewhat suspicious. Or, well, it was a thing of *tagati*, for, as we have said, the forest was a place to be avoided at night, and no one but themselves would have been likely to come into it.

"Go forward, my children," commanded Sapazani, who had been walking behind. "We will rest by yon fire."

They were astonished, but made no remark. Just before they reached it the chief gave a rapid order in a low undertone to a couple of young men who were nearest to him. These again had to conceal their astonishment, which was great.

A few minutes more and they arrived at the fire, beside which two men were squatting. No sooner was the party well within the circle of light than these sprang up, and threw themselves upon one of the new arrivals. Two more came to their aid, and in a moment the assailed one, in spite of his powerful struggles, was borne to the earth and securely tied. Again astonishment was the part of most of the onlookers, but their father and chief was present. The matter rested with

him. The bound man lay, his eyes starting from his head, a picture of amazement combined with fear. Sapazani stood gazing down upon him in silence.

"Why art thou afraid, Sebela?" he said in an even tone.

"*Nkose!* I am afraid because I seem to have come under the frown of my father and chief," answered the man. "But I have done no wrong."

"No wrong? *Hau!* And is treachery no wrong?" said the chief, his tone now stern and denunciatory.

"Treachery? Now has some evil person been poisoning the ears of my father," replied the prisoner, who fully realised the desperate strait he was in. "I would like to see that person."

"Evil person, indeed; but he did not live long after his treachery had been found out. But he was a Kafula, and thou, Sebela, art one of ourselves. *Whau, Sebela!*"

"*Whau, Sebela!*" roared the squatting group in abhorrent contempt.

"But if he is dead he cannot speak now, my father," pleaded the other, grasping at a straw. "It is only the word of one man, and he is a liar."

"We shall see. First of all, what is the name of the other man who was with thee at Ezulwini?"

"Now it is of some one else my father is talking. Not for a long time past have I been at Ezulwini, and then it was alone," was the answer.

"That is the first lie," said Sapazani. Then turning to the others, "A dog who betrays his father's house, what should be his fate?"

A roar went up—savage, vengeful, simultaneous.

"The fire! Give this dog to us, father. There is the fire all ready."

Sapazani nodded. Willing, ferocious hands were upon Sebela. He was dragged to the glowing wood and stretched right against it, yet not before with his only available weapons he had bitten two fingers of one of his torturers nearly off.

"Is it warm enough, Sebela?" said the chief. "If it is, name, then, the other man who helped thee to sell thy father's house to the whites."

The wretched victim writhed hideously in the grasp of those who held him, indeed, so powerful were his struggles that it was all they could do to hold him down at all. He uttered no cry, but his wet face and rolling eyeballs and bared teeth testified to the agony he was undergoing. The spectators, their most savage passions aroused, gazed gloatingly on.

"Name him, name him, Sebela, that thy torments may cease," repeated Sapazani.

"Pandulu."

The name burst forth in a tone that was half gasp, half shriek. The agony of the wretch had become too great for the endurance of even a barbarian. At a sign from the chief he was dragged away from the fire.

"That for the one," said the latter. "Now for the other. Name the other, Sebela."

"There was no other, *Nkose.*"

"No other? What? Was the fire not hot enough? Take him back."

But before the order could be carried out the victim decided that he could not face further torment. Every nerve in his body was throbbing with the agony he was undergoing.

"If I name him," he groaned, "shall I die immediately the death of the spear instead of by fire?"

Sapazani thought a moment.

"If thou liest not—yes," he answered.

"I have the chief's promise." And he named a name. It was that wrested from Pandulu at the point of the assegai under those same dark forest shades.

"This time thou hast not lied, Sebela," said the chief. "Well, go."

He made a sign, and in a moment as many assegais were driven into the body of the tortured wretch as there were of those wielding them who could get near enough, while those who could not pressed hungrily forward to get in their stab even after life was extinct. And it was that, well-nigh instantaneously.

"*Ou!* The justice of our father and chief!" cried the whole band as they surveyed their bloodstained blades and gazed adoringly at the splendid frame and majestic bearing of Sapazani. "He is the lion who will lead us to our meat. Ough—Ough—Ough!" in imitation of the roaring of the king of beasts.

"*Gahle,* my children," said Sapazani warningly. "Yet forget not—when the time comes."

Even as they moved away stealthy shapes were pattering up from afar. The blood scent carries an incredible distance

to the nostrils of the wild creatures of the waste, and already there were many such, stealing amid the undergrowth, waiting until the fire should die, to quarrel and snarl over this unexpected feast. Even as in the case of the other victim which this grim forest had swallowed, there would be little left of this one to tell any tales. And the broad, cold moon shone relentlessly down.

Tekana, the son of Msiza, rose blithely in the blithe early morning before the sun had peeped over the rim of the world. He was a goodly youth, tall and supple, and as he left the kraal of his relative—a distant relative who was not over-attached to him, for his father was dead—his thoughts were the thoughts of love. He had been offering *lobola* for a girl whose father was the head of a kraal some five miles distant; but the said parent had fixed his price too high, and Tekana was in despair lest some richer suitor should step in and put him for ever out of the running. He had been dejected on this point for some time past, and had been wondering whether if he went away to work in the mines at Johannesburg for a year he could earn enough to make up the amount demanded, and to this end he had consulted one or two who had gone through that experience. In fact, he was for ever talking about it. His relative was surly and close-fisted, and, as we have said, had no great love for him; moreover, he had more than hinted of late that he preferred his room to his company. Yet a year was a long time, and once away, what might not happen? He was very much drawn to the girl, and she to him, but on that account her avaricious parent stuck firm to his price—eight good cows to wit, or their equivalent in hard English sovereigns, five of the cows payable, of course, in advance. Now Tekana could muster but three, and a doubtful one that a sympathising cousin had promised to lend him. He was in despair, and so was Ntombisa; in fact, she hinted to him that an elderly, unlovely suitor, with four wives already, and much cattle, had more than once cast his eyes upon her, and had been palavering with her father in rather an ominous way.

Then, suddenly, the whole situation had changed. Tekana owned another relative, who in turn was related to the induna of the court at Ezulwini, and this man had pointed out to him insidiously how money was to be made, and plenty of it. This would bring him Ntombisa at once. But he did not like the method of it—not at first. Not at first. But his relative proved that nothing would come of it. No harm would come to anybody, least of all to his chief. It would be a mere matter of Government officialism, and there the affair would end. Besides, he would actually be serving his chief if anything, in that the latter would be obliged to sit still, and thus be saved from joining in any trouble, which could only end in disaster and ruin. So Tekana swallowed the bait and accepted the price.

Thus Tekana was found to be wending his way in the blithe early morning, blithe at heart, to the kraal of his prospective father-in-law. He had got the balance of the *lobola* in good English sovereigns, and soon all the preliminary ceremonies of the marriage would be settled. Everything looked rosy.

“Au! Thou art hurried, brother. Whither bound?”

Four men were sitting on the grass by the side of the path. These had risen as he approached.

“For the kraal of Sondisi, but a short way hence,” he replied.

“First sit and take snuff,” one of them answered. “Thine errand will break no ox’s head.”

He could not refuse; yet it was with ill-concealed impatience that he sat down among them. Yet not quite among them. He knew them for Sapazani’s people, yet they were wearing European clothes. Tekana was no fool of a Zulu, wherefore this fact struck him as singular; moreover, his own conscience was not clear. So he squatted as much as he could on the edge of the group. Incidentally he squatted in such wise as to be able to spring to his feet in a fraction of a second.

The snuff-horn went round, and they chatted on about ordinary topics. The while Tekana was wondering why they were wearing clothes contrary to the chief’s deadly prejudice. They were wearing them awkwardly, too.

One of them, the nearest to Tekana, rose. But while in the act of passing behind him Tekana rose also, and not a moment too soon. From under the suspicious-looking coat was drawn a broad assegai, and he whipped round barely in time to avoid its full stroke. Each of the other three also had risen and held a broad, gleaming blade, and without a word came straight for him.

Tekana, as we have said, was no fool, also his conscience was not clear; moreover, he was quite unarmed except for a stick. With this he knocked the weapon from the first man’s grasp, and then, without a word, he started to run.

Now his chances were even. The assegais of his assailants were useless for throwing purposes, and could he but gain his goal first his prospective father-in-law would certainly afford him protection, if only to save all that *lobola* from slipping through his own fingers.

But his would-be murderers were as good at running as he, and he had no start. They, too, wasted no words as they sprinted in his wake, and there was scarcely a dozen yards between them. Yet the distance was evenly kept.

For about a hundred yards this went on. Then the hindermost of the pursuers stopped, and with lightning-like rapidity picked up a large stone. This he hurled with power and precision. It smote the hunted man hard and full on the base of the skull, bringing him to earth more than half stunned. In a moment four assegai blades were buried again and again in his body.

“The last of the three!” exclaimed one of the slayers, all of whom were panting after their run. “Here is a thick bush. We will hide him.”

This was done. Swinging it up by the wrists and heels they threw the body into the thickest part of a thick clump that grew just beside the track, not even troubling to see whether he had anything worth taking. Plunder was not their object. Thus disappeared Tekana, who had set forth so blithely in the early morning. When the next return should be made for purposes of poll-tax collecting it would be represented that Sebela and Tekana had gone away to work at the mines, as the latter had frequently expressed his intention of doing. Pandulu did not matter. He came from Natal, and had come secretly at that. He would not be missed.

Whereby two things are manifest—that Sapazani was a very dangerous man to betray, and that in a sparsely settled and savage country things are done that never come to the knowledge of the ruling race at all.

Chapter Eighteen.

The Mating.

"Yes, I have to be a bit careful," Ben Halse was saying. "You see, I've got up a bit of a name—well, all we old-time traders were tarred with the same brush. I could name more than one who made his pile on the same terms; I could also name a big firm or two in Natal who has made a bigger pile on the same terms. However, we're not running this load into the country, but out of it."

The speaker and Alaric Denham were helping to load up a waggon, part of the contents of which were consigned for shipment at Durban. One important item of the load was a case containing the record koodoo head. There were other specimens, too, which Denham had collected.

The latter had been Ben Halse's guest about three weeks now, and as he had only just got up his outfit, and luggage in general, from the coast port it looked as though he were destined to prolong his sojourn for some time. And, indeed, from his point of view, there was every inducement for doing so. He and the trader had taken greatly to each other, and once when he had mooted the idea of leaving the other would not hear of it.

"We seem all jolly together," Ben Halse had said, in his bluff, straightforward way. "You take us as you find us, and you seem to me a man who would fit in anywhere. Further, you have got into a queer part of the world such as you may never get into again. You are collecting new things every day. So why hurry? You are welcome as long as you can stick it."

To which Denham had replied that he had enjoyed every day of his stay as he had seldom if ever enjoyed anything; and he would give himself plenty of time to wear out his welcome. And he and his host had sealed the compact then and there over a glass of grog.

Now he said—

"I shall be relieved when this load is fairly on board. That head, you know, is a sort of a nightmare. All the rest put together isn't in with it."

"Oh, you can trust Charlie Newnes," said the trader. "He's a straight, reliable man as ever was—a darn sight more so than lots of men who are quite white—and stands well with those who *baas* this show now. I was shooting what I chose here in these parts when these new officials—damn them!—were being licked at school, before ever they dreamed of coming here to tell an old up-country man like me that he mustn't shoot this and mustn't shoot that. I don't know what the devil we're all coming to. Oh, here is Charlie."

A tall, well-set-up young fellow appeared on the scene. He was the son of a well-known old-time trader by a Zulu wife, but in him the European had predominated to such an extent that outside Africa he might have passed for a white man. There was, however, a certain lithe suppleness about his walk and movements that would have given him away in a moment to any South African not of the town born and bred.

"Well, Charlie," said Ben Halse; "it's all loaded up now. Mr Denham says he won't close his eyes until he knows his cargo's shipped, so be sure and impress upon Garland that he must send word at once."

"That'll be all right, Mr Halse; Mr Denham can rest easy," answered the young fellow. "If there's a reliable agent in Durban for anything under the sun, from shipping an elephant to the Zoo to sending a youngster to sea properly equipped, Mr Garland's the man."

"Well, then, you can trek. Come in and have a drop of square face first."

"Well, Mr Halse, I don't often take anything," said the young fellow deprecatorily. "But—once in a way."

The refectation was duly consumed, and the waggon rolled its way down the hill.

"Your stuff'll be all right, Mr Denham, never fear," said Charlie Newnes, as they shook hands. Then he started to overtake the waggon.

"That's a fine young fellow," said Denham, looking after the outfit. "I should think he and his like would count for something in this country, in the long run."

"Oh, I don't know. They are rather between the devil and the deep sea," answered the trader. "There are quite a lot of them about—decent, respectable chaps for the most part. Neither one thing nor the other. I knew his father well in the old days. Bob Newnes ran the whole north-western part of this country before and after the war of '79. He made his pile a good bit."

"Father, you *are* giving yourself away," laughed Verna.

"Oh, I've done that already before. Well, what does it matter? Any fool can see I'm no chicken."

"You're a jolly well-preserved one, Halse," said Denham. "No one would have given you credit for such far-back experiences if you hadn't told them yourself."

"They used to call me a gun-runner, you know, Denham—do still, in fact. We were all gunrunners in those days, as I was telling you just now. But what the devil did it matter? No one was damaged by any gunshot during the war of '79, except in a couple of stray instances, for the average Zulu is such a wretched shot he couldn't hit a cathedral. Since then—well, when they fought each other, there was no harm in supplying them with as many as they wanted."

Verna was beginning to feel uncomfortable, and some mysterious telepathy made Denham aware of the fact.

"Of course," he answered cheerily. "Don't we build war-ships on the Clyde and Tyne and at Belfast for foreign Powers

to use against ourselves if they want to? It seems to me there's precious little difference, if any at all."

"Bless your soul, no. Well, I raft up some pretty good loads for the Usutu in the mid-eighties, when they were at each other's throats here. The Usutu paid the best, you see. The other side had got their own white men—John Dunn and others. We weren't over-ridden with officialdom in those days. Those were times, but they've all gone. Verna, if you're still on to that picnic, suppose you give us breakfast."

"That picnic" was a ride which she and Denham had planned down into the forest country in search of specimens. They had taken several of the kind already.

Yes, several. And Denham, thrown into the daily society of this girl, had come to the conclusion that such society was necessary to him, daily, and thenceforward. His life since he had been here had been an idyll, he told himself, a sheer idyll. Why should it not be a permanent one? Strangely enough, with all his advantages and experiences Denham was singularly modest. Why should he expect Verna to leave her father at the call of a mere stranger? Why should he expect her father to be ready to part with her? They were so happy together, so wrapt up in each other; and he, after all, what was he but a mere stranger? And then there was something darker at the back of that, but it he put away from his thoughts. Still, it would obtrude.

Sometimes the thought of his wealth and position would come to his aid. But immediately it would strike him that such counted for nothing here. If ever there was an independently-minded man on earth it was his host, and as for Verna, why, she was clean outside all his experience of the other sex. Then again would come in that strange and subtle sympathy, which would well up at times during their close and daily companionship.

The atmosphere of the Lumisana forest was not so stuffy and fever-breathing now. A touch of approaching winter was upon it, and from the blue, unclouded sky the sun no longer shot down rays of torrid heat. So as the pair threaded the narrow path, closely shut in overhead by towering tree-tops, the horses showed no sign of weariness or distress.

"I don't much like bringing them in here," Verna said. "There's tsetse at times. But it has turned so much cooler that I think it's safe."

They were riding in single file, she leading. It was a wonderful road. Tall trees shutting out the light; ropes of monkey trailers dangling to the ground, thick undergrowth and long grass making that peculiar translucent hue such as you may see by taking a deep dive into a tropical sea. Not many bird voices, but here and there one, for birds prefer the outskirts of inhabited lands, and the remotest depths of forest are not to their taste.

"Shall we lunch here, Verna?" said Denham, as they came out upon a small open space where a runnel of water flowed into a pool. In the course of their close companionship he had got into the way of calling her by her name. It had come naturally to both of them somehow. She, for her part, had, of late, never called him anything at all.

"Yes; it's as good a place as any, and, I'll tell you now, it's where the record head was shot. I never would bring you here before, you know, but—here we are."

And she flashed a merry laugh at him.

"By Jove! that's capital. Now we'll 'reconstitute' the whole performance, as the French police do in a murder case. Now, show me. Where was the koodoo, and where were you?"

"First of all, about the horses," she said; "we must keep them hitched up, we can't knee-halter them because it's swampy the other side of the *vlei*, and once they got into that, why—good-night. We should have to walk home and break the news as gently as we could to father."

They loosened the girths only, having first allowed the animals to drink; and then Verna, in as few words as possible, showed him the positions of the whole affair.

"It's nothing to brag about," she ended up. "I'll own to one bit of conceit about it, though. I told father that it seemed a thousand pities my name shouldn't figure as having shot the record koodoo head of the world, even if it was only in a private collection. He said that it could—however, we've settled all that now."

"Well, he was wrong, for, on second thoughts, it can't."

"What's the joke?" she said, fairly mystified.

"None at all, it's dead serious," speaking quickly. "I shan't label it as shot by Verna Halse, but by Verna Denham. Those are my conditions. How do they strike you—darling?"

Her face flushed, then grew pale, then flushed again. In the world of adoring love in her eyes he read his answer. She put forth both hands, which he seized.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "Yes, but, I do know. Yet, listen, Alaric"—it was the first time she had ever used his name, and it came out sweetly—"are you sure you mean what you say? For instance, supposing you were to go away for six months, would you come back and say it all the same?"

"I've no intention of trying any such idiotic experiment, and, fortunately, such an utterly unnecessary one. Well?"

"How long have we known each other?" she answered. "Barely a month, certainly not more. We have been thrown together all day and every day. Are you sure that such propinquity has not something to do with it?"

He laughed good-humouredly, tolerantly.

"That's all very well," she went on, "but this is serious. What can you see in me, you who have seen so much and so many, the not even *half* educated daughter of an up-country trader, whose bringing up has given little opportunity for the ordinary refinements, let alone for acquiring accomplishments? And with all these deficiencies I should very soon pall

upon you.”

“I shall have to laugh directly,” he answered. “Half educated? Why, you’ve been arguing against yourself with a grip of your points which would be worthy of the smartest K.C., and with a terseness which would not earn him his fee. What can I see in you?”—and his tone became very vehement and very serious. “I can see in you attributes which, taken together, should render any woman irresistible—a rare physical attractiveness, an unbounded power of sympathy, and a staunchness that would stand by a man through the worst that might befall him. Is that sufficient, or must I go on adding to it?”

Verna’s eyes had filled as he was speaking. The words, the tone, seemed to burn through her whole being; but there was a smile upon her lips—very soft, very sweet.

“And can you see—really see all that in *me*, Alaric?”

“All that, and a great deal more,” he answered vehemently, drawing her to him. “So now give me your first kiss.”

“Darling, I will.”

The sun streamed hotter and hotter into the open space, frogs croaked among the reeds surrounding the burnished surface of the pool; a lemur, swinging and bounding on high among the twisted tree-trunks, stared down, blinking his beady eyes and cocking his pointed snout; a large snake lay coiled in the grass hard by, wondering if safety rested in lying still or beating a retreat; half-a-hundred of the eyes and lives of the forest were witness to the beginning of the mating of these two, witnesses, as they may have been to the darker deeds of blood which these grim shades had so lately contained.

Chapter Nineteen.

The Forest.

“And all this time we have been forgetting our picnic,” reminded Verna merrily.

They undid the saddle bags and spread out the contents. Nothing had been forgotten, for had not she herself packed them?

“Why, this might be an up-the-river jaunt,” said Denham, as the appetising daintiness of each article of food revealed itself. And then these two healthy people, realising perfectly that there is a time for the material as well as for the romantic, fell-to with a will.

Not much was said as they took the homeward way; for one thing, it is difficult to converse when you are riding single file, and to keep a bright look out for projecting boughs or tangling trailers calculated to sweep you from your saddle in summary and unpleasant fashion at the same time. Yet there was a glow of happiness in the hearts of both, that could do without words. Again, as on their way forth, Denham was contemplating his guide with feelings of intense admiration and love; but now, superadded, the exultation of security. And yet—we have said that he was a singularly modest man, for one of his personal gifts and material advantages—he still found himself wondering what a woman like this could see in him.

“You’re not conversational, Alaric,” said Verna, over her shoulder. “What’s the subject of the meditation?”

“I ought to answer ‘you—and you only,’ but it wouldn’t be true. The fact is, I have been obliged to divide contemplation of you with an enduring and superhuman effort to save myself from dangling—an executed corpse—from any one of these confounded trailers.”

She laughed—merrily, happily.

“Well, I can’t spare you yet. Look! the stuff’s thinning here. You can come alongside again.”

Hardly had he done so than both horses cocked their ears, snuffing uneasily.

“Why, what is it?” exclaimed Denham, rising in his stirrups to peer forward. “By Jove! It’s a skeleton. Let’s investigate.”

He dismounted, and helped Verna from the saddle. They were careful to hitch up the horses, and then went forward.

As Denham had said, it was a skeleton, or rather what was left of one. The skull was separated from the trunk and the dry rib-bones were mostly scattered, while those of the limbs still held together. But just beside it was the unmistakable remnant of what had been a fire, and a large one at that.

“What does it mean?” said Denham. “Some poor devil got lost, and died of starvation beside his own fire?”

Verna shook her head. She was gazing down thoughtfully at the white bones and their surroundings.

“That’s not the reading of it,” she said. “That’s no white man’s skull. Look at the teeth. Further, its owner’s end was not starvation.”

“How knowest thou that, O Sherlock Holmes up to date?” Denham had picked up the skull and was examining it with interest. “At any rate, he didn’t die from a bang on the head.”

“No; but he was killed, all the same, by others.”

“Sherlock Holmes again. Go on.”

"Well, no self-respecting native with the fear of *Inswelaboya* and other horrors of the night before his eyes, that is to say, any native, would dream of coming in here alone for anything you could offer him."

"Wait a bit, Sherlock," laughed the other. "I think I've got you on one point. You said 'horrors of the night.' How do you know it was night?"

"I deduce it from the size of the fire. Such a big one as it was would never have been built in the daytime. There must have been several in it; the ground is too dry for tracks to show, but for some reason or other this one has been killed by the rest."

"Verna, you are simply wonderful. Talk about woodcraft!"

She looked pleased.

"Well," she said, "I know the people and their ways. Not only that"—looking rather serious—"I hear and overhear things that you wouldn't understand, or rather wouldn't be able to get behind even if you had a fair amount of the language at your disposal, and you're not making a bad progress under my poor tuition, Alaric."

"Delighted. Only it isn't 'poor.'"

She made laughing rejoinder, and these two happy people talked on lightly, or half seriously by turns, rejoicing ill their newly-welded happiness. And the skull stared drearily up from the ground, sad relic of a fellow-creature done to death here in the forest gloom amid every circumstance of torment and blood.

"Hallo! what's the matter with the gees?" said Denham suddenly. "They seem unhappy about something, and it can't be only about this old skull."

For the horses were showing great uneasiness, snorting and snuffing and striving to free themselves.

"They've seen or scented something," pronounced Verna.

"Well, we'd better investigate," said Denham, holding ready the small bore, yet hard-hitting, rifle he had brought with him in view of "specimens," and advancing in the direction to which the horses' fears pointed. "Keep back, Verna. It may be a snake or a leopard."

Hardly were the words uttered than a serpentine head and neck of a dull yellow colour rose up out of the herbage, then subsided, with a half-startled hiss. Denham felt his sleeve plucked, as though to arrest his advance.

"Leave it, and come away," Verna whispered. "It's the *indhlonhlo*. They're frightfully dangerous."

"Leave it?" he whispered back. "Why, it's the very thing I've been hoping to come upon all these weeks! Leave it? Not for anything."

"Not for me?"

"For you? Wait a bit, Verna, and follow my plan. You'll see something directly. Take the rifle"—handing it to her—"go a few yards back, and when I clench my open hand behind me, like this, shoot. Aim at the lowest part of the neck so as not to spoil the skin. But don't make any *sudden* movement whatever you do."

His nerves were thrilling now with excitement suppressed but intense. All the "collector" was predominant; he only saw before him the "specimen," the rare "specimen," which he had coveted so long in vain. Dangerous! Well, many wild animals were that, but they were "collected" all the same.

"But I warn you it's deadly dangerous," she repeated; yet she carried out his orders implicitly.

Denham began to whistle in a low, but exquisitely clear tone. This he raised gradually, but always continuous, and never sounding a false note. The effect was magical. The yellow head and neck shot up again above the herbage, waved a moment, then remained perfectly still. No hissing or hostile sign proceeded from the entranced reptile, for entranced it certainly was. Verna waiting, the rifle held ready, was entranced too, and as those sweet, clear notes swelled by degrees higher and higher to sink in faultlessly harmonised modulation, then to rise again, something of an eerie magnetism thrilled through her being as though she shared the influence with the formidable and deadly reptile thus held in thrall. Moments seemed hours. Would he never give the signal? A little more of this and even her nerves would be too much strung to reply to it.

The melody rose higher and higher, but always correspondingly clear. More of the reptile's length towered up now. Without taking her eyes off it, Verna saw the hand behind Denham close. Her finger pressed the trigger. The yellow neck flung back with a quick, whip-like movement, and there was a rustling among the herbage which told its own tale.

"Did you hit?" whispered Denham, without turning his head.

"Oh yes; you can never make any mistake about that when you're behind a rifle. But—"

She broke off in amazement. The other had gone quite white, or at any rate as white as his bronze sunburn would allow. He seemed aware of it himself.

"You did it magnificently," he said, passing a hand over his eyes as though to clear them. "You know," he went on, half in apology, half in explanation, "that sort of thing takes it out of one. It isn't only the musical part of it. A certain amount of magnetism, of expenditure of force, comes in. But let's inspect the quarry."

"Careful, dearest. We'd better make sure it's quite dead. They are frightfully venomous."

"Wherefore you want to take the lead," flinging a restraining arm around her. "That won't do at all."

But all danger was over. Verna's bullet had severed the spinal cord. The reptile was dead, but the muscular vitality kept its coils writhing in a manner suggestive of lingering life. All the collector again was uppermost in Denham as he contemplated the writhing booty. He saw it already carefully and naturally set up in his museum.

"Can't be less than seven feet," he said, turning it about gingerly with a stick. "But, darling, what a dead shot you are! All my best specimens *you* obtain for me."

"But I shouldn't have obtained this one if you hadn't kept it still in the first instance. Alaric, you never told me you added snake-charming to your other accomplishments. Do you know, though, if it had been anybody else I should have thought it decidedly uncanny. Have you done much of it?"

"Only tried it once before in my life. Then it came to me as a sudden idea. I thought I'd experimentalise again in this instance. I happen to be able to whistle rather above the average, so I was always careful to keep the note clear. I had a sort of feeling that the least break would destroy the spell at once. By the way, think there's another anywhere about?—they say snakes go in couples."

"No, no, no!" she answered, instinctively slipping a restraining hand beneath his arm. "Be content with this one. Besides, we have got to get it home."

"So we have, by Jove!" with a glance up at the sun. "Now let me think of the best way to work. The horses won't stick it near them, I'm afraid. But this is worth having, and no mistake. They grow larger than this, though, don't they, Verna?"

"Yes," she answered, with a touch of anxiety. "But they are very rare and very dangerous. A snake isn't like a lion or anything of that sort. He's about ten times as quick, and offers no mark for a bullet, and if you use shot you spoil the skin. No; be content with this one."

"Why, you sworn big-game huntress, you talk with weighty wisdom. Now I am still debating the difficult problem of how to get this specimen home."

"*Nkose! Nkosazana!*"

Both started. In their preoccupation they had been totally unaware of the presence of any third person. They looked up to become aware of the presence of such, in the person of a tall Zulu, and he Mandevu. The appearance of the latter caused Denham some vague uneasiness. It seemed as though this man were dogging him. The next words were not calculated to allay the feeling.

"That was a great snake," he said, "and well killed. *Whau!* when last I saw a snake bewitched like that it was not so well killed, it was cut nearly in half. *Nkose* must be *isanusi* to have the power of keeping a snake—two snakes—still in such wise."

Verna translated this for Denham's benefit, and translated it well, word for word. Inwardly it puzzled her a little, for it seemed to convey some hidden meaning. But to her companion the words were disquieting, to say the least of it, and more than ever confirmed the idea that the Zulu was following him from place to place with a purpose.

"Tell him, Verna," he said, "that I want this taken home. If he has any boys he can fetch them along, and they shall be well paid, nor will I forget himself."

This was put. Mandevu thought he could find the boys—there was a kraal a little way off. He would see. This Verna knew to be absolutely untrue, but Denham was delighted. He presented Mandevu with a half-sovereign, intimating that there was more where that came from when the service required should be accomplished. That worthy strode off into the forest on the spot.

Verna was rather silent as they sat and waited. That curious instinctive consciousness of being watched or followed was upon her. She did not believe that Mandevu had come upon them by mere chance or that he was alone. She remembered their meeting with him near Sapazani's kraal, and also that Denham had run against him twice at Ezulwini. Now if they, or either of them, were being watched, to what end? And here she owned herself puzzled.

Presently Mandevu reappeared with two boys. Meanwhile Denham had been doctoring his prize with some subtle chemical substance by way of preservative. He did not notice that none of them looked in the direction of the skeleton, plainly visible from there. He was too intent upon his new find. But Verna did. However, as she had said, she knew the people, so forbore to remark upon it. Yet a muttered exclamation on the part of one of the two did not escape her.

"*Whau!* The snake of Sebela! It, too, is dead."

And hearing it, a good deal of the mystery of the skeleton was solved. For she had known Sebela—alive. The forest had its secrets. Its shades witnessed scenes intensely human—dark as well as golden.

Chapter Twenty.

Sergeant Dickinson's Find.

Meanwhile some curious and somewhat startling circumstances were developing. Sergeant Dickinson, N.P., stationed at Makanya, was—as we heard Harry Stride say in substance—an astute officer. So astute was he as to render him unpopular with a section of the natives, and notably with those who were disaffected. Twice, indeed, had his life been attempted by these, but with firm faith in the proverb, "Threatened men live long," such attempts had not seriously affected him. They were "all in the day's work," and only served to create a little excitement in an otherwise rather monotonous round.

Harry Stride's find of the saddle below the Bobi drift had come to him as a godsend. Could he work up a case out of it? He thought about it a good deal, and round and round; but this was after he had started with one of the four troopers under his command on a patrol immediately, and the two were threading the several hours of difficult and rugged forest path in the direction of the find.

He had no difficulty in locating the exact spot. Stride's description had been lucid and accurate—the drift itself, of course, was well-known to him.

"The thing to do, Symes," he said, "is to examine both banks right the way down. If the saddle was here there may be other things further on. We'll take this side first."

Carefully Dickinson quartered the river bank, the trooper leading both horses. It was rough going, but both were young and hard. Suddenly the trooper exclaimed—

"Look there, Dickinson!"

He was pointing to the other side. Something like a strip of clothing was fluttering from a bush hardly above water level. When the river was higher it would have been beneath it.

Now a strip of clothing in that position, amid the wildest part of the very wild Makanya forest, was a thing to attract attention. The natives frequently wore clothes, it was true; still, under the circumstances Sergeant Dickinson thought it worthy of note. And just as he had so decided, something else caught his attention.

"Symes," he said quickly, "I'm going to swim across. I fancy there's something worth finding on the other side."

"Swim across?" said Symes, with an expletive. "I wouldn't. The river's full of blooming crocs."

"I know. But we'll give 'em a holy scare first."

"Why not ride round by the blanked drift and come down the bank?" said Trooper Symes. "This is a plaguy rotten deep hole."

"Because of that krantz. It comes right down to the water, and to dodge it means the devil's own delay getting here. And if what I see is what I think, why, every minute is important."

He had thrown off his tunic—he knew better than to throw off all his clothes to swim a crocodile-infested river, for with this obnoxious saurian, as with the wily shark, experience goes to show that a clothed man is safer than an unclothed one; possibly there is something alarming in the artificiality of his clothes—or is it the bad fit of his tailor? Now he drew his revolver and so did the trooper. Both fired several shots into the water at various points.

"But what in blazes d'you think you do see?" said Symes.

"I'll tell you when I get to the other side," and Sergeant Dickinson took the water with a mighty splash.

It was not very wide there, though smooth and deep. A few long, strong strokes and the swimmer was on the other side, holding his revolver holster high above water in one hand, for he of all people did not care to be unarmed in that locality.

Eagerly, excitedly, he climbed up the bank. An exclamation of satisfaction mingled with utter disgust escaped him.

"Symes," he called out. "You've got to go back to camp as hard as you can push your horse; hitch mine up to the bush yonder, but firmly. Get my kodak—see it's not been used since I filled it yesterday—and then get back here as hard as ever you can."

"Kodak! I'm blanked! You might let on what you've found," grumbled Symes.

"It's a head, man, a white man's head. I can't bring it across the river, it's in such a disgusting condition that the damn thing'd tumble to pieces. Ugh! Must take its likeness to establish identity. So put your best leg forward."

Trooper Symes at once laid himself out to sustain the traditional reputation of his rank. He swore.

"Don't blab the affair in camp," called out his superior, as he started.

The latter, left alone, began eagerly, with his investigations. Anything more revolting than the aspect of his find can hardly be imagined. Yet considering that it must have been in the water several days, and several more since it had been stranded through the subsidence of the river, it was surprising in what a recognisable state the swollen features were. Yet, the horror and repulsion of this revolting sight was merged in Dickinson's professional exultation as he examined it long and attentively. It had not been severed by any sharp instrument, but presented the appearance of having been *torn* off. This pointed to the agency of crocodiles. Yet why had they left it? Here was a mystery to be unearthed, a clue to go upon. Here was the *corpus delicti*. The bullet hole in the broken saddle which Stride had brought him was another link in the chain. Were there no others?

First there was the strip of clothing which he had seen from the other side. It he examined. It was of khaki-like material, something akin to that employed for the uniform of the Force, and yet different. Ah, what was this? Trailing in the river was the fragment of a coat, hitched to a thorn. In his eagerness to get at it he nearly fell into the water.

There was a pocket. Eagerly the sergeant's hand investigated this, only to come in contact with what seemed a mass of pulp. He drew it forth. It slipped through his fingers and fell into the river—once it had been papers, but the immersion had reduced it to pulp, yet not quite all of it so escaped. One fragment remained, and it seemed to have been part of an extra strong envelope. This he examined eagerly. It bore a blurred and faded scrawl, most of which had entirely disappeared. By dint of the most patient and careful scrutiny Dickinson succeeded in making out—

H. Gold
Box
Jo

The rest had gone with the other fragment of the envelope—had run off to pulp.

"H. Gold—something. Box—something. Jo—hannesburg," was how he pieced this scanty clue together. "Well, Johannesburg is all 'gold,' or it's supposed to be," and he grinned to himself at this lame joke. "But I wonder what's the other half of the name—Goldstein or Goldschmidt, or Goldberg or Gold—what? Then, again, there must be tens of thousands of P.O. boxes there too, and it's clearly one of these. But how the deuce one is to trace any of the thousands of children of Israel whose names begin with 'Gold' is another side of the joke."

He carefully copied the fragment into his notebook, imitating as nearly as possible, and that was very nearly indeed, the character of the writing. Then he looked around in search of further fragments. There were none.

Dickinson got a couple of sticks, for he could not touch the loathly thing, and having first lighted his pipe, managed to get the head into a possible position for photographic purposes. Then he sat down—at a respectable distance—and began to study the features.

"One of the children of Israel, if ever there was one, and no mistake about it," he decided. "Ugh, I've looked at the ugly thing long enough."

Another pipe was filled and lighted. He felt hungry, and the stuff he had brought with him for lunch was in his holster on the other side. He did not care to swim the river alone, with no one to help scare potential crocodiles. He felt thirsty too, but he would have to feel a great deal more so before letting himself drink from the water that had held that dreadful thing facing him. He cut some boughs and placed them over it to keep off the flies, then returned to his seat in the demi-shade of a thorn-tree, and proceeded to elaborate theories with all his might—not that there was much to go upon as yet.

He stood a good chance for the next Sub-Inspectorship which should fall vacant; could he but work up this case successfully it would be the making of him. There was a girl over in Natal whom he wanted to marry, and to whom he was more than half engaged; but they had agreed to wait for the Sub-Inspectorship. It was hot, very hot. Would his comrade never come back? The hours wore on. The ripple and murmur of the river was soothing. Dickinson felt drowsy. Presently he slid more and more from his sitting posture and slept, and dreamed of the girl over in Natal.

He slept on and on, now hard and dreamlessly. But by that time Sergeant Dickinson, N.P., was in greater peril than he had ever been in his life.

"Yonder now, Shumilana," whispered Mandevu. "The distance is near enough. It is not safe to go nearer, but at such short distance, for one who was taught to shoot when in the *Nongqai*, (in this instance the Zululand Native Police), and turned out of it through him who lies yonder, it is not possible to miss."

And the two dark figures crouched down upon the rock which overlooked the sleeping Dickinson at about two hundred yards, while the discharged policeman stealthily drew forward his Martini rifle and carefully sighted it.

Wake up, Dickinson, for this man is one of the few natives who can use a rifle with accuracy of aim, and he has been taught by the ruling race. And he is drawing a fine "bead" on the two hundred yards sight. He held the same rank in his corps that you hold in yours, and it was through your agency that he was—rightly—degraded and dismissed the Force. He is as cool-nerved as you are yourself, and is not likely to miss. Wake up, if you would ever see the girl over in Natal again. Wake up, Dickinson!

Just then a lizard runs over the face of the sleeper, causing him to half jump up, half roll over. Bang, crash! and the bullet embeds itself in the trunk of the thorn-tree, which a second before had been supporting the weight of his body. It takes only another second for him to throw himself flat behind a mound of loose stones surmounted by a growth of short bush.

Sergeant Dickinson is as brave a man as there is in the Force, and that is saying a great deal. He realises now that he is in a tight corner. The rascal, whoever he may be, *can* shoot; moreover, he has a rifle, whereas he himself has only his regulation revolver. The enemy can keep beyond range and stalk him, from a distance, at leisure. And to enforce this side of the situation bang comes another bullet, right through the growth of bush which surmounts the loose stones. But a Martini is a slow-firing rifle, and the target, with lightning-like resource, has flattened down behind the stones.

"Good line that, damn him," he growls, as the air caused by the humming missile is distinctly perceptible above his head. "Well, I'm done at last. He can't go on missing all day."

"I thought thou couldst shoot true, Shumilana," whispers Mandevu. "*Whau!*"

The last, *staccato*. For a bullet has splattered hard against the rock upon which the two are lying. It has not come from the man in yonder flimsy cover, but from across the river. Another follows sharp, and it splinters the stock of Shumilana's piece, causing him to drop it with a growl of pain, for the shock has strained the muscles of his wrist and numbed his whole arm. The two savages drop from their lurking-place and glide away like snakes into the thicker bush, only barely in time to avoid another bullet which rips viciously over them. And Trooper Symes chuckles as he rides down to the river bank, where the other horse whinnies excitedly at the reunion.

Dickinson's first remark was characteristic.

"Got the kodak, Symes?"

"Of course. Here it is."

"Well, I'll bring it through."

"No fear. It'll save time if I do."

Holding the case high above his head, Symes was through in a minute.

"It's a case of sharp's the word if we're to catch the light," said Dickinson, and forthwith he proceeded to uncover the

ghastly relic. "There," he went on, having taken half-a-dozen snapshots at every angle, "we've got the workings of something of a case."

"Faugh! Ugly-looking devil, any way you look at him," pronounced Symes. "A blanked 'Sheeny' if ever there was one."

Characteristically again, then and only then did Dickinson refer to the very narrow escape he had had.

"What made you bring the rifle, Symes?"

"Dunno. Thought we might get a chance at a buck going back. Lucky I did."

"Rather; they'd have done for me. I hadn't a chance. Shake, old chap."

The two comrades shook hands, and then thought no more about the matter. It was all in the day's work.

"I wonder," said Dickinson, when they had regained the other side—they had buried the head under a pile of stones, "I wonder who the swine could have been who was sniping me. He knew how to shoot, by the Lord! Shouldn't wonder if it's some discharged *Nongqai*. I always held it a mistake teaching those chaps to shoot."

Symes agreed—with language, as usual. Then they had a hurried snack, and rode off—two very wet police—to find some safer and more open locality for their night camp. But that, too, was all in the day's work.

Chapter Twenty One.

Sapazani "At home."

Ben Halse showed no surprise when Denham broke the news to him; in fact, he felt none. What he did feel was a sharp pang at heart as he realised that he must go through the rest of his life alone. Well, it was bound to come some day, and one compensation was that it could not have come under more favourable circumstances. He had known the other long enough to have decided that had Verna searched the world over she could not have found a more fitting mate.

"Sure you're in earnest about this, Denham?" he said. "Here you two have been thrown together for days and weeks. You've seen hardly anybody but ourselves all that time, and no women. I'm a plain man, you know, and I always speak my mind, so you mustn't be offended."

"Why, of course not. But you won't mind my saying that you are arguing against your own argument. If, as you say, Verna and I have been thrown together all this time and are vastly less tired of each other than the day we first met, isn't that a pretty fair test?"

"M'yes. It cuts both ways, I suppose."

The two were seated in the shade of a wild fig-tree at the back of the house, and a little way from it, on the morning after the scene in the forest. Those words, "the first day we met," carried Ben's thoughts back to that very day when he had sat watching the pair walking down the garden path at the Nodwengu Hotel, and the possibility of just such a development had crossed his mind.

"If you were a younger man, Denham," he went on, "I should be inclined to say, go away for a little while so as to make sure of yourself, and treat this as never having been. Then, if you are, come back again. But you're old enough to know your own mind; at any rate, if you're not now you never will be, that's sure."

The other laughed, lightly, pleasantly.

"Thanks," he said; "I cordially agree as to the last, but totally disagree as to the first. Why, Halse, you surprise me. Doesn't it occur to you that Verna may have feelings to be considered, and that the course you hint at might be a little bit rough on her? for I am conceited enough to believe that she has a very decided preference for the propinquity rather than for the absence of my unworthy self. How does that strike you?"

"I don't know." And the speaker subsided into thoughtful silence, and began slowly to cram his pipe. Denham, watching the movement of the gnarled brown hands, the set of the strong, handsome face, thought he could read what was passing in the other's mind. He, himself, a stranger of a few weeks' acquaintance, had come here to rob this man of the light of his home, of the pride and joy of his life, to destine him to loneliness thenceforward until his death. Something of this he put into words, with a rare and tactful sympathy.

"Ah, yes," was the answer. "I might have been thinking something of the kind; in fact, I've often thought of it. The thing was bound to come some day, of course; but I've always told myself there was plenty of time, and at the girl's age two or three or four years would make no great difference. But there—it doesn't do to be selfish."

Denham, recognising the shake in the voice of this strong man, put forth his hand, which the other gripped, and for a few moments there was silence.

"I've never seen any one I would so willingly entrust my Verna to as yourself, Denham," said Ben Halse presently; "so there's compensation in that."

"You flatter me too much, Halse. But you won't mind my saying you are about the most imprudent parent-in-law elect I ever heard or read of."

He laughed as he said this. He was glad to throw off the serious vein.

"Why?"

"Because you are taking me so absolutely on trust. You know nothing about me. I may be a fraud financially. I may be an intending bigamist; in fact, anything. Now I tell you what. Before you give me Verna entirely you are to write to my solicitors—the two senior partners of the firm have known me ever since I was born. Write to them privately and separately, and make any and every inquiry that may occur to you."

The trader thought a minute, then he said—

"Well, that's fair and square and above-board, Denham. I'm pretty good at reading men, and I think I've read you accurately. But as you yourself have thrown out the suggestion, you won't be offended if I follow it?"

He looked the other full in the face as though with a searching glance. But no trace of hesitation did he read there.

"Why, most emphatically not," came the ready answer. "I'm a man of the world, Halse, and if I were in your place I should certainly exact a similar guarantee. You will get answers in a couple of months at the outside, I'll take care of that. Meanwhile, you will sanction our engagement provisionally, subject to those answers being satisfactory to yourself?"

"Yes."

And again the two men clasped hands.

Then followed a couple of weeks of what was simply a halcyon time. The sympathy that had existed between them almost from the very first had deepened now into the most perfect of affinity and trust. Again and again Alaric Denham blessed the chance that had brought him into the wilderness to find this pearl of great price—the one woman in the whole world who seemed born for him, who would stand by him even if the whole world were against him—and there might occur the opportunity of putting even this test upon her, but that he did not then foresee. Long days out together, in the sombre forest, or exploring wild, craggy heights in the clear, exhilarating mountain air; and every one of those days seemed far too short, and never was there the slightest sign of interest flagging between them. He told her more about himself and his life, but there was still that one thing he did not tell her. Yet why should he? The load was thrown off, and would remain buried in mystery for ever. Surely this strange, wild country had brought him relief and happiness beyond measure.

One day Verna said—

"Let's ride over and pay a surprise visit to Sapazani this afternoon, father. We promised to show him to Alaric, you know, and he hasn't been here for a long time."

"All right. But how d'you know he's at home?"

"I got it from some of the people this morning. He has been away a long time, but he's back now."

"Yes, he has," said the trader meaningly. "He'll get into trouble if he doesn't watch it. How about the store, though?"

"Oh, we can lock it up for once in a way. Nobody's likely to come, or if they do it'll only be for a tenpenny knife. Trade's too dismally slack for anything just now."

"That's a grand idea," said Denham. "I had begun to think I was never going to see this 'show' chief of yours."

"By Jove! what a beautifully built kraal!" exclaimed Denham, as they came upon it suddenly, over the lip of the hollow. "Rather different from those wretched, slovenly-looking affairs you see further down."

"Yes; Sapazani is an intense Conservative," said Ben Halse; "wherefore he isn't beloved by those in authority. But the old-time kraals were all built like this one, except in the open country where there was no bush to make fences of. They used stone walls instead, and still do."

They found the chief sitting in the shade of a dried bullock-skin just against the fence of the central open space. He gave them greeting in a dignified way, as between equals, but did not rise. That was a European custom, and therefore abhorrent to his conservative soul. But he called to an attendant to rig up a similar bullock-skin and to spread mats, not even rugs, for his visitors.

"Case of doing in Zululand as Zulus do, Alaric," laughed Verna. "You'll have to learn the native art of squatting. It's all right when you get used to it."

"Of course. I say, this is an uncommonly fine-looking chap. Do you think he'd let me fire the kodak at him? I put it in my pocket on spec."

"We'll try presently, but I doubt it."

Meanwhile Sapazani was asking Halse who his guest was. He knew perfectly, but still he asked. Denham the while was watching him with intense interest. He had seen two or three chiefs at Ezulwini, looking thorough "slouches" in waistcoats and shirt-sleeves and ragged smasher hats. But this was a splendid specimen in every way. He looked every inch a chief, they did not, every inch a king, even. He hardly liked to present this dignified-looking savage with a superfluous pair of binoculars, by no means new, which he had brought along to that end. But Verna, consulted, set his doubts at rest on that score.

"What is he yarning about?" he asked.

"Oh, just commonplaces. He wouldn't talk about anything else in the presence of a mere woman," laughed Verna. "If father and he were alone together it would be different. Would you like to say anything to him? I can translate."

"Yes, dear. Tell him I'm sorry I can't talk to him myself, but that you can do it much better for me."

"No, I won't put it that way." She put the remark, however, and Sapazani smiled, showing his splendid white teeth, his lustrous eyes moving from the one to the other.

"A splendid-looking chap, by Jingo!" pronounced Denham again. "A real type of the Zulu I've heard about or read about."

The last remark Verna translated. The chief smiled again.

"I don't know who the strange *Inkosi* is," he answered. "He looks like one great in his own country. Perhaps the day will come when he will be able to speak with those who are great in his own country for those who were once great in ours."

To this Denham answered that he would certainly do so if ever there was occasion for it.

Now some women appeared bringing *tywala*. The vessels were scrupulously clean, and the pinkish, hissing brew looked uncommonly inviting in its black clay bowls. Denham had tried it before, but had never been able to take to it. This, however, looked different.

"Try again, Alaric," said Verna. "You'll find this a superior brew. I know I'm dying of thirst."

A portion was set before each of them, with the *punga*, or preliminary sip, which custom required on the part of the entertainers. Denham did try it, and voted it excellent, and then took a very long pull indeed.

"Now you're initiated, dear," said Verna merrily, "once you've learnt to drink *tywala*."

"I call this uncommonly jolly," pronounced Denham, looking around. "These chaps must have a good time of it."

The domed huts within their ring fences shone yellow and picturesque in the sunlight. A few men were seated in groups chatting in a bass undertone, and the red top-knots of women showed above the thorn fence, gazing curiously at the visitors.

"Sapazani would tell you 'must have *had* a good time of it,'" said Ben Halse. "He's a man of the past."

"Discontented?"

"Rather."

"Tell him I want to give him this, Halse," producing the binoculars. "To remember my visit by."

Sapazani received the gift in the same dignified fashion, and they instructed him how to find the focus. He tried it on various objects and then handed it to an attendant.

"It is good," he said. "I will remember."

But to the proposal to snapshot him he returned a decided negative, polite but firm. Denham was disappointed.

"Couldn't he show us his hut?" he said. "I should like to see what the hut of a big chief is like inside."

This was readily acceded to. Sapazani rose and led the way. Then Denham was even more struck by the tall, magnificently-proportioned form, the great muscles showing through the brown satiny skin as the man walked, easily, leisurely, straight as a pine-tree, with head slightly thrown back. Verna could not help noticing that the two men, standing upright together, were of exactly the same height and build, the savage chieftain and the up-to-date English gentleman.

Denham admired the interior of the cool, spacious hut, with its polished floor of hard, black clay, and the bowl-like fire-place in the centre, the assegais disposed on pegs around the walls, and the clean, rolled-up mats against one side. The place was a model of coolness and cleanliness, he decided.

When they got outside again several of the chief's wives, convened by Verna, were standing waiting for them. To these she distributed various things she had brought, chatting and joking familiarly with them. They were fine, merry-faced girls, and here again Denham found a keen bit of character study. Sapazani accompanied his visitors to the gate of the kraal—he was a stickler for old-time Zulu etiquette, as Ben Halse and Verna, of course, knew, wherefore they had hitched up their horses outside and bade them farewell.

"Well, and what do you think of our 'show' chief now, Alaric?" said Verna, as they started on their homeward ride.

"He's a splendid-looking fellow, and his manners are perfect," he answered. But to himself he was thinking that had Sapazani been a white man he would have resented the way in which the chief had looked at Verna more than once. Being a native, of course, any such idea was absurd, preposterous, out of the question. But he wondered whether Ben Halse had noticed it.

And Sapazani, looking after them, was saying to himself—

"The trap is set, and yonder is the bait—*au!* yonder is the bait—*impela*."

Chapter Twenty Two.

Bluff—And Counterbluff.

When they reached home they found a visitor awaiting them, in the shape of Harry Stride. Ben Halse, for all his hospitable instincts, secretly and within himself wished him at the devil. Verna would rather he had not come—just then;

but Denham, of the trio, was the least concerned. So secure was he in his own happiness that he could not but be sorry for the man who had failed to draw his at the same source. But as far as any outward manifestation of lack of welcome was concerned the new arrival had no cause of complaint.

During the evening they talked generalities, the state of the country, the day's visit to Sapazani, and so forth. But Stride, while not manifesting the former instinctive hostility towards Denham, did not fail to notice, with jealous eyes, the perfect understanding which seemed to prevail between him and Verna. Were they engaged? he wondered. They must be, judging from a look which, more than once, he saw pass between them. Well, he had a card up his sleeve, but he would not throw it until the morning. So he went on chatting about things in general, and Verna was especially kind to him. Denham too, with ready tact, refrained from anything that might be construed into bordering on an air of proprietorship! out of consideration for the poor fellow's feelings; and when Verna went out with Stride for a quarter of an hour or so to look at the night, he remained chatting with Ben Halse.

"You won't be shooting each other in the night, will you, Denham?" said the latter drily. The point of the joke was that, accommodation being somewhat limited, the two men would have to share the same room.

"I'll try not to return the fire; but, on the whole, perhaps I'd better stick a dummy in the bed, and slip outside. Poor chap! Nobody could be more sorry for him than myself."

"I'm sure of that. Well, every man must take his chance, and Harry's young yet. He's a good sort of boy, but I don't believe he'll ever do much for himself."

"Perhaps he's never had a show."

"That's the worst of it. A lot of these young fellows come drifting up to this country knowing nothing about it, and think they're going to pick up gold under every stone. That prospecting business is just foolery. They'd much better settle down to some steady job. And yet, and yet—where'd I have been myself if I hadn't let out and chanced it? Well, it's a world of pitch and toss, after all."

Stride was the first to turn in, and when his companion followed he had rolled himself in his blanket as though asleep. But he was wide awake enough in reality. He hated that other so intensely that he could not trust himself to speak now that they were alone together. Some people had all the advantages of life and others none; and here this stranger, solely because he was a rich man, or was reputed to be, must have a free walk over; must come here and rob him of all that made life worth living—hope, to wit. Well, to-morrow he would fire the first shell. And he did.

Just after breakfast, but before they got up from table, Stride produced a square envelope.

"I took a few snapshots down in the Makanya the other day," he said, drawing out some prints. "What d'you think of that, Mr Denham?" handing one across the table to him.

Denham took it, and it was all he could do not to let it drop. The ghastly face staring at him from the glazed paper, hideous and bloated through immersion and decomposition, was that of the head which Sergeant Dickinson had been at such pains, and trouble, and risk to photograph. There was a frightful fascination about it, and he continued to gaze, aware the while that Stride was fixing his face with a pitiless glance.

"Well, what d'you think of it?" said the latter, growing impatient.

"Think? Why, that it's a good study of a dissecting-room subject, but a beastly thing to spring upon any one just after breakfast. Where did you get it?" handing it back.

"It was taken below the Bobi drift. A head was found sticking in the bushes, also some clothes, with things in the pockets. I, before that, found a saddle with a bullet hole through the flap."

"Yes; you told us that at the club the other night, I remember. So they've found more?"

Stride was puzzled. He thought to have knocked the enemy all of a heap, but the said enemy had never wilted, beyond what a man might naturally do who had an unusually ghastly and repulsive picture suddenly sprung upon him, as Denham had said, just after breakfast.

"But isn't it our turn to be let into the mystery?" suggested Verna sweetly.

"Oh, I don't know. No; I won't show it to you," answered Stride. "It is rather nasty, isn't it, Mr Halse?" handing it on to him.

"Looks so. Ugly-looking Jew, I should say. Wonder what the devil he was doing down there. I suppose they shot him for plunder. Zulus are not what they were. Time was when a white man was perfectly safe in any part of this country. Who took the photo, by the way?"

"Dickinson, at Makanya."

"Oh yes, the police sergeant. Well, have they investigated?"

"Rather. They've got at his identity, too. He was a Jo'burg Jew named Hyam Golding. The next thing is to find out what induced him to travel that way at all. It doesn't lead anywhere in particular."

"Let me see it," said Verna. "I'm not of the hysterical, 'fainting-female' order, am I? Thanks," as it was handed to her. "What a horrid-looking man he must have been. I mean apart from the conditions under which this was taken. Let's see some of the others."

He complied. One he kept out, and handed it to Denham.

"Do you recognise it?" he asked. "You came through it, I think you said."

"Did I? I think not, considering I didn't know one drift from the other. However, it's just possible I may have; but one drift is very like another, especially in photography."

"It's the Bobi."

Somehow Verna's instincts were instantly on the alert. There was more than a subtle something in Stride's manner and remarks, a sort of "making a dead set" smack about them. She became cold and hostile towards him at once. He saw this, and realised he had made a mistake. So he left the subject of the head, and drew attention to the other prints.

His plan had failed. He had thought to induce Denham to give himself away before the others, and that completely. But he had reckoned without the cool nerves of Denham. Well, the next card to play was bluff.

An opportunity was not easy to find. Most of the morning they sat in the shade, and smoked and chatted. But later, when Verna was busy indoors, and something had taken Ben Halse away, Stride said—

"I've got something to tell you. How about taking a bit of a stroll, where no one'll hear us?"

"All right. Let's."

They strolled off together a little way. Suddenly Stride said—

"Rum thing this murder down in the Makanya, isn't it?"

"I don't know enough about it to say. But I suppose there's no doubt about it being a murder?"

"Not a particle. Dickinson has worked the thing up in first-rate style. There's hardly a link missing from the chain."

"Not, eh? There's a saying, though, that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link; but if the link is not merely weak but missing altogether, what's the use of that chain?"

"The link can be supplied," said Stride meaningly. "Dickinson could put his hand on the right man at any minute."

"Then why the devil doesn't he?"

The straightness of this query rather nonplussed Stride. But he remembered that men in desperate straits had many a time been known to save the situation by consummate bluff.

"Perhaps he isn't quite sure where he is at this moment," he answered. "I could help him."

"Then why the devil don't you?"

"Look here. Let's quit beating around the bush," said the other, speaking quickly. "Will you take a piece of advice?"

"Can't say until I hear it. But I'll promise to consider its burden when I do."

Denham was getting rather sick of all this mysterious hinting. He was also getting a bit "short."

"I'll give it you in one word, then," was the answer. "Skip."

"Don't see the joke. Explain."

"Don't see it, eh?"

"Not even a little bit."

"Well, bluff's a good dog sometimes," sneered the other, who thought he would enjoy a different situation directly. "Still, you take my tip and skip, with the smallest loss of time you can manage. I don't suppose they'll bother to follow up the thing very keenly once you're clean out of the country. And if you're wise you might soon will be. Get out through Swaziland and into German territory if you can, or at any rate keep dark. Halse will be able to help you."

All this while Denham had been looking at the speaker with a kind of amused curiosity. At the close of the above remark he said—

"What's the matter with you?"

"What d'you mean?" snarled Stride, who was fast losing his temper.

"Mean? Why, that I'm wondering why you asked me to come out with you to listen to all the nonsense you have just been talking. You're not drunk, any fool can see that, and yet you fire off some yarn about some Jew found drowned, or murdered, or something, down in the Makanya; and talk about chains and missing links and all sorts of foolishness, and on the strength of it all invite *me* to 'skip.' Really the joke strikes me as an uncommonly thin one."

"It'll take the form of an uncommonly thick one," snarled the other, "and that a rope, dangling over a certain trap-door in Ezulwini gaol. Well, I thought to do you a good turn, came up here mostly to do it, and that's how you take it. Well, you may swing, and be damned to you."

Denham lit a fresh cigar. He offered his case to his companion, but it was promptly refused.

"Now let's prick this bubble," he said, looking the other fair and straight in the eyes. "From a remark you made in the club the other evening I gathered you wanted to insinuate that I had murdered some one. That, of course, I didn't take seriously."

"There may have been others who did, though," interrupted Stride.

"No matter. Then you roll up here, and suggest that I am wanted as the murderer of some unknown Jew, whose top end appears to have been found in the Makanya bush. You know, if I were less good-natured, you might get into serious trouble over such a thing as that. You insinuated it in the presence of the Halses, too."

"Meaning an action for slander, I suppose. Go ahead. I defy you to bring it. Do you hear? I defy you to bring it."

"It isn't worth while. Still, if you go on spreading these stories all over the country I may be compelled to. It's one thing to make accusations, but quite another to prove them. To prove them," he repeated emphatically, with his eyes full upon the other's, and a sudden hard ring coming into his tone with the last words.

Inwardly Stride was conscious of his first misgiving in the matter. He was as certain in his own mind that the man before him had, for some reason or other, killed the one, part of whose remains had been found, as that the sun shone. But between certainty and proof was a far cry. He was not lawyer enough to know that in such a case as this any evidence that could be got together would be of the circumstantial kind, and not necessarily conclusive, and he had come here with the express object of frightening Denham out of the country altogether. Instead he had found that Denham was not the sort of man to be frightened at all.

"Oh, the proof'll come right enough," he answered, with an easiness that was more than half affected. Then seriously, "Look here, you know I've no reason exactly to belove you?"

Instantly Denham's tone softened.

"I think I can guess," he said, "and cannot but be sorry. But that is all in the fair chances of life. How can I help it?"

"Help it? Damn 'helping it,'" was the furious reply. "But now, look here. I—with others—am going to make it the business of life to bring this thing home to you. We shall hunt up every scrap and particle of evidence of your movements since you first landed, your every movement. There's one chance for you and it the last. Clear out—now, at once."

"Now, really, you make me laugh. Is it in the least likely?"

"What is in the least likely?"

Both started. Verna had come up behind them, but though she had coughed more than once, in the tension of their discussion they had failed to hear her. She had foreseen a quarrel when she saw them go off alone together, and had made up her mind as to the best means of preventing it. And it was perhaps just as well that she had.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Revelation.

A curious change had come over Denham soon after Harry Stride's visit. He seemed to have grown grave and rather silent. Even his interest in collecting seemed to flag. If Ben Halse noticed it he held his tongue. Verna noticed it, and resolved not to hold hers.

Her opportunity came. They had climbed to the resting-place which had been the goal of their ride that first day: that great natural window in the rock tooth which overlooked such a magnificent sweep of wilderness; in fact, this point had become rather a favourite objective in their many expeditions *à deux*. Here was her chance, here alone, beyond every possibility of interruption; here, alone together, the world far away. But before she could begin he said—

"I have something to tell you."

The girl's face went white, and something like a gasp escaped her. Like lightning there flashed through her brain the one and only possible thought. He was going to tell her he had made a mistake, or that there was some impediment and they must part. Her love for him had reached such a height of passionate adoration that where he was concerned she had no pride left.

He gazed at her in blank amazement. Then she was clasped tight in his embrace.

"For God's sake don't look like that," he said. "My darling one, what is it?"

"Are you going to tell me there is something that must part us?" she managed to gasp out.

"Good God, no!" he answered vehemently. "At least," he added, sadly doubtful, "that depends on yourself."

The colour came back to her face and her eyes lit up, sweetly, radiantly.

"Depends on myself," she repeated. "Why, in that case nothing in the world can part us—nothing!"

"Are you sure?"

"Nothing. Nothing," she reiterated. "Alaric, my darling, you have not been yourself of late. There is something on your mind, and that is what you are going to tell me now. Am I right?"

He nodded. Then, after a pause—

"Tell me again, Verna. Is there anything that could separate us, anything I may have done—not against yourself, mind!—in this wide world that could cause you to shrink from me? Is there? Think it out."

"Why, of course not," she answered, boldly serene now that the whole question lay in her own hands, almost laughing, in fact, although knowing full well she was on the verge of something tragic.

"But—what if I have killed a man?"

"What if you have killed twenty men? Some people have, and they brag about it."

He looked hard at her.

"Yes; but what if I have—what the law calls—committed murder?"

Now she looked hard at him, then shook her head.

"You have not murdered *me*—nor father."

There spake the natural woman in Verna Halse. He had not injured her or hers, consequently who ever this man had injured it was nothing to her. In all probability he was justified in so doing, certainly was, in that in her eyes he could do no wrong.

"But do you quite understand, Verna?" he said gently. "I am in danger of—of the rope."

"Are you? Well, we shall make it our particular business to see that that danger passes off. Why, there are places about here where you could hide for years. Listen, Alaric"—suddenly waxing grave, while a passion of tenderness came into her voice—"You saw fit, goodness knows why, to love me. Do you think, then, I am going to shrink from you because you are in a difficulty? I am only an ignorant sort of girl, but I have seen something of one side of life, at any rate, and the power does not exist—law or anything else—that shall take you from me. But, tell me all about it."

"I will, Verna. You remember the first time we came to this spot, and I was telling you things? I said there was one thing I hadn't told you, but that I might some day. This was it."

She nodded.

"You remember, too, on that occasion, my saying what a splendid thing it was to feel quite easy in one's mind, and that I had not always been able to by any means?"

"Yes."

She was gravely attentive now. Her quick mind, not at ease itself, was rapidly piecing two and two together; wherefore his next remark caused her little if any surprise.

"That beastly thing young Stride sprung upon us the other day was an exact likeness of the man, only, of course, it exaggerated his villainous expression. He's dead now; but what I suffered at that blackmailer's hands—good God! Verna; when I think of it I could wish he might come to life so that I could kill him over again."

Then a new experience came to Verna. This man, so strongly self-possessed, upon whom an easy dignity sat so well, had suddenly become a different being. His eyes glowed and his features were set. He seemed completely to have lost sight of her and her presence for the time being; to be "reconstituting" the tragedy of horror and revenge. This was a side of him—a tigerish side—of which she had never dreamed, but she did not shrink from it, not one atom. She put forth a hand into his, and the touch calmed him.

"Tell me, Alaric," she said. "Why did you kill him? I dare say he deserved it. In fact, judging from that villainous-looking face he must have."

He looked at her in some amazement. The cool, matter-of-fact tones in which she discussed what to most women would have come as a very disquieting shock, astonished him a good bit.

"Love," he said in an uneven voice, placing the cool, shapely hands round his neck and against his face, "I place my life within those dear hands. I will tell you the whole thing."

Then he told her how the dead man had systematically blackmailed him for some years past, acting on the knowledge of a former business secret, which if divulged would not merely have spelt ruin, but worse; a transaction into which he had been led by others, in the days of his comparative inexperience. Then he told her of the tragedy on the river bank in the Makanya forest; told her minutely, omitting no detail. She listened intently, breathlessly.

"When I rode away from that spot," he concluded, "it was with an unspeakable load lifted from my mind, a load that had weighed upon it for years. Everything was favourable. We had not been seen together, for we entered the country by different ways, and our meeting was entirely a chance one. He had found out somehow that I was bound for Ezulwini, and had started to catch me there, in order to squeeze out some more blackmail. He had missed his way and had wandered to where we met. I had not missed mine, for I had mapped out a way through all that wild part. When we did meet the first idea that flashed through my mind was that now and here was a chance such as I should never get again. Everything was favourable—the wild loneliness of the spot, seldom if ever travelled, and the fact that we had not been seen together. I would force him to sign a declaration which should put it out of his power for ever to harm me. But he flatly refused, and the rest you know. It was only afterwards that it occurred to me that the sequel was the best that could have come about, for the declaration, being unwitnessed, would probably have been worth nothing at all. I must have been a bit off my head, or that would have occurred to me at the first. Now, Verna, why don't you shrink from me?"

"Shrink from you?" and the clasp of her hand tightened on his. "It would take a great deal more than this to make me even begin to think of doing that. In fact, I can't see anything so very dreadful about it at all. A blackmailer is the most pestilent vermin on earth, and shooting's too good for him. Let me think. Ah! He tried to shoot you, you said?"

"He certainly would have if I'd given him the slightest chance. Still, there's no getting over the fact that I fully intended to shoot him in the event of his persistently refusing to sign that paper."

"And he deserved it. Moreover, didn't you try to get him out of the water?"

"Yes. I couldn't stand seeing even him finished off in such a beastly manner. Afterwards it occurred to me that it was the best possible thing that could have happened in that it would destroy all trace. You understand?"

"Perfectly. But now, if the worst came to the worst, couldn't you make it out a case of self-defence?"

"A very poor plea," he answered, with a gloomy shake of the head, "especially under all the circumstances. Besides, no end of things would be raked up and a motive established. But nothing more would have been heard of the affair if that infernal Stride hadn't picked up the saddle. Then, when he heard I had come through the Makanya just about that time, he put two and two together. He more than hinted as much one evening in the club before them all. Before them all, mind! Of course I made some joke about it, but as sure as we are sitting here, Verna, I could see that two, at any rate, more than half believed there might be something in it. Those two were James and Hallam."

Verna's brows knitted. She did not like this feature in the case.

"Do you know why Stride is so vindictive in the matter, Verna?" he said, after giving her an account of his interview with the young prospector and the latter's threats.

"I think I can guess." Then she fell to thinking whether she could not turn Stride's weakness for herself to account. But it was too late, she recognised. He had set the ball rolling—at first all innocently, it was true—but it had now rolled too far.

"Who did you first meet after you had left the river?" she asked.

"I struck a small kraal, and, incidentally, the people were none too civil. But it was a long way from the spot where it happened."

Not even to her could he break his word of honour pledged to the strange, sinister-looking fellow-countryman who had shown him hospitality, to respect to the uttermost the latter's secrecy.

Verna thought for a moment. Then she said—

"Alaric, do you remember the time that we killed the *indhlonhlo*, down in the forest, Mandevu's sudden appearance?"

"Yes," eagerly. "What then?"

"Do you remember his reference to your power of snake-charming, not once but twice?"

"Good God! I should think so. I thought it strange at the time."

"Well, could he—or anybody—have witnessed the whole affair?"

"N-no," he answered thoughtfully. "I don't see how any natives could have been concealed within sight or even earshot. The horses would have winded them and have got restive, whereas they were perfectly quiet."

"I can't make out that part of it at all," said Verna. "I must think. He knew about that other snake-charming incident. I could see that. The question is—if he knew, how did he know? Some one must have seen it, and if they saw the one thing they'd have seen the other."

"Yes; they must have. Verna, I have an instinct," he went on somewhat gloomily, "a sure and certain instinct that this net will close round me. Everything in life looked too bright since I succeeded in ridding myself of this incubus, and, then I found *you*. After that everything was positively radiant. Of course it couldn't last."

"But it can last, and it shall. Dear one, you said just now that you were placing your life in my hands, and that precious life I shall guard with a jealous care. I have means of hearing things from outside which you would hardly believe, and shall set them working at once. No, it would take a great deal more to part us now—Do you remember the day we first met," she broke off, "and they were talking of this very affair in the hotel? Well, I volunteered the remark that you had just come through the Makanya, but nobody heard. They were all talking at once, but I didn't repeat it. Some instinct warned me not to."

"Ah, that first day! We little thought what we were going to be to each other then."

Verna shook her head. "I'm by no means so sure of that," she said.

"No more am I, now I come to think of it."

After this Denham threw off his depression as though by magic. As the days went by and no news came from outside, he was almost dazzled in the sunshine of happiness that flooded his heart. He had dreaded the effect of the revelation upon Verna, and now that he had made it, so far from her love for him lessening it had, if possible, deepened tenfold.

Then fell the bolt from the clear sky.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Verna's Dilemma.

Alaric Denham had disappeared.

He had gone out by himself early in the afternoon on foot, taking with him his collector's gun. At sunset he had not returned; then night fell and still no sign of him.

Verna's anxiety deepened. She could hardly be persuaded to go into the house at all. Her eyes strove to pierce the gathering gloom, her ears were open to every sound that could tell of his approach. Yet no such sound rewarded them. Her father was disposed to make light of her fears.

"Denham's no kind of a Johnny Raw, girlie," he said. "He knows his way about by this time. Likely he's wandered further than he intended, after some 'specimen' maybe, and got lost. He'll have turned in at some kraal for the night, and be round again in the morning."

But morning came and still no sign, then midday. By that time the trader himself came to the conclusion that it might be as well to institute a search.

The missing man had left an idea as to where he was going. But, starting from that point, an exploration of hours failed to elicit the slightest trace. Inquiries among natives, too, proved equally futile. None had so much as glimpsed any solitary white man. They had called at Sapazani's kraal, but the chief was absent. It was in this direction that Denham had announced his intention of wandering. Undhlawafa, however, promised to turn out a party of searchers. Night fell again, and Denham was still missing.

Strong, feverishly energetic, Verna had taken an active part in the search; but for any trace they could find, or clue they could grasp, the missing man might have disappeared into empty air. Even her father now looked gloomy, and shook a despondent head. There were perilous clefts about those wild mountain-tops half concealed in the grass, into which a man might easily fall and thus effectually perform his own funeral. That this one might have done so was now her father's belief, but to Verna herself another alternative held itself out. What if he had been secretly followed and arrested for that which he had done? Or what if he had detected such danger in time and felt moved to go into hiding? Somehow neither of these alternatives seemed convincing. The heartsick, despairing agony of the girl was beyond words.

Four days thus went by, Verna was despairing, her father gloomy. To the latter she had now confided Denham's story; they had arranged between them that this should be done in the event of certain contingencies. Ben Halse came to the conclusion that this rather tied his hands, for to advertise the disappearance would be to draw too much attention to a man who had every reason for avoiding it.

It was night. Verna stood in the open door looking forth. A faint snore now and again from another room told that her father had subsided into obliviousness, but to-night she herself could not sleep; indeed, but for the sheer physical exhaustion of the day she would never have been able to sleep at all. The soft velvet of the sky was afire with stars, and above the dismal howl of prowling hyenas would now and again rise the distant song and roar of savage revelry from some kraal far out on the plain beneath. Back in the sombre recesses of the mountains weird, indescribable sounds, disguised by echo, the voices of bird or beast would ring forth, or a falling star dart, in trailing spark, through the zenith. Suddenly another sound fell upon her ear. Somebody was approaching the house.

All the blood ran tingling through her frame. She listened—listened hard. Footsteps! Alaric had returned. He should find her there, waiting. But the glow of intense thankfulness sank in her heart. But for the one obsessing idea she would have recognised that those soft-padded footfalls were not those of any white man.

She advanced a few steps out into the gloom and called softly. A figure came into sight indistinctly. Even then her heart throbbed to bursting. This nocturnal visitor must be the bearer of news. But he had halted. She must go towards him.

"And the news?" she said, speaking quickly.

"If the *Nkosazana* would hear of him who was missing," was the answer, "she must go to the chief's kraal alone. This movement must be known to nobody, not even to U' Ben. Otherwise she would never see or hear of the missing one again."

All further attempts at questioning the nocturnal visitant met with no reply. He had delivered the 'word' of the chief, and had nothing to add to it. Only—the *Nkosazana* would do well to lose no time. If she could start at daylight it would be highly advisable. But no one must know. It was in the conditions.

To say that Verna was suddenly lifted from darkness to daylight would be to say too little. The condition certainly struck her as strange, but then—the stake at issue! Alaric was not dead, but had perhaps been obliged to go into hiding, was the solution that occurred to her. That was it. Sapazani was their friend, and had warned him, and aided in his concealment. He would get him away out of the country later on, and she—why, she would go to him, go with him, to the uttermost ends of the earth, as she had more than once declared when they had been discussing just such a contingency.

How she got through the night Verna hardly knew. Before dawn she was astir. She woke her father, and told him she was going to start off on another search on her own account, and Ben Halse, himself thoroughly tired out after days spent in the saddle on this bootless quest, had answered that it was quite useless, but that she had better be doing something than nothing, and hail turned over again to sleep the sleep of thorough exhaustion.

As the day dawned, and she was well on her way, Verna became aware that she was being followed, or rather kept up with, by one man. The path was steep and rocky, and she could seldom ride out of a footspace; yet at every turn this man would show himself, either in front or coming on behind with long, swinging strides. Him, however, with an effort of patience and a knowledge of native ways, she forbore to question, though she strongly suspected him of being her visitant of the night before.

The sun was up by the time she reached her objective. The kraal lay peaceful in the early morning; the great double ring fence, and from some of the yellow, domed huts blue smoke was rising. Yet it seemed to her that the place was deserted. It was the hour of milking, yet no cattle were to be seen, and there were few people about. What did it mean? What could it mean?

And now, for the first time, an instinct came upon her, an instinct as of some harm pending. Had she done right to come? Was this part of some sinister plan? and were those who distrusted Sapazani more completely "in the know" than they two? She paused, irresolute. But it was too late to turn back now. The man who had kept pace with her all the way

had grasped her bridle rein and was inviting her to dismount.

"Yonder. The chief," he said, when she had done so.

The space immediately surrounding the kraal was open save for a small clump of spreading mimosas. In the shade of this Sapazani was seated, with three or four other ringed men in attendance. That her arrival was expected was obvious, for a wooden pillow, covered with a clean, new rug, to serve as a seat, had been placed for her. Knowing their ways, she greeted Sapazani in the usual pleasant and cordial style and sat down to talk—outwardly as careless as when they last met, inwardly her whole soul raging with eager impatience.

"And he who is lost?" she said at last. "He is found?"

"He is found."

Her joy and thankfulness knew no bounds, and she was hardly conscious of the withdrawal of those around the chief.

"What is for two ears is not for eight," went on the latter. "I have a word to you, Izibu."

"That is why I am here," she answered, with a smile. "And him of whom I came to learn tidings?"

"Of him we will presently talk," answered Sapazani. "Talk we now of myself. I am in need of a new *inkosikazi* (principal wife), and her I shall take from among the daughters of the white people."

Verna stared.

"That will not be easy, will it?" she answered, striving not to smile.

"Easy? That I know not. But my new *inkosikazi* (principal wife) will be thyself, child of U' Ben, and the *lobola* (Price paid in cattle to the father or guardian of a girl asked in marriage) which I shall send will be the life of him whom thou seekest."

Verna half started from her seat, flushing crimson with anger and outraged pride. Then she subsided again.

"Is this a joke on the part of the chief?" she said. "Because I like not such jokes."

"No joke is it," answered the other, in a tone of firm assurance. "My new *inkosikazi* shall be thyself, Izibu."

Reference has been made to the impassable barrier to unions between white and colour existing, and rightly so, throughout the whole of South Africa; but the repulsion and degradation attaching to such is deepened tenfold when it is the woman who represents the white race. In Verna, of course, such tradition was part of her being, and now that this was put broadly before her, her horror and disgust were unlimited. She to be one of the many wives of a squalid savage! for such the stately and fine-looking Zulu chieftain had now become in her eyes; a mere despised black man—Sapazani's colour was copper red—why, she must be dreaming. No living being in his senses dare make such a proposal to her. But she checked the scathing reply that rose to her lips—she could not hide the flashing fury in her eyes—for she must not lose sight of the end for which she was there, the finding of Alaric.

"Listen, Izibu, and I will tell a story," said the chief, who had been watching her keenly, but outwardly unconcerned. "There were two bulls grazing together near the banks of Makanya River. They began to roar at each other, perhaps one wanted the pasture to himself, or this or that heifer, no one knows. Suddenly one gored the other to death and pushed him into the river, then went on his way. These bulls were of the Amangisi (English), and among such for one to kill another is death. There were those who looked down upon this conflict from high up on the other side of the river. They will be there to speak when wanted."

Now a new light broke upon Verna. Alaric had positively declared that nobody could have witnessed the encounter or the restiveness of the horses would have betrayed the presence of such. But they had been on the other side of the water, hence the very pointed reference on the part of Mandevu to the double feat of snake-charming. To her, of course, the parable needed no interpretation. This hateful fiend had got Alaric into his power to compass his own object, and that object—good Heavens!

"But you would not betray him, you who are our friend!" urged Verna, clasping and unclasping her hands in an agony of appeal.

"The magistrate," went on Sapazani, "*our* magistrate at Esifeni, will be surprised, he who is never tired of saying Sapazani is not loyal. He will be surprised when Sapazani the disloyal hands over to him one of his own people who has broken the white man's sternest law, and says, 'Here, take him, I want not such among my people.' This is what will happen if the child of U' Ben refuses to become my new *inkosikazi*."

Verna was beside herself. Here, then, was the missing link in the chain. The deed had been actually witnessed. Nothing could save him. The mention of her father inspired her with an idea.

"You would not dare do this thing," she said. "My father would kill you, would never rest until he had done so. Every white man in Zululand would combine to hunt you down, nor could you long escape."

"Why, for that, Izibu, there will be no white men left in Zululand to do it before many days have passed. Well? Is it to be his life, or—?"

Verna saw no way out. She, of course, did not intend to accept the dreadful alternative. She would kill herself. That afterwards; but now she must save this precious life. Then another idea struck her. What if Alaric were delivered over to the authorities, might it not be that the evidence would not be strong enough? Was it not worthwhile risking this? She knew what Alaric's answer would be. But Sapazani seemed to have been reading her thoughts, for now he said—

"My mind is different in this matter. It is too far to Esifeni, and the man might escape. Therefore I shall have him killed here—to-day—killed by torture, and thou shalt see it done, child of U' Ben."

Verna's face was stony with despair.

"And if I agree?" she said slowly. "He will be placed beyond all reach of danger?"

"That will he, Izibu. My word stands."

"Where is he now?"

"Here."

She turned to follow the sweep of his hand. From the direction of the kraal a group was approaching, and her heart beat quicker as she recognised the central figure. Alaric Denham stared in amazement. He made a move to join Verna, but was prevented by the guard surrounding him. Incidentally the said guard was bristling with assegais.

"What is the meaning of this, Verna?" he said. "There's no war. Yet these fellows collared me unawares, and here I am. But what is it, darling?" becoming alive to the stamp of piteous misery upon her face.

"You will go free now," she answered, "right away out of the country. It's no longer safe here."

"Well, I'm agreeable. Are you ready?"

"Yes—no—that is, not yet," she faltered hurriedly.

"Take him back," commanded the chief, and the guards moved away with their prisoner, who, of course, understood nothing of what had been said, but supposed that Verna would contrive to straighten it out somehow. "Well, Izibu, he is going to be got ready for the torture. Do you agree to save him? It is the last chance."

"Oh, God! God, help me!" she sobbed forth, sinking to the earth, her face buried in her hands; Sapazani, watching her, gloated over her fine form, soon voluntarily to be placed within his power. So taken up was he that he failed to perceive the approach of the man who now stood at his elbow. Turning angrily, he beheld Mandevu.

The latter whispered a word or two. Sapazani was astonished, but did not show it.

"Wait here, child of U' Ben," he said, rising, "until my return."

"But they will torture him!"

"Not until my return."

He moved towards the kraal gate. The word which Mandevu had whispered in his ear was "Opondo."

The renegade was seated within the chief's principal hut. His hard, vindictive face was firm and impenetrable.

"Greeting, Sapazani," he began, without ceremony. "Thou must give up thy purpose. The two yonder must be allowed to go free."

The snatching of a bone from a hungry mastiff might convey some sort of idea of the expression which came over Sapazani's face at this utterance; the very tone of which admitted of no dispute.

"Must?" he repeated.

"Yes, *must*."

"*Hau!* I am no chief!" he said sneeringly, "no chief. And if I refuse?"

"Then thou wilt indeed be no chief, son of Umlali, for it would ruin the whole of our plan to carry out thy purpose."

Sapazani brought his hand to his mouth and sat thinking. He knew that the other spoke truly, and yet—

"Further," went on his visitor, "U' Ben is my friend. He saved my life once, and has done me good service in the past. His child must not be harmed. For the other, the man, he will be able to do me—to do us—good service in the future, when the time comes, for which reason Mandevu has been constantly near him so that I could find him at any time, therefore he must go free."

Verna, seated there, alone, in stony-eyed misery, was wondering if it were not all a hideous nightmare. "I have bought his life. I have bought his life," she kept moaning to herself.

"Rise up, child of U' Ben," said a voice, whose owner she had not heard approach. "The word of the chief is that thou and the white man are to go home together, now at once."

"Do not mock me, Mandevu," she answered stonily.

"Mock? *Au!* See. There he comes," pointing with his stick.

Verna raised her eyes. From the direction where she had last beheld him Alaric Denham was approaching—alone.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Volcanic.

"I hope the brute won't turn obstreperous, Vidler," said the magistrate of Esifeni to the clerk of the court, as the two met on the verandah. "'Pon my soul it isn't fair to stick us in such a position. Here we are, with three or four police, stuck away in the thick of a perfect hotbed of rebellion, and expected to keep it in order."

The other shrugged, but said nothing. He was fully alive to the difficulties of their position. The "brute" referred to was no less a personage than Sapazani, who was expected that morning to answer to a summons with regard to certain matters, specially ordered by the Chief Commissioner.

"This country's being run on the wrong tack altogether," went on the magistrate. "Here's a tinpot township with three or four stores, as many more tin houses, and a Methodist chapel, and the Residency. Sounds big, don't it, Vidler? especially when there's wind enough to blow out the Union Jack we delight to fly from the pole in the garden. And all the force we've got to back it up is four police. Why, we're only here on sufferance. It isn't fair that a man with a wife and family should be forced to live at the mercy of that ruffian Sapazani."

The magistrate of Esifeni was not a timid man, but the monotony of life at his remote post rather tended to make him "nervy." Of late, moreover, he had seen and heard enough to make him anxious, and the largest thorn in his side was named Sapazani.

Between himself and the chief there existed a latent hostility which, never failed to peep out more or less whenever they met. Of late they had met rather more often than either wanted, but official duty required it; otherwise Downes would gladly have treated Sapazani on the principle of giving an organ-grinder sixpence to go to the next street.

"Wonder if that's him," said the clerk, shading his eyes to gaze at a distant cloud of dust coming over the rise, for the township was situated in a shallow, open hollow. "Yes, it is," he went on, "and he's bringing a regular impi with him as usual."

The magistrate frowned.

"Damn him," he said. "I'm always giving him hints about that, and by way of taking them he turns up next time with a bigger crowd still. It's done for impudence, Vidler."

"I'm afraid it is, sir. But in this case we mustn't forget that our force consists of four police, two of whom happen to be just now absent; and, incidentally, that you have a wife and family."

"Quite right, Vidler, quite right. I'll keep my temper, somehow," he added, half savagely, half weariedly.

His subordinate was doubtful on this point, but forbore to say so. The day was abominably oppressive, and the hot wind from the north raked everything. It was the worst possible sort of day for the transaction of a difficult and delicate *indaba*, when both parties to the same were in a state of mutual friction.

The Zulus were now within recognising distance. Sapazani was clad in a well-cut riding suit of Bedford cord, with boots and spurs, but there was nothing between the sun and the shine of his head-ring, and he rode a good horse. Undhlawafa and a few others were also mounted, and then came a string of followers, clad mostly in a long military surtout. As Vidler had said, it seemed a regular impi, for there certainly could not have been much less than a hundred.

"There's one point on which Sapazani and I agree," said the magistrate, as he watched the approach of the *cortège*, "but not for the same reason, and that is obliging these fellows to wear clothes when they come into a township. It facilitates concealed weapons, but a chap with nothing but a *mútya* on has nowhere to conceal anything."

There was a stretch of grass between the Court House and the main road. Here the chiefs dismounted and came forward. Some dozen perhaps were there, the main body of their followers squatting themselves a little distance away. They gave the salute civilly but coldly—

"*Nkose!*"

This was calculated to start the talk wrong, Downes holding that, as representing the British Government, he ought to be given the salute royal, "*Bayéte.*"

The magistrate was seated in the verandah, with a table in front of him covered with papers; on his right was the clerk, and two members of the Natal Police stood on the other side. But before everything had been got into order Sergeant Meyrick had remarked to Trooper Francis—

"What's the odds we're here to draw our next month's pay, Frank? Sapazani's an awful rascal, and he don't bring a whole crowd like that here for nothing."

"Depends upon how much Downes can keep his rag in," was the answer. But their revolvers were loaded, and they had other ammunition handy.

The *indaba* began upon small matters, a recent dispute or two as to the ownership of cattle, or of land commonage, and so forth. Over the way people were gazing with faint curiosity at the new arrivals, and one or two storekeepers were trying to inveigle them into a trade. But it was difficult to scare up much interest in Esifeni. It was not a township addicted to excitement, and Sapazani was not a popular potentate among the storekeepers, in that his conservative soul discouraged the purchase of European goods on the part of his people.

In the preliminary questions Undhlawafa did most of the talking, referring now and then to the chief, who had been accommodated with a chair by virtue of his rank. Then the magistrate said—

"Come we now to a weightier matter—"

He was interrupted, brusquely, unexpectedly.

"I talk not before my own dogs," said Sapazani, with a wave of the hand towards the court induna who was standing at the end of the verandah, the same man who had brought him a summons to his own kraal, also towards two native constables who were hanging on the offskirts. The tone was curt, peremptory, not to say haughty. The magistrate stared at the speaker, frowned, then said, sarcastically—

"Is this my court or has Sapazani suddenly been chosen to represent the Government instead?"

But the chief's face underwent no change. He returned the official's gaze with a straight, haughty stare.

"I talk not before my own dogs," he repeated.

Downes was nonplussed.

"Well, if you prefer it, come within my own room," he said. But the other curtly refused. He did not know what trap might have been laid for him there. Once out of sight of his people and where was he? Certainly between four walls anything might happen, outside, well—he knew where he was.

"If I talk I talk here," he declared. "Otherwise I go home."

Downes was speechless with rage—we have said that the day was abnormally hot and oppressive, and that these two men, whenever they met, invariably got upon each other's nerves. But he haply remembered the burden of his remarks to Vidler. The whole township was practically defenceless. No arms were visible certainly, but more than an uncomfortable suspicion was upon his mind that they were there all the same. It was a case for making the best of it. The while Vidler had made the slightest perceptible sign to the court induna that he should withdraw as though of his own accord, and with him the two native constables.

"Go easy, sir," he whispered warningly to his superior, in an undertone. The latter pulled himself together.

"Talk we now of Pandulu," he said.

"Pandulu?" echoed Sapazani.

"Yes. What of him?"

"Who is Pandulu?"

And Undhlawafa and the remainder of the group looked at each other, and repeated, "Who is Pandulu?"

"He is a man from Natal," answered the magistrate. "He has been seen near your kraal, Sapazani, he and Babatyana, who is wanted by the Government. Where are these men?"

"Pandulu? Babatyana? Men from Natal?" repeated the chief. "Now, *Nkose*, this is like talking through a bullock's skin. No *Amakafula* have been at my kraal."

"I said not *at* thy kraal, but near it," was the short reply. "Now a chief is responsible to Government for all that happens within the tribe which he rules—under the Government. Under the Government," repeated Downes emphatically.

"Yet even a chief is not as the white man's God. He does not know everything," was the sneering reply. "I would ask—why does the Government allow its own people in Natal to come over into Zululand at all? We need no *Amakafula* in this country. Why does it allow them to come here? Is it that it cannot prevent them?"

And something of their chief's sneer was echoed among the group, in the shape of a smothered laugh.

"Prevent them?" retorted Downes. "A man of your intelligence, Sapazani, must know that the Government has the power to sweep this land from end to end if necessary until there is not a man left alive in it."

"The Government? Which Government?" answered the chief, with his head on one side. "The Government of Natal or the Government of the Great King beyond the sea?"

"Both Governments. Both work together. The question is childish."

"Both work together," repeated Sapazani, still with his head on one side. "*Au!* That is strange. Because when the men down in Natal were ordered to be shot for killing two of the *Nongqai* the King's Government prevented it."

"That was only until they had inquired further into it," answered the magistrate. "But they were shot—were they not?"

"We have *heard* so."

There was a note of incredulity about this reply which was exasperating. Perhaps it was intended to be.

"So it will be with every one who defies the Government, no matter who he may be," concluded Downes, magisterially, as though clinching the argument.

"*Nkose*," replied Sapazani, outwardly polite, though subtly sneering, "I would ask why the Great King has withdrawn all his soldiers from here. Is it because he is angry with the white people here?"

Murmurs of assent ran through the attendant group. Downes thought to detect the cloven foot. Those infernal Ethiopian preachers had been around disseminating that very idea, he remembered.

"It is not," he answered decisively. "It is because he trusts all his subjects—black as well as white. But should any

such show themselves unworthy of his trust their punishment will be swift and terrible.”

“But, *Nkose*, it will take a long time to bring soldiers from across the sea,” persisted Sapazani, speaking softly.

“There are enough on this side of the sea to do it all,” said Downes. “More than enough. Now take warning, Sapazani. You are not loyal. I, your magistrate, can see that, have seen it for some time past. You are sheltering these disaffected men—Pandulu and Babatyana.” Here Sapazani smiled to himself as he thought of the “shelter” he had afforded to the first named. “If this is done it will mean but one thing, that you are thoroughly disloyal to the Government. Well, the fate of a disloyal chief is banishment or death; at any rate, banishment, never to return.”

Here Sapazani smiled again to himself as he thought of the head of the royal house, who had been banished but had long since returned. That smile exasperated Downes still further.

“You will appear here within half-a-moon’s time,” he went on, “with one or both of these men. At any rate, you will appear to—”

“*Hau!* Appear here in half-a-moon’s time? *Hau!* But I will not, O little-dog of the King’s little-dog Government. Have I nothing else to do than to wear out the road to Esifeni! I will *not* appear in half-a-moon’s time, *impela!*”

The interruption was startling. The chief had leaped to his feet, and, his tall form straightened and his arm thrown forward, was glaring at the magistrate, with murder in his eyes, as his voice rose to a sullen roar of defiance.

“For every trivial thing,” he went on, “I am summoned to appear at Esifeni. If a calf is sick I am summoned to Esifeni to explain it. If a baby dies I am summoned to Esifeni to explain it. *Hau!* I will come no more—no more. Let the Government do what it will. I, too, have men. I, too, have men.”

His voice had now risen to a perfect roar. The group had uneasily sprung to its feet. Undhlawafa in vain tried to whisper words of soothing counsel to the exasperated chief, but they fell on deaf ears. The ears of the outside attendants were by no means deaf, however, and now they came crowding up around the scene of the *indaba*. Their attitude was silent, waiting, ominous.

Now the best of Downes came out. He did not believe he had many moments more to live, nor did one of those four white men; they marked the way in which the *right* hand of each composing that crowd was concealed within its owner’s clothing. The hot fit of temper had left him, and he sat there confronting the enraged chief with the dignity of one who felt as an upholder of the Great British Empire at all risks to himself. Above and beyond the threatening half-circle he could see the flag of the Empire drooping limply over the roof which sheltered his dear ones, and it flashed through his mind that these might, perhaps, be left uninjured. Then he rose to his feet.

“Go,” he said. “I talk not with a chief who talks to me in that way. I am here alone, and these are all who are with me. But I am strong with the strength of the whole Empire which that flag represents. Go, and return not to talk in this way to the representative of the King.”

For one tense moment they looked each other in the eyes. Then Sapazani spoke—

“I go,” he said. “When I return it will not be in this way.”

He turned and, without a word of farewell, strode away. His followers were puzzled, therefore subdued. But the bright blades concealed beneath their clothing remained there, still bright, still undimmed.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Concerning Battle.

Skerry Hill was the absurdly-named trading store of a man named Minton, and at present it was in a state of siege. Ben Halse was there, and Verna and Denham, and half-a-dozen or so of prospectors and miners, including Harry Stride and Robson. The place was laagered up with waggons and carts, old packing-cases, tins—anything that came in. A strand or two of barbed wire had been rummaged out, and ringed in with this additional defence the inmates, numbering about a dozen rifles, felt fairly secure, at any rate until relief should come.

For mighty events had been maturing. Babatyana had raised the tribes in the north of Natal, then crossing the border had put the torch to those in the south of Zululand. It was war, pure and simple, and a large force had been mobilised to quell it. But what touched them here more nearly was the report, well confirmed, that Sapazani had defied and threatened his magistrate, had come within an ace of murdering him and massacring the whole township of Esifeni, and had then taken to the bush with his whole tribe in order to effect a junction with the rebels in the south. All the sparse white population of the district had either fled or gone into laager.

Now all this scare would not have troubled Ben Halse overmuch, but for the revelation which Verna had made to him. He was very angry, but he kept his head. He questioned her minutely as to the reason of Sapazani’s sudden change of front, but beyond that he had been suddenly called away and had not appeared again she was in the dark. He, however, took a serious view of it. Such a thing as any native acting in this manner was absolutely unheard of, absolutely without precedent. It was so preposterous even as to look like a practical joke, but natives of this one’s age and standing are not given to such. It was certainly time to get out of Sapazani’s country, even apart from the existing state of things. So he had buried everything that it was possible thus to hide, and incontinently trekked.

Denham was left in the dark as to the real reason of his brief captivity. To him Verna felt a natural shrinking and repulsion even from mentioning a loathsome matter of the kind. So they got up some story of the times being troubled, and that his capture was probably done with the object of holding him as a hostage.

They had not been long upon the road before they met with some Zulus who were well-known to them. These warned them not to follow the way they were going. It skirted the Lumisana forest for hours, and Sapazani’s tribe was ambushing the whole of that road. So Ben Halse decided to alter his plans, and turning off to Skerry Hill, join the laager there for the present. Needless to say, the acquisition of a man of his record and resource was enthusiastically hailed by the

occupants. And Denham, too. Another "rifle," and the more of such the better.

Minton was a rough and tumble sort of man, of no particular characteristic except that when he had had a couple of glasses too many he became a quite phenomenal bore; when he had had three, he wanted to fight, but as no one thought it worthwhile taking him seriously he went to sleep instead. He had a limp wife and several small children, all given to howling vehemently on any or no provocation.

"Hello, Ben," cried Minton. "What's the news up your way? Must be hot if *you've* decided to clear. Well, Miss Verna, hope you've brought your .303. We may want it. And you, sir; glad to meet you. Had heard of you being with our friends here. Come in; I've still got a boy left who can look after your horses."

Verna did not like the allusion to her shooting powers. She had never quite thrown off that misgiving she had lest in Denham's sight she should always be the fighting, hunting Amazon. Minton's well-intentioned jocularly grated upon her ears. But it need not have.

Then the limp wife and the children came forward, and were duly made acquainted with Denham, who won golden opinions from the minor parent of the latter on the spots by stroking their sticky little paws within his, and insisting upon making them stickier still with the contents of certain glass bottles of bull's-eyes which stood upon one of the shelves within the store.

"What's yours, Mr Denham?" said Minton, going, in business-like fashion, behind the bar end of the store counter. "Ben's form of poison never varies. It's square face in this country, and 'dop' down in Natal—when he can get it. Cheer, oh!"

Now the prospectors dropped in. All knew Ben Halse; then they were introduced to Denham, and of course another round was set up.

"Hello, Robson," sung out Minton, when this was accomplished. "Where's your pal?"

"Don't know. He says it's too hot."

"Too hot?" rejoined Minton derisively. "I like that. He's hot stuff himself. Bring him in. It's my round."

Thus Harry Stride and Denham met again. The latter showed no trace of resentment with regard to their last meeting. He greeted Stride with an open, pleasant cordiality that rather astonished that youth. But Stride was not responsive. He avoided showing his antipathy, and was conscious of feeling galled that his partner, Robson, was behind the secret of it. Yet he need not have been, for the tactful North-countryman never by word or wink let drop that he possessed the slightest knowledge of the same even to him.

The accommodation was somewhat crowded, of necessity. Verna declined an invitation to use one of the rooms within the house. The perpetual yowling of the Minton nursery, heard through partitions of paper-like thinness, might as well have been in the same room. So she elected to sleep in the spider, on the ground that it was cooler. The men sat smoking in a group, with an occasional adjournment to the bar, then turned in anywhere and at any time as they felt sleepy. The horses were all brought within the enclosure and securely made fast.

"What have you been doing about sentry-go, Minton, up till now?" said Ben Halse, after every one was pretty well asleep.

"Oh, I don't know we've thought much about it," was the devil-may-care answer. "I've got a couple of pups here—them rough-haired curs you see yonder at the back. They'll raise Cain enough before any one's within two miles of us, you bet. Come and have a last nightcap—what d'you say, Mr Denham?"

"Oh, I don't know. Done well enough already. However, one more."

Both Denham and his host were hard-headed men, moreover, they knew that the said "one more" wouldn't hurt them, in view of the scheme which each and both were mutually, though tacitly, hatching.

"This is a pretty silly way of running a laager, Denham," said Ben Halse, with infinite contempt, when the two were alone together. "Why, on the tack these boobies are going the whole of this show is in Sapazani's hand, and *we* don't want that, eh?" significantly, forgetting for the moment that the owner was outside what he and Verna were not. "I propose that we take a turn at watching outside, one each side of the *scherm*."

"I was thinking just about the same thing myself," was the answer.

Hour followed hour. Both men, wide enough awake, had taken up their positions. Occasionally they would meet, and exchange a word or two. In the strong starlight the loom of the hills and the dark hang of forest were distinguishable, then towards morning a pale fragment of moon rose. Denham, sitting among the low thorn-bushes, the magazine of his .303 fully charged, enjoyed the silent beauty of the night, and his naturalist ear took in every cry of beast or bird away out on the otherwise silent waste. Intertwined, too, were thoughts of Verna and of his own position. As to the latter, in a way, the outbreak of war had been distinctly advantageous. No one, least of all the police, would have time to bother about the remains of some unknown Jew, or as to how he came to grief, now quite some time ago. Then the moon came over the distant ridge of forest, and it grew lighter and lighter. Even beneath his heavy overcoat Denham shivered.

Suddenly he grasped his rifle. No, it was only Ben Halse.

"Come round here," whispered the latter. "Something's moving."

Denham's nerves tingled. In a moment they were round at the point indicated. Several plover were circling overhead, uttering shrill cries.

"Look here," whispered Halse earnestly. "When I fire there'll likely be a rush. If there is, don't be content with one shot. Pump about six into them one after another, as quick as ever you can. It'll stop the lot for the moment, and rouse up those boozy idiots inside the fence. Then we'll run like hell, but—look out for the barbed wire."

Denham nodded. He was cool as ever man was, but the thrill of battle was in his veins, and, like the mythical knights of old, he was spurred by the thought that he was fighting for a lady-love. Intently he watched his companion. The latter raised his piece suddenly, then dropped it again; then up it went as quickly, and the flame and roar of the report spurted forth, followed immediately by another detonation.

Simultaneously there rose from the grass a mass of dark forms, but no sound was uttered. They would be in upon the laager and surprise it asleep, having first made mincemeat of the unfortunate sentry. But—would they? Acting upon Ben Halse's instructions, Denham, half concealed by a broad, flat-topped thorn-bush, poured his magazine fire into the thick of them, cartridge after cartridge, and aiming low. He could hear Ben Halse doing the same, and knew he was missing nothing and nobody. He himself knew he was missing nobody. It was just as Ben Halse had predicted. The attacking line was thoroughly demoralised, and reckoning, as it might well have reckoned, that there were about twenty more men here than was really the case, dropped flat to the earth, a manoeuvre of which the two daring watchers took advantage to sprint away to the laager, keeping as much under cover of the bushes as possible.

"Steady, boys; it's only ourselves," sung out Ben Halse, as several rifles went up ominously to greet them. "Good Lord! I don't know where you'd all be if it wasn't for our same selves. Now, then, let's get into position. We'll want it directly."

They did. Broad shields showed through the misty dawn, their bearers advancing at a sort of creeping run behind them, then the gleam of assegais. A few shots were fired, but hummed high overhead, doing no harm. But the men within, now thoroughly aroused, were all the cool and daring pioneers of civilisation such men almost invariably are. Each instinctively sought out the most useful post, and their rifles crashed into the advancing rush, pouring in shot after shot from the magazines.

"Here, you mustn't be here. Go back into the house. You'll be hit."

The tone was gruff, and the speaker Harry Stride. Verna answered—

"No, I shan't. I can shoot, and I'm going to."

And she did. Afterwards she did not care to reckon up with what effect.

The loss to the assailants was great, terrific. They were at close quarters, and the defenders were firing low. And then they began to get entangled and tripped up on the barbed wires.

"*Usutu!*"

The war-cry rang out, fierce-throated, on the right. A derisive yell was the reply.

"Boy, bring the coffee, sharp," shouted someone inside, between the volleys.

"How much to the Point?" sung out someone else: the joke being that many of the assailants wore clothes, and had possibly been kitchen boys or ricksha pullers in Durban or Maritzburg. To which the assailants would shout back—

"How many women have you got there, *abelungu*? *Ha!* We shall find wives directly without having to pay *lobola*."

"Here is the price of one!" cried Verna grimly, as she drilled the head of a flitting savage who was glancing from one point of cover to another. A huge shout arose from the defenders.

"Good shot! Oh, good shot! Three cheers for Miss Halse!"

And they were heartily given, amid the roar of dropping volleys. Yet, at the moment, Verna felt disgusted. That old feeling came over her again.

But a voice dispelled it.

"Darling, you are too rash. There are enough of us. Why not go under shelter?" Denham was beside her. All the bitter thoughts vanished.

"Alaric, don't loathe me for this," she whispered. "I don't do it for choice, but we want all the defence we can make."

"We shall always be able to say we have fought literally side by side, at any rate," he answered, with a pressure of the hand. "How can I think any the worse of you for your splendid pluck?"

There was no more time, however, for anything of this sort. The attacking party had divided into two, and one section of it had crawled round, under cover of the thorn-bushes, to the other side. Now they opened fire, and the bullets began to hum and "ping" over the laager. To their accompaniment the storekeeper's wife and children kept up an unintermittent howling.

"For God's sake, Ada, choke those brats," yelled the exasperated Minton, "and yourself helping them. Here's Miss Halse dropping her man to each shot with the best of us, and all you do is to sit and howl. That won't help any."

It grew lighter and lighter, and consequently more dangerous for the savages. They had reconnoitred this laager and its conditions at night, and had voted it a safe and easy walk over, and so it would have been but for the arrival of Ben Halse. Now they concluded it wasn't good enough, and drew off under cover of the long grass. Then the sun flamed up over the dark wall of forest-hung hill, and Ben Halse, and one or two more, were just able to get in a stray long shot at stragglers showing themselves in the retreating distance.

"They're done with," said the last named. "Tell you what it is, Minton, you deserved all you'd have got for leaving your shop to take its chance. You'd have got it too if it hadn't been for me and Denham, though I don't say it to brag."

"Oh, damn it, old chap," was the answer. "Don't jaw and lecture like a bally Methodist parson. Come on in and have a drink all round. I'll swear we've deserved it. Then breakfast. All's well that ends well."

They counted the dead. There were thirty-three of them, nearly three times their own number, and not one of themselves was scratched, though a horse had been hit by a chance bullet. Of wounded none were found, their comrades having had time to carry them away.

Breakfast over there was a great cleaning of rifles, and much talk. All but one or two were wildly elate. They had had their first brush and had come out with flying colours. They thirsted for a second. So when someone said suddenly, "Look there!" and every head, turned in the direction pointed out, was conscious of a dust cloud coming along the road where it crossed a distant ridge, all hands rejoiced exceedingly, because they were going to get it.

They were, however, doomed to disappointment, for several binoculars soon revealed behind that whirling dust cloud, no Zulu impi, but a large contingent of the Natal Police, advancing at a quick trot.

Their pace slackened as they drew nearer, and recognised that all was well. As they rode up, nearly a hundred strong, in double file, the very simplicity of their khaki uniform and well-filled bandoliers, the sunburnt faces of the troopers, mostly young men, hard and athletic, and full of determination and dare-devil dash, seemed somehow far more imposing than any display of scarlet accompanied by the blare of a regimental band. These men were doing the hard work of their country, and they looked it.

"We've come to clear you out of this, Minton," said the inspector in command, when the first greetings were over, "Sapazani has broken out, and has nearly two thousand niggers in the Lumisana. So roll up everything and be ready to trek to Esifeni with us as soon as our horses are rested. You've done well enough this morning, but a few of you like this are a mere mouthful in the long run. Besides—the ladies."

The storekeeper swore a bit. He wasn't going to be hustled off for any blooming Sapazani, not he. They had taught them a lesson that morning that wouldn't want repeating, and so on. Inspector Bray grew "short."

"Well, if you're a blanked idiot, Minton," he said, "stay, by all means; but I don't suppose there are any more such fools. Eh, Halse?"

"I'm not one of them, Bray," was the answer. "A man can risk his own skin as much as he's fool enough to do, but he's no business to risk that of his womenkind. My party goes with you."

That settled it. The consensus of opinion was against the storekeeper, wherefore, as he could not stay on by himself, the whole position was simplified. He occupied the remainder of the time burying the most valuable of his stock-in-trade, the liquor to wit, and such other things as were worth bothering about in an emergency. Meanwhile the two police officers and Ben Halse went round the line of attack, like a sort of informal coroner's court "viewing the bodies." Several of these the latter recognised as Sapazani's people. The others he did not think were.

Then, when the Force had sufficiently rested, there was saddling up and inspanning, and soon after midday the column pulled out.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Of the Bush Road.

An advance guard of twenty men was thrown forward; Ben Halse's trap and that containing the other storekeeper's family being in the middle of the main body, which was ready to close up around both at a moment's warning. Scouts were thrown out, but there were places in which the thick bush rendered the services of such entirely useless.

The prospectors especially were inclined to treat the whole thing as a picnic; indeed, there was hardly a man there present who was not spoiling for a fight—and would have been intensely disappointed if no such were put up. The women and children were certainly a drawback; stray bullets have an uncomfortable knack of splattering in anywhere. That the escort might be overwhelmed by weight of numbers and utterly wiped out never occurred to them. Nearly a hundred police in full fighting kit, and the dozen or so of extra rifles, ought to be able to hold their own against all Zululand. Isandhlwana? Oh yes; but that was out of date; out-of-date weapons and out-of-date men. With quick-firing rifles, and an abundance of ammunition, they could hold out for ever against a mob of ricksha pullers and kitchen boys, for such were the sorry substitutes for the old-time splendid legionaries of the last king. The civilian element, in view of its victory that morning, was inclined to treat the whole situation as a joke.

Denham, however, formed an exception to this spirit, so, too, did Ben Halse, for the same reason. Inspector Bray, an experienced officer, who was in command of the Force, felt not a little anxious; he would not have felt anything of the kind but for his charges; and there was a very critical bit of the road just beyond the Gilwana drift—several miles of thickly bushed country. If they were attacked at all it would be there, he prophesied to Denham, who was riding beside him.

It was a lovely afternoon, the air brisk, fresh and crisp, the sky cloudless. The scattered thorn-bushes were alive with bird voices, but that dark hang of forest on the rugged hills, now on the right hand, now on the left, there it was that the element of menace lay.

"It's the devil," he said, "to have women to look after. I beg your pardon, Denham, but I'm talking generally. You see, any tumble-down shanty of a brick building will stop a bullet, but nothing will here. You can make 'em lie down in the bottom of a trap, for instance, but that's not bullet-proof. And I think I see Miss Halse, for instance, consenting to do anything of the kind."

"I'd be sorry for the chump, black or white, she had got the sights of a rifle on," he answered, with a thrill of pride. "She's just a dead shot."

"So I've heard," said Bray, with a twinkle in his eyes. "You must have had a good time together all this while. Good sport—and all that?"

"No, you don't draw me, Bray. I'm a collector, and I never heard that birds and snakes were 'royal' game."

"Rather hard to keep one's piece from going off—by accident, of course—when a waterbuck or something *strays* across the road, eh?"

But this chaff was interrupted by a trooper, who had ridden back from the advance guard, and the intelligence he brought caused his superior to swear. The river was down, and the passage of the Gilwana drift would be impossible for at least a couple of hours.

"That's that infernal thunder burst up in the hills early this morning," declared Bray. Then he gave orders to off-saddle where they were, for, of course, he had originally intended to do so on the further side. However, it was open here, at any rate, and they might still be able to push through the thickest and most dangerous part before dark.

"This is a real old picnic now, Miss Halse," pronounced Sub-Inspector Dering, as he helped to unpack from the spider the requisite things which had been brought along for lunch. "Lord, what a nuisance those kids are!" he added in an undertone. "Always howling."

For Minton's small family was uttering shrilling expostulation at the delayed meal. The while vedettes were posted, and the police, split up into groups, were discussing their rations. The officers and the civilian element were making a picnic together, and as such it seemed, but the stacked rifles and full bandoliers told a different tale.

"What d'you think, Halse?" said Inspector Bray, as the two talked apart while the others were laughing and joking and making merry as they laid out the things. "Shall we slip through, or shall we get a chance at Sapazani?"

"Can't say. You see, I've been cut off from communication ever since I left home. But I should say the chances are about even. One thing you may rely upon, we have been watched every inch of the way."

"Sure?"

"Dead cert. However, let's fall-to, at any rate. We'll be ready for them if they do come, and we can't do more."

The picnic proceeded merrily enough. Sub-Inspector Dering attached himself very attentively to Verna. He was aware of her engagement, but he was an Irishman, and therefore bound to attach himself to the best-looking woman present. Harry Stride was rather silent, hardly talking with the other prospectors, among whom he had chosen to keep himself. But when the after-lunch pipes came out, Bray, with an escort of a dozen men, started off to examine the drift for himself, and with him went Denham.

It was barely two miles off. The river, not a wide one, swirled between high, clayey banks fringed with dense bush. If attacked at the point of crossing the matter might be serious.

He was relieved. The high-water mark of the flood had left a broad, wet stripe between it and the surface. The stream was subsiding rapidly.

"In half-an-hour we shall be able to take it," he said. "Hallo! Don't see anything, Denham?"

"Yes," said the latter, with his glasses to his eyes. "It looks like cattle. Yes, it is; black and white ones. But they are not being driven; they seem to be grazing."

Away on the hill, some seven hundred yards beyond the river, where the bush thinned out into rocks and open ground, white specks were visible to the naked eye.

"It's a signal, I believe," said Bray. "Well, we'll take the drift now, at any rate. If we are to have a fight here, I prefer it by daylight." And he ordered a trooper to gallop back to the camp with instructions to saddle up and inspan immediately.

In a surprisingly short space of time the troop was ready to march. But a delay occurred through Minton's rotten harness, which kept giving way in all sorts of unexpected directions. Inspector Bray cursed hideously to himself; but for the presence of the women he might have earned heartfelt admiration from his troop at large by reason of his proficient originality in that direction. Willing hands, and handy ones, there were and plenty, but by the time the damage was repaired quite a considerable portion of precious time had been wasted.

Again at the drift more delay. The storekeeper's wretched horses stuck. All the flogging in the world was of no use; and there was the trap in the middle of the stream, the water flowing through the bottom boards soaking everything, and the woman and children howling dismally. Had an attack been delivered then the result might have been disastrous. But Ben Halse outspanned his pair and hitched them on, and by this aid, and much shouting and flogging, the whole outfit emerged, panting and dripping on the opposite bank. By then a great deal more valuable time had been lost. And it was nearly sundown, and about seven miles of the most dangerous and bushy part of the road had to be negotiated.

The early afternoon was drawing in, and there is little or no twilight in those latitudes. They had covered about three miles from the drift, when suddenly and without any warning a mass of Zulus rose up from the bush on One side of the road, and roaring "*Usutu!*" charged down upon the front of the column. They were naked, save for their *mútyas* and ornaments of flowing cowhair, and carried shields and bright, business-like assegais.

"Sapazani's people," exclaimed Ben Halse. "Look out for the chief, boys. You can't mistake him once you sight him—half a head taller than the longest here."

There was not even time to dismount, but the revolvers of the police at such close quarters, aimed low, poured such a terrific fire into the advancing mass that those behind could not come on for the line of writhing, struggling bodies that lay in front.

"Give it them again, boys," yelled Sub-Inspector Dering, lifting the top off the skull of a gigantic savage who was clutching at his bridle rein with one hand, a broad assegai held ready to strike in the other. The great body toppled over with a thud, and at the same time another crashing volley sent many more to earth, the residue dropping into cover again. With splendid discipline the troop resumed its march.

Fresh cartridges were slapped into the pistols; it seemed likely to prove a revolver duel, in that the bush was too

thick to admit of using rifles. The trained horses, being all together, had shown themselves wonderfully free from restiveness. As for the men, an extraordinary thrill of excitement had run through all ranks. This was battle indeed, and, so far, they had held their own.

For a few minutes they kept on in silence, with pulses tingling, but cool-nerved, alert, ready for any fresh move. Then a volley broke forth, flashing redly from the dim duskiness of the slope. Bullets hummed over the heads of the troop, two of them splintering the side of Ben Halse's spider. Verna, who had got out her magazine rifle, and was straining her eyes in search of a mark, heard them and moved not a muscle. Her father, who was driving, but whose revolver was ready to his hand, also took no notice. But just before the volley ceased down went a trooper almost under the wheels of the trap.

"In here with him," cried Verna, springing to the ground, and herself helping to lift the stricken man in. He was badly hurt, too, and insensible, but there was little enough time then for attending the wounded, for immediately a fresh volley was poured in. This time two troopers fell, one shot stone dead. The concealed savages raised a deafening roar of exultation.

But now some of them began to show themselves. There was a break in the dense bush, and in their eagerness they began to cross this too soon. The order for half the escort to dismount was followed by a volley from the rifles. It was now too dark to see the result clearly but from the vengeful yells that went up it was obvious that more than one bullet had gone home. Again the volleys roared redly through the night.

A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, which for present purposes may be taken to mean that two of the prospectors' horses had gone dead lame. After the repulse of the first attack the escort had been going at a trot, and the prospectors, who had been bringing up the rear, had dropped dangerously behind, and among all the noise and firing their shouts to that effect had gone unheard. One, galloping furiously up, now brought the intelligence.

"Dickinson, ten men and come along," yelled Dering, who was looking after the rear of the column. "Those devils'll have 'em if we ain't sharp."

It happened that Denham had been chatting with the sergeant, incidentally little dreaming of the nature of the other's furtive interest in him. Now that there was a call to the rescue he dashed off with the party. These they came up with not far down the road. Robson had been hit by a bullet and badly wounded, and a comrade was supporting him on his horse. Stride's horse was one of the lame ones, and Stride himself was doing all he knew by kicks and blows and cursed to urge that noble but unreliable animal onward. Just then the enemy seemed to become aware that something was wrong.

"Look out, sir," warned Dickinson to his officer. "On the right!"

They could hear the bushes parting, the thud of running feet. Then Stride's horse fell.

"Here, jump up, man!" cried Denham. "Up behind me. My horse is as strong as the devil."

"*Usutu!*" broke from the onrushing crowd. "*Usutu, 'Sutu!*"

The savage forms were almost in among them now—assegais ready.

"Quick, quick, damn it!" shouted Denham. Stride hesitated no longer, and the horse with its double burden started off after the rest.

The roar of the war-shout was right in their ears now. They had just regained their comrades when something seemed to strike Denham with a debilitating numbness, followed by a spasm of the most intense agony. His hold relaxed. He was conscious of a roaring inside his head, and out of it. The whole world seemed to be whirling round with him.

Rescuers and rescued reached the column just in time, just as another fierce attack was delivered. But again that well-directed volley was available, and the assailants dropped back. Moreover, the bush ended here, and in the face of that determined repulse the savages had no stomach for trying their luck in the open. The troop moved on unmolested.

Then was heard a voice, a clear, woman's voice, audible in the still night to every man in the whole escort.

"Where is Mr Denham?"

A thrill of instinctive consternation ran through all who heard. Denham's name was called up and down the line of march, but with no result. In the confusion attendant on the last close attack on the rescue party nobody had seen anybody. It had been very much a case of every man for himself. Some one, however, had seen Denham mount Stride behind him on his horse. And then Stride himself came forward.

"You left him," said Verna, her pale face and gleaming eyes looking dreadful in the brilliant starlight. "He saved you, and you left him. You coward!"

"So help me, God, I didn't!" objected Stride vehemently. "I don't really know what happened. I'll go back this moment and look for him. Any one go with me?" looking around somewhat vacantly. "Then I'll go alone." Then he swayed and tottered, pulled himself together, then subsided on the ground, in total unconsciousness.

"He's hit, himself," said one of the police who were bending over the wounded man. "Rather. He's got it bang through the chest."

Verna looked at the fallen man, and her bitter resentment left her, but not her grief.

"I am going back to look for him," she said. "Who'll volunteer?"

"You shan't go," said her father decisively; "but I will. How many men can you spare me, Bray?"

Inspector Bray was not pleased. Here he had brought off this expedition with success, even with brilliancy, and now the kudos he would gain would be utterly marred. For to allow any of his men to go on this insane quest would mean to

send them to their death. There was not a chance of the missing man being found, except cut into small pieces. Still, if it had been any other than Ben Halse—and, besides, that white face, those eyes, gleaming in the starlight!

“You can have ten,” he said gruffly, “if you can get as many to volunteer.”

Ten? The whole troop wanted to volunteer on the spot. But the ten were chosen.

“I’ll be somethinged if I follow up this investigation any further,” said Sergeant Dickinson, who was one of those chosen, to himself, as they set out. “He may have killed a hundred blanked ‘Sheenies’ for all I care. I’m not going to hunt down a chap like that. I’d rather chuck the Force.”

It may be said that the search party utterly failed in its object. It was met by overwhelming numbers, and there was nothing for it but a precipitate retreat upon the column again.

Then and for all the days to come Verna Halse realised that for her the light of the world had gone out.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Naked Impi.

The police camp was still and silent in the early dawn, if dawn it could be called, for a damp, dark mist wrapped the earth in thick folds. It had been found necessary to go into camp, if only to rest the horses for the next day’s march, which would bring the escort to Esifeni. It was deemed fairly safe too, in view of the defeat inflicted upon the enemy the evening before. Besides, they had got into open country now, and the close quarter surprise in the bush was no longer possible.

Was it not? Here was a worse enemy than thick bush. In the couple of hours before dawn the mist had stolen down upon them, shrouding the whole camp with a feeling of dazed helplessness. The vedettes thrown out on four sides, three men strong apiece, might as well not have been there now. Mist is a dreadfully formidable auxiliary to a wary, determined foe, stealing in cautiously behind it.

Of course all had lain down, ready for the smallest call to arms. Most were asleep; young men, fearless, healthily tired, are not likely to be kept awake by such a trifle—all in the day’s work—as a possible attack. Not all so slept, however. Verna, pale, haggard, hollow-eyed with grief, was carefully sponging out her rifle; eager now in her fierce longing for some kind of vengeance, even though vicarious vengeance, for another opportunity of using it to some purpose. No compunction of any sort was in her mind now. The more of *his* slayers she could send to join him in the other world, the greater would be her joy—the only joy left to her. She had declined Sub-Inspector Dering’s offer to clean the weapon for her on the ground that any sort of occupation was better than none, and sleep was impossible.

By this time the whole Force was aware of the relationship existing between her and the missing man, and all forbore or feared to intrude upon her grief. Stony-eyed, silent, under this second blow, she stared forth upon the enshrouding mist, as though to pierce its dark folds and see—what? Her father was frankly snoring. It was characteristic of that hardened up-country adventurer that nothing short of absolute necessity should be allowed to interfere with the recuperating powers of nature. The two officers in command, likewise the same number of sergeants, were wide awake, and conversing in low tones.

It grew lighter and lighter, the mist notwithstanding. The sun must be up. They thought of giving orders to saddle up. By the time the process was accomplished, and Minton’s miserable harness got into working order by the agency of countless bits of string and *reimpje*, it would be clear enough to march. But there was a guardian angel over that camp after all.

Suddenly a shot rang out, then another. In an instant the whole camp was astir. But no flurry, no fuss. As we have said, the whole escort had slept under arms, and each trooper awoke in his place and ready. Two more shots followed from the same quarter, but this time much nearer, then a small volley from another vedette posted on the next face of the camp.

A swirl of air cleft the mist. From the sides on which the shots were fired the vedettes were now seen running in.

“Large impi close on us, sir,” reported the first to arrive, breathlessly. “Hardly six hundred yards now.”

Inspector Bray issued but one short order. He had been prepared for such a contingency, and everything had been prearranged on pitching camp. Now, in a second, each man had built up what cover he could with his saddle and blanket, and lay behind it, his rifle forward, alert and ready. He had not long to wait.

Another swirl of air rolled back the mist, leaving a quarter of a mile on that side exposed as by the raising of a curtain. It was as the sentinels had said. In crescent formation the dense black cloud swept on—in dead silence—a phalanx of shields, a perfect bristle of assegais. A black impi—a naked impi—no dirty tattered shirts or ragged store clothes among these. They were as the old-time warriors of the king—with flowing war adornments and crested headgear and great tufted shields. And they were no further off than four hundred yards.

A sharp word of command and the police rifles rang out. The oncoming ranks were shaken, but with the second volley the whole advancing mass had sunk like magic to the earth, and the discharge swept over them harmlessly. At the same time a terrific volley swept over the camp *from the rear of the assailants*. These, under cover of it, made a nearer rush, and the same tactics were repeated.

“By God!” shouted Bray, taking in this, and excited by a couple of bullets whizzing over, and very near to, his head. “There’s tactics in this. Covering their advance! Who the devil could have taught them that move, eh, Halse?”

The latter said nothing at first, but he thought he knew.

“It’s Sapazani’s prime impi,” he declared. “No clothes, and charging in. We’ve got our job cut out. Not ‘shirt-tail’ warriors these, but quite after the real old style.”

As the "covering tactic" was repeated the impi extended with lightning-like rapidity, following out the old Zulu practice of throwing out surrounding "horns." They could not have been less than a thousand strong—rather over than under. And now for the first time arose from that number of throats the roar of the war-shout—

"Usutu!"

The police horses were now thrown into confusion—several of them had fallen in that overhead volley, standing high as they did, and were kicking and struggling in all directions; indeed, it was all that those told off to hold them could do to restrain them on the picket lines at all. As yet, however, not a man had been hit.

"The chief!" ejaculated Ben Halse eagerly, touching Bray on the arm. "Sapazani."

In the forefront of the impi, waving his great shield, Sapazani was now conspicuous. His gigantic form, the towering black ostrich plumes stuck within his head-ring would have marked him anywhere. But he seemed to bear a charmed life. A bullet from Ben Halse clipped one of his plumes, but he shook his head and laughed.

"Greeting, U' Ben! Thy hand and eye are failing," he roared; bounding, leaping, like a wild beast, in the forefront of his followers, who were now beginning to fall around him in rows. All sides of the camp were busy now, and but for the quick and, literally, massacring fire poured into the rush, would have been overwhelmed.

"The chief! The chief!" shouted the excited men. "Now, then, all at him at once. We'll down the devil."

But they did not. Never still, Sapazani dodged the volley and laughed exultantly. But even as he did so he leaped in the air and fell flat. Those in her neighbourhood looked up at Verna Halse, who, pale as death, with a red spot on each cheek and dull eyes, after one quick glance began refilling her magazine.

"By God, Miss Halse, you've killed Sapazani!" ejaculated Sergeant Dickinson. "You've killed the chief."

It was indeed so. While others had been concentrating their fire on that whirling, bounding figure without result, Verna, her heart on fire with burning longing for revenge, but her brain dangerously, deadly cool, had been watching her opportunity, watching when a fraction of a moment's stillness on the part of her quarry should give her the opportunity she sought. It had come and she had taken it.

A rousing, ringing cheer went up from the men. Already on the other side the combat had become nearly hand to hand. Assegais now were hurled into the camp, and more than one trooper was stricken. Minton, the storekeeper, was raving and cursing with one sticking through his leg, to the accompaniment of the howling of his progeny; but on the side led by Sapazani the onslaught wavered. The dead and wounded lay tremendously thick, and still the police bandoliers were not half empty, and now amid freshly heartened cheers their contents still played upon the roaring masses. Then, as the word mysteriously and quickly went round that the chief was slain, the news instead of inspiring them with the fury of exasperation had the contrary effect, and lo! as quickly as they had come on they were now in full retreat. A rain of bullets followed them, but no pursuit was allowed.

Verna had grounded her rifle, and stood looking after the retreating enemy. Then she walked back to the trap and deposited the weapon, speaking to nobody and ignoring the enthusiastic congratulations showered upon her. The while the vanishing curtain of mist was hanging in diminishing filminess over the hills, and the sun rose bright and glorious into a vault of unclouded blue.

"If you'll take my advice," said Ben Halse to the Inspector, "you'll have Sapazani verified dead without loss of time. They might rally and rescue him. But look out carefully for the wounded. They may send more than one man under before they go under themselves."

His advice was needed. In more than one instance some desperate savage, mortally and otherwise disabled, gripped his assegai in a feigned death grip to strike a last blow at any who should be unwary enough to approach him. But Sapazani was found not to be dead, though his days were numbered not by hours, but by minutes.

He, as they surrounded him, opened his eyes, but made no act of aggression, although by an effort he might have reached his broad assegai. Verna's bullet had drilled through his chest, narrowly missing the heart, and, being a Dum-dum, had torn away a gaping and ghastly hole beneath the shoulder where it had come out. As they propped him up against the body of one of his slain followers the rush of blood was enough to have ended the life of any one but a savage then and there.

"*Whau!*" he ejaculated feebly. "It is U' Ben. And we were friends."

"Were, yes," answered the trader shortly. "No one knows better than Sapazani why we are so no longer."

This, of course, was "dark" talking to Bray and the police. However, they supposed it referred to some trading transaction between these two. And at the same time a very uncomfortable misgiving came into Ben Halse's mind. What if the dying chief, out of sheer malignity, were to "give away," for the benefit of the police, some very awkward, not to say incriminating transactions in which he had been mixed up. But Sapazani's next words were—

"Where is Izibu? for something tells me I died by her stroke. I would fain see her again to say farewell."

Ben Halse's face hardened, knowing what he did and what the others did not. He hesitated, but as he did so a clear, hard voice struck upon his ear—upon the ears of all of them.

"Here is Izibu." And Verna, who had been approaching unseen, joined the group.

"It is well," said the dying chief. "I am content. We have been friends."

There was a world of pathetic dignity about the man as he sat there, his large, powerful frame thrilling in every nerve with bodily anguish, his fine face wet with the dews of death, as he turned his lustrous but fading eyes upon one or the other of the group.

"Friends!" echoed Verna in biting scorn. "Friends? Where, then, is he who was left behind yesterday, he who was our friend and therefore yours?"

Sapazani looked puzzled, then a light seemed to dawn upon him.

"Is it the man who collects snakes and—other things, Izibu?"

She nodded.

"Then of him I know nothing. Nor did I know even that he had been left behind, *impela*."

"You swear it?"

"U' Dingiswayo!" said the chief earnestly, invoking the name of the ancestral head of his tribe. And then for the first time a ray of hope came back into Verna's life.

Then the dying man's tone grew drowsy, and his head drooped forward. He was muttering words of counsel, of quick command, as though to his followers. Then he subsided to the ground. A sign or two and a groan. Sapazani was dead.

"Poor devil!" said Inspector Bray. "He's a fine fellow when all's said and done, and a plucky one."

"Whatever else he may be, Sapazani's a gentleman," said Ben Halse, fully appreciative of the fact that the dead chief had observed the strictest secrecy with regard to such former transactions as have been alluded to.

But Verna said nothing. She fed and fostered that ray of hope.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Left Behind.

Even though the rescue party failed in its object in so far that no rescue was effected, still, it is more than probable that it was the saving of Denham's life—for the present; for it had drawn off the savages and had given the wounded man time, when he recovered consciousness, to crawl into the most secure hiding-place he could find. This was in the thick of a clump of bushes, whose overhanging boughs formed a sort of natural pavilion.

In the darkness and general *mêlée* his fall had been unperceived, or he would have been cut to pieces then and there. He had lost his rifle, but still had his revolver and cartridges. That was something. Yet, when all was said and done, here was he alone, in the heart of a now hostile country, every hand against him did he but show himself anywhere, without food or means of procuring any, for even did he meet with game he dared not fire a shot for fear of attracting the attention of his enemies.

It was with vast relief that he discovered that his injury, though painful, was not serious. He could only conjecture that he had received a numbing blow just behind the left shoulder from a heavy knobkerrie hurled with tremendous force, and such indeed was the case. At first it seemed as though his shoulder was broken. It had swelled as though it would burst his coat, but it was only a contusion, though a severe and painful one.

Lying low in the welcome darkness of his hiding-place he could hear deep-toned voices all round him, some quite near. The impi had returned from its pursuit of the rescue party, and was searching for its dead and wounded. Here was a fresh element of danger. What if they should light upon him? Then the only course left open would be to sell his life as dearly as possible.

He could hear voices now quite close to his hiding-place. They were coming straight for him. Crouching there in the gloom, hardly daring to breathe, he unbuttoned his holster. It was empty! In the excruciating pain of his injury he had not noticed its unusual lightness. The pistol was gone. He had dropped it when falling from the horse. He was totally unarmed, and to that extent utterly helpless.

Not ten yards from his hiding-place the voices stopped. He could hear some swift ejaculations, then a groan, then another and deeper one. He had not made sufficient progress, under Verna's tuition, to be able to make out what was being said, but he gathered that they had found a wounded comrade. Heavens! but what if the latter had seen or heard him, and should put them on his track, perhaps under the impression that he was one of themselves and needed succour?

Then something dug him as with a sharp sting, then another, then another. It was as though burning needles were being thrust into him, but he dared not move. Then another. It was literally maddening. He conjectured he had got into the vicinity of a nest of black ants, but he could not lie still thus to be devoured alive. They had managed somehow to get inside his clothing, nor dared he move either to crush or dislodge them; and the incident brought back stories he had heard from Ben Halse and others of the old-time way of torturing those accused of witchcraft: spredeagling them over an ants' nest to be eaten alive. The thought was not a pleasant one, bearing in mind his own helplessness, and now, did he fall into the hands of those without, such might conceivably be his own fate.

The voices had ceased. He heard a peculiar sound, then a rumbling noise as of a heavy body struggling upon the earth in the agonies of death. Then the voices were raised again, but now receding. Soon they were silent altogether.

Given a little exertion, and South Africa, by reason of the dryness of its atmosphere, is one of the most thirsty climates in the world, wherefore, now a burning thirst which had been growing upon Denham reached maddening point. At all costs he must slake it, but how—where? He knew that the Gilwana River made a bend which would bring it up to about a mile from the scene of the fight. Was it safe to venture forth? Well, he must risk it.

All seemed quiet now. The moon was rising, and he remembered how at that time barely twenty-four hours ago he and Ben Halse had given the alarm which ushered in the fight at Minton's store. Since then another stubborn fight, and now here was he, a helpless fugitive, who more likely than not would be a dead one at any moment.

A few yards and he nearly stumbled over something lying there. It was a dead body. Stooping over it in the gathering moonlight, Denham made out that it was that of a Zulu of good proportions. It was horribly mangled about both legs, the result of a Dum-dum bullet, but there was a stab in the chest from which blood was still oozing. Now he knew the meaning of the mysterious sounds he had heard. The man had been killed by his comrades, probably at his own request, because he was too badly injured to make it worthwhile carrying him off the field.

He turned away from the corpse in repulsion and horror, and as he did so the whites of the sightless eyeballs seemed to roll round as if to follow him. He felt faint and weak. There was a little whisky in his flask, and this, although of no use at all for thirst-quenching purposes, was good as a "pick-me-up." At last the purling ripple of the river sounded through the still dawn in front. Another effort and the bank is gained.

The bank, yes. But the stream flowing down yonder between this and the other clay bank cannot be reached from here, short of diving into it, but the lay and nature of the soil points to dangerous quicksands underlying that smoothly flowing reach. With a curse of bitter disappointment, his strength weakening with every step, he turns away, to spend another half-hour in scrambling through dongas and thorns and long grass till an accessible point may be found, and all to the accompaniment of the musical water rippling merrily in his ears.

At last! Shelving down to the water's edge, a beautiful smooth grassy sward, overhung by forest trees. The fugitive throws himself on the brink and takes a long, long, cool drink, and it is cool at the hour before sunrise. Then, infinitely refreshed, he sits up.

What is there in this flow of river, in the silence of the forest, that brings back another memory, the memory of a repulsive, agonised face; of the last shriek as the wretch is dragged under? He himself is now in well-nigh as hopeless a case. Again between himself and Verna has come Fate. Can it be that this tribute is to be exacted from him for that other's blood? Exhausted, despairing, he sits there on the river bank. Well may he despair. Unarmed and foodless, how shall he ever succeed in finding his way back to safety?

What is that? The sound of voices coming along the river bank, and with it the unmistakable rattle of assegai-hafts. Wildly he looks around. There is nowhere to hide. In a minute they will be upon him. Ha! the river!

Just below, the current swirled between high banks, which in one place overhung. By gaining this point—and he was a powerful swimmer—he might lie *perdu*, half in, half out of the water. They would not think of looking for him there. Famished, weakened, aching from the dull pain in his shoulder, he let himself into the water, and swimming noiselessly downstream gained the desired haven just as some fifty Zulus, in full war-trappings, came out on the spot where but now he had been sitting. He could hear the sound of their deep voices, but they did not seem raised in any unusual tone of curiosity or excitement.

He was half in, half out of the water, clinging to a pile of brushwood that had been wedged in there. A ripple out on the smooth surface of the stream evoked another thought. Crocodiles! Heavens! had that same horrible fate been reserved for himself?

Minutes seemed hours. The water was cold in the early morning, and he was half numbed. Then he saw the Zulus cross the drift, holding their shields and assegais high above the water. One tall, finely built man led. Him he thought he recognised. Surely it was Sapazani.

Sapazani! The chief was on the friendliest terms with Ben Halse. Everything moved him to come forth and claim his protection, and then a more subtle instinct warned him not to. He remembered how he himself had been held in durance at the instance of that very chief, and the air of mystery that seemed to have hung over that extraordinary proceeding. They were not at war then, and he had been released. Now they were at war. No, he would not venture.

He waited until some time after all sounds of them had died away, then slid into the water again and swam quietly, and with a long side stroke, upstream to where he had entered. But before he was half-way something startling happened. The crash of a rifle—evidently from the high bank above him, together with a peculiar thud, followed immediately by the lashing and churning of the water just behind him. He looked back. Some large creature was struggling on the surface in its furious death throes. He shuddered. It was better to fall into the hands of the savages and take his chance than to consign himself to such a certain and horrible death as this. So in despair he emerged from the water, to find himself confronted by two men—a white man and a Zulu.

An indescribable revulsion of joy and security ran through him, nor was it dashed when he recognised the very mysterious recluse who had shown him hospitality on the night following the tragedy in that other river. The other was Mandevu.

"This time you yourself were about to become food for crocodiles," said the former in a grim, expressionless way, as he emerged dripping from the stream.

"Wasn't I? Well, you saved my life once, and I throw myself upon your help to save it again."

"Why should I save it again?"

"Why should you have saved it once, if not again?"

"Not once, twice already, if you only knew it."

Denham stared at him for a moment.

"Ah!" he said, as if a new light had dawned upon him. Then, in his frank, open, taking way, "Save it a third time, then, before you do so a fourth, for at present I'm simply starving."

"That's soon remedied." He said a word to Mandevu, and in a minute or two the latter returned, leading a strong, serviceable-looking horse, and Denham's eyes grew positively wolfish as they rested upon some bread and biltong which was unpacked from a saddle bag. "Now sit there in the sun and you'll be dry in half-an-hour."

The normal hard and cruel expression had given way to a sort of humanised softness in the brown, sun-tanned face of the stranger as he watched Denham sitting there in the newly risen sun, voraciously devouring that which was set

before him. At last he said—

“You are a man of your word, Denham.”

“Oh, you know my name,” said the other cheerfully. Some instinct restrained him from suggesting that the advantage was all on one side.

“You have kept the condition which I placed upon you. Not even to Ben Halse’s daughter did you break it.”

“Now how do you know that?” And the question and the straight, frank glance accompanying it would have convinced the other, if he had needed convincing, that this was so.

“That doesn’t matter. I do know it. If I did not, you would not have walked away from Sapazani’s place so easily. In fact, you would never have got away from it at all.”

“I am sure I owe you an endless debt of gratitude,” answered Denham earnestly. “The only thing is I don’t believe you will ever give me a chance of showing it.”

“But I will; I am going to give you just such a chance before we part. But that will keep. Now—when are you going to marry Ben Halse’s daughter?”

Denham stared, then burst into a joyous laugh.

“When? As soon as ever I can, by God!”

The stranger looked at him curiously.

“Do you know why I have helped you?” he said.

“Not in the least.”

“On that account, and—on another. You were made for each other, and I could see it. *I know.*”

There was that in the tone, in the expression of the man’s face, that went to Denham’s heart. He, then, had a sacred memory, which had remained green all these years. Some telepathic thought seemed to convey this. He put forth his band and the other took it.

“May I ask,” he said, “if you devote life to befriending people in similar circumstances?”

The other laughed—the dry, mirthless laugh which was the only form of merriment in which he ever seemed to indulge.

“No, indeed. Once only, under similar circumstances. That was during the trouble in Matabeleland.”

“By Jove!”

Then fell an interval of silence, which neither seemed in a hurry to break. The sun mounted higher and higher, and grew hot. At length the mysterious stranger drew a parcel from his inner pocket. It was of no size, but carefully done up in waterproof wrappings.

“You have given me your word,” he said, “and you have kept it—I mean as to having met me at all. You can account for your escape, as may occur to you, but no word, no hint about me. Another condition I must impose upon you, and that is that you take no further part in the fighting here, but proceed straight to England, and deliver the contents of this packet in the quarter whither they are addressed. But the packet is not to be opened until you are on English soil. Do you agree?”

“Most certainly. Why, I owe you everything, even life.”

“Even life, as you say. And not even to the girl you love must you divulge the knowledge of my existence—the secrets between man and man are just as inviolable as those between man and woman. Well, you will be taken under safe guidance—absolutely safe, have no fear—to Ezulwini, but you will have to travel by byways, and therefore slowly. You see, I have watched every step you have taken ever since you came into the country, because I had marked you down as the one man who could carry out my purpose, and you will do it. Now, if you are rested, you can take this horse, and Mandevu will guide you to where you will find an efficient escort.”

“But—I can’t talk very well. And then, if we are attacked by a white force, what then? I only ask so as to know what to do.”

“Neither matters, and you will not be attacked. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then farewell. We shall never meet again, but I know you will carry out everything.”

“That I will. Good-bye.”

They clasped hands, and as Denham rode away from the spot he wondered whether he had been dreaming. At the top of the rise he looked back. The other had disappeared.

“Come, *Nkose!*” said Mandevu, his tall form striding on in front at the pace of the horse’s fast walk.

Chapter Thirty.

“Curtain.”

The Nodwengu Hotel at Ezulwini was in such a state of turn-out and general excitement as had never occurred within the walls of that not very antique establishment. The big central room, ordinarily used for concerts or dances or public meetings, was crammed with laid-out tables wherever a plate and knife and fork could be crowded in, while the smaller one, the dining-room under conditions of everyday life, was entirely handed over to the bottle department. All this, however, did not herald a royal visit—only a wedding.

“See here, Mrs Shelford,” said Denham, looking in for a moment upon the scene, where the pretty and popular hostess was seeing to this, that and the other with all her characteristic thoroughness. “You’ll have no time to get into that exceedingly fetching frock I caught a glimpse of the other day if you don’t leave all this to somebody else.”

“Oh yes, I shall. But you know what I told you the day you came—you can’t leave everything to Kafirs. By the way, I suppose you’ve had enough of the Kafirs now?”

“For a time, yes. But—I think they’re interesting. Sapazani, for instance?” waggishly.

“The brute! Good thing he was shot. Well, I suppose we shall never see you out here again.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Didn’t I find Verna here—right here, in this very house? And isn’t that why I in particular wanted her married here, among the people she knows, and who know her, rather than in Durban or some other strange place?”

“Yes, you did find her here, didn’t you? Well, now, Mr Denham, you’ve no business here yourself this morning—until you come back in state. So go away now till then.”

“No fear,” said a jovial voice in the doorway. “Mr Denham’s coming round to have a glass with myself and some of his old fellow-campaigners, round the corner.”

“Look here, Mr Shelford, remember the serious business sticking out,” said Denham merrily.

“And as for the campaigners, all the campaigning I seem to have done was to slink away and hide.”

“Yes, of course. But they’ve a different tale to tell. But if you don’t want to come you’ll better do the same now, because these chaps will get you there by force.”

“Oh well, I can’t afford to offer resistance to the police, so here goes.”

The bar was crowded, mostly with police. Denham’s arrival was hailed with a shout of acclamation, and he and his bride were duly toasted with a good-fellowship which, if a bit noisy, was still genuinely sincere. These fine fellows were all due to start for the seat of hostilities again that evening, but, if some of them were a bit “wobbly” now, they would be all right, and fit, and hard as ever, when the time came, never fear.

From that lively scene to the quiet of the hospital was a strange contrast. Denham slipped away opportunely and soon, for he had a visit to make.

“How’s Stride to-day, doctor?” meeting the District surgeon at the entrance.

“Going on slowly, but well. Don’t excite him, will you?”

“No; I think he’d like to say good-bye. What do you think?”

“As long as he doesn’t get excited,” was the rather dubious answer. “Come along.”

The hospital at Ezulwini was rather full just then with victims of the rebellion, still in full swing, and the nurses were busy morning, noon and night. Everything about the place was so bright and cheerful that the casual visitor almost wanted to be an inmate for a time. Even the operating-room looked inviting, and more suggestive of cool drinks than of bloodshed. Not here was it, however, that they were to find Harry Stride.

“Well, Stride, old chap, how are you getting on?” said Denham, taking the sick man’s listless hand.

“Oh, I don’t know; they say I’ll pull through, but I’m taking a darn long time about it. And I wanted to go and pump some more lead into those swine, and it’ll be all over while I’m lying here.”

“Well, better be lying here than lying *there*,” said Denham,

“Right-oh! And that’s where I should be lying if it hadn’t been for you,” answered the other earnestly.

“Oh, that’s all in the tug-of-war,” rejoined Denham. “We don’t count that at all. You’d have done the same for me—we’d all have done the same for each other, of course. But I couldn’t clear out without saying good-bye, and seeing how you were getting on.”

“You’re awfully good, Denham; but I don’t believe I should have done the same if the positions were reversed.”

“Yes, you would. And look here, Stride, you needn’t think that I haven’t sympathised with you all through. How could I have helped doing so from the very circumstances themselves?”

Stride was silent for a few moments. Then he said—

"I believe I've behaved like a cur, Denham. If you really did what we—what I suspected, I'm certain that you were justified. Since I've been lying here I've been thinking things over."

"Well, in that case you may take it from me that it was justified," answered Denham gravely.

"I'll swear it was. Well, it's awfully good of you to find time to look in upon me this morning of all days, and I appreciate it."

Denham was moved.

"Look here," he said, dropping his hand upon that of the other, "I must go now, time presses. But, Stride, old chap, I want you to promise me something, and that is that if ever you are in want of a friend you will remember you have the best of that article here. For instance, prospecting is precarious work, and, I'm told, often very hand-to-mouth. Now, I happen to be one of those fortunate people who is frequently in a position to be of use to his fellow-creatures, and if ever you find yourself in any strait you must apply to me. There are often fairly comfortable bunks I can slide people into. Now, will you?"

"Yes, I will. You are awfully good, Denham."

"That's settled. So now good-bye, and don't get well until it's too late to go and get yourself half killed over again."

A hearty handshake, a pleasant nod and a smile, and Denham was gone. But Stride called him back.

"You'll give—her—my every good wish?"

"Certainly, old chap, certainly."

The arrival of the missing man had been a source of boundless surprise. How on earth had he, a stranger, been able to make his way across that long distance of hostile country? Why, it would have taxed to the uttermost the experience and resources of any one among themselves, was the consensus of opinion. The thing was a mystery, and at such Denham left it. He supposed he was born lucky and with a bump of topography, was how he accounted for it in his easy-going way. But never by word or hint did he let drop anything as to the real agency which had got him through, not even to Verna.

And she? Well, to-day was her wedding day.

The pretty little church at Ezulwini was crammed. Sub-Inspector Dering, incidentally due to leave for the seat of war that evening, acted best man, and subsequently, at the big spread at the Nodwengu Hotel, in the course of his speech pointed out that having helped to "kill" one good man that morning he was due to go off and get another good man killed, himself to wit, that evening, but that he deserved for coming in too late to pick the combination of rose and lily of the whole country for himself; which hit evoked vast laughter and applause, and the festivities flowed on.

"Father," said Verna, in the interval before leaving. "Father, dear old father, what will you do without me? Shall you go back home or what?"

Her tears were falling as she held him round the neck, gazing wistfully into the strong, weather-beaten face, which in spite of her present great happiness it wrung her heart to realise she should see no more, at any rate, for some time to come.

"No, not yet, anyhow. I shall go and take part in this scuffle," he answered. "Perhaps, later on, I'll come and help knock over some of Denham's pheasants in the old country, if he's agreeable."

"If he's agreeable? What's that, Halse?" repeated Denham, who had just then come in. "Why, the sooner you like, the sooner the better for us. Come now. We'll have a jolly voyage all together."

"No; I'll see this scrap through first," was the trader's reply, given with characteristic terseness. "Later on, perhaps."

Then there was a tremendous "send off," and thereafter the bulk of Ezulwini—male—spent the rest of the day and evening proposing the healths of the departed bride and bridegroom.

Chapter Thirty One.

Envoi.

The leafy summer day was at its close—and Horlestone Manor was in one of the leafiest parts of leafy England. Through its cool gardens in the cloudless sunset strolled two people.

"I wonder if you'll ever long for the good old wild surroundings among all this tameness, darling," one of them was saying.

"Tameness! Why, it's Paradise!"

"Paradise! Wait until you see it in winter. You'll yearn for the Lumisana when you're shivering with three feet of snow piled up round the house."

"No, I won't. If I do I'll go and stare at the big koodoo head and the *indhlonhlo*. Let's have another look at them now."

They strolled through the passage that led to Denham’s large and spacious museum. The great head looked down upon them from a prominent space, where it was throned all by itself. Beneath hung an inscription—

“Shot by Verna Denham,
Lumisana Forest, Zululand.”

Then the date.

“We shall have to turn that inscription face to the wall if James or Hallam or Downes come to give us their promised look-up,” laughed Denham.

“Oh, we’ll tell them to look the other way.” Then, growing serious: “Strange how so many of the things here should have been instrumental in bringing us our life’s happiness. It was through them we came together.”

“It was, thank God,” he rejoined, equally serious.

Finis.

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