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Author: Bertram Mitford

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE WHIRL OF THE RISING ***

Bertram Mitford

"In the Whirl of the Rising"

Prologue.

"You coward!"

The word cut crisply and sharp through the clear frosty air, lashing and keen as the wind that stirred the crystal-spangled pines, and the musical ring of skate-blades upon the ice-bound surface of the mere. She who uttered it stood, her flower-like face and deep blue eyes all a-quiver with contemptuous disgust. He to whom it was addressed, started, blenched ever so slightly, his countenance immediately resuming its mask of bronze impassibility. Those who heard it echoed it, secretly or in deep and angry mutter, the while proceeding with their task—to wit, the restoring of animation to a very nearly drowned human being, rescued, at infinite risk, from the treacherous spring hole which had let him through the surface of the ice.

"Say it again," was the answer. "It is such a kind and pleasant thing to hear, coming from you. So just, too. Do say it again."

"I will say it again," went on the first speaker; and, exasperated by the bitter sneering tone of the other, her voice rang out high and clear, "You coward!"

Piers Lamont's dark face took on a change, but it expressed a sneer as certain retrospective pictures rose before his mental gaze. Such indeed, in his case, drew the sting of about the most stinging epithet that lips can frame; yet, remembering that the lips then framing it were those of the girl with whom he was passionately in love, and to whom he had recently become engaged, it seemed to hurt.

"Say something. Oh, do say something!" she went on, speaking quickly. "The boy might have been drowned, and very nearly was, while you stood, with your hands in your pockets, looking on."

"If your people see fit to throw open the mere to the rabble, the rabble must take care of itself," he answered. "I daresay I can risk my life, with an adequate motive. That—isn't one."

The words, audible to many of the bystanders, the contemptuous tone, and nod of the head in the direction of the ever-increasing group on the bank, deepened the prevailing indignation. Angry murmurs arose, and some "booing." Perhaps the presence of the Squire's daughter alone restrained this demonstration from taking a more active form of hostility; or it may even have been a something in the hard, bronzed face and firm build of the man who had just been publicly dubbed "coward."

"For shame!" hotly retorted the girl. "I have no wish to talk to you any more, or ever again. Please go."

He made no reply. Lifting his hat ceremoniously he turned away. A few yards' glide brought him to the bank. He sat down, deliberately removed his skates, lit a cigar, then started upon his way; the no-longer restrained jeers which followed him falling upon his ears with no other effect than to cause him to congratulate himself upon having given others the opportunity of performing the feat from which he had refrained.

The subject of all this disturbance was showing signs of restoration to life and consciousness. Seen in the midst of the gaping—and for the most part useless—crowd which hemmed him in, he was an urchin of about thirteen or fourteen, with a debased type of countenance wherein the characteristics of the worst phase of guttersnipe—low cunning, predatoriness, boundless impudence, and aggressive brutality—showed more than incipient. Such a countenance was it, indeed, as to suggest that the rescue of its owner from a watery death went far to prove the truth of a certain homely proverb relating to hanging and drowning. And now, gazing upon it, Violet Courtland was conscious of an unpleasant truth in those last words spoken by her *fiancé*. She was forced to own to herself that the saving of this life assuredly was not worth the risking of his. Yet she had implored him to do something towards the rescue, and he had done nothing. He had replied that there was nothing to be done; had stood, calmly looking on while others had risked their lives, he fearing for his. Yes, *fearing*. It looked like that.

And yet—and yet! She knew but little of his past, except what he had told her. She had taken him on trust. He had led something of an adventurous life in wild parts of Africa. Two or three times, under pressure, he had told of an adventurous incident, wherein assuredly he himself had not played a coward's part. Yet the recollection so far from

clearing him in her estimation produced a contrary effect, and her lips curled as she decided that he had merely been bragging on these occasions; that if the events had happened at all they must have happened to somebody else. For, when all was said and done, he had shown himself a coward in her sight. Her hastily formed judgment stood—if anything—stronger than before. And—she was engaged to marry a coward!

With a sad sinking of heart she left the spot, and, avoiding all escort or companionship, took her way homeward alone. The short winter afternoon was waning, and a red afterglow was already fast fading into the grey of dusk. Against it the chimney stacks of Courtland Hall stood silhouetted blackly, while farther down, among the leafless and frost spangled tree-tops, the old church-tower stood square and massive.

It was Christmas Eve, and now the bells in the tower rang out in sudden and tuneful chime, flinging their merry peal far and wide over leafless woodland and frozen meadow. They blended, too, with the ring of belated blades on the ice-bound mere behind, and the sound of voices mellowed by distance. To this girl, now hurrying along the field path, her little skates dangling from her wrist, but for the events of the last half-hour how sweet and hallowed and homelike it would all have been; glorified, too, by the presence of *one*! Now, anger, disgust, contempt filled her mind; and her heart was aching and sore with the void of an ideal cast out.

One was there as she struck into the garden path leading up to the terrace. He was pacing up and down smoking a cigar.

“Well?” he said, turning suddenly upon her. “Well, and have you had time to reconsider your very hastily expressed opinion?”

“It was not hastily expressed. It was deliberate,” she replied quickly. “I have no words for a coward. I said that before.”

“Yes, you said that before—for the amusement of a mob of grunting yokels, and an odd social equal or two. And now you repeat it. Very well. Think what you please. It is utterly immaterial to me now and henceforward. I will not even say good-bye.”

He walked away from her in the other direction, while she passed on. A half impulse was upon her to linger, to offer him an opportunity of explanation. Somehow there was that about his personality which seemed to belie her judgment upon him. But pride, perversity, superficiality of the deductive faculty, triumphed. She passed on without a word.

The hour was dark for Piers Lamont—dark indeed. He was a hardened man, and a strong-willed one, but now he needed all his hardness, all his strength. He had loved this girl passionately and almost at first sight, secretly and at a distance for some time before accident had brought about their engagement, now a matter of three months’ duration. And she had returned his love in full, or had seemed to, until this disastrous afternoon. And now his sense of justice was cruelly outraged, and that he felt as if he could never forgive. Moreover, his was one of those natures to which an occurrence of this kind was like chipping a piece out of a perfect and valuable vase or statue. The piece may be restored, but, however skilfully such be done, the rift remains, the object is no longer perfect. It is probable that at that moment he felt more bitterly towards Violet than she did towards him, which is saying a great deal. He had been rudely thrown out of his fool’s paradise, and with grim resolution he must accept the position and live down the loss. But the flower-like face, and the deep blue eyes which had brimmed up at him with love, and the soft, wavy brown hair which had pillowed against his breast in restful trust—could he ever tear the recollection from his mind? Pest take those jangling Christmas bells though, cleaving the night with their mockery of peace and good-will!

“Here, Violet. What the dickens is the meaning of this?” said her father, an hour or two later, as he met her going upstairs to dress for dinner. “Here’s Lamont cleared at a moment’s notice, without the civility even to say good-bye. Leaves this,”—holding out an open letter—“saying he’s been called away on urgent business—a qualified lie you know, because no one does business on Christmas Day, and it’s nearly that now—and won’t be able to return; may have to go abroad immediately; and all the stock balderdash men write under the circumstances; though how they imagine anybody is going to be such an idiot as to believe them, I can’t make out. Now, *you* are at the back of all this. Had a row?”

“Oh, I don’t care to talk about it,” she said, with a movement as though to pass on.

“But you must care to talk about it, my dear girl; at any rate for my satisfaction. You had to consult me, didn’t you, in order to bring about this engagement? and now if you’ve thrown the man over—and it looks deucedly as if you had—I’ve a right to know why. Here—come in here.”

Squire Courtland was by no means of the type usually described as “one of the old school,” except in so far that he was very much master in his own house. For the rest, he prided himself on being exceedingly up-to-date—and his estimate of woman was almost savage in its cynicism. Between himself and Violet there was an utter lack of sympathy; resulting, now that she was grown up, in an occasional and very unpleasant passage of arms.

“If I’ve thrown the man over!” quoted Violet angrily, when they were alone in her father’s own private ‘den,’ “of course you are sure to take his part.”

“I must know what ‘his part’ is before taking it or not. You women always expect us to hang a man first and try him afterwards; or rather to hang him on your sweet evidence alone, and not try him at all.”

“Oh, father, please don’t talk to me in that horrid tone,” restraining with vast effort the paroxysm of sobbing which threatened, and which she knew would only irritate him. “I am not feeling so extra happy, I can tell you.”

“Well, get it over then. What has Lamont done?”

“I can’t marry a coward.”

“Eh? A coward? Lamont? Have you taken leave of your senses, girl?”

“Well, listen. You shall hear,” she said crisply. And then she gave him an account of the whole affair.

“Is that all?” he said when she had done.

“All?”

“Yes. All?”

“Yes, it is. I don’t see what more there could be. I urged him to try and save the boy, and he refused. Refused!”

“And, by the Lord, he was right!” cried the Squire. “The answer he gave you was absolutely the right one, my child. If it had been yourself you’d have seen how he’d have gone in, but for a man of Lamont’s strong common-sense to go and throw away his life for a gallows’ brat that has only been fished out of the mere to be hanged later on in due course—why, I’m glad he’s justified the good opinion I had of him.”

“Then, father, you think he was justified in refusing to save life under any circumstances?” said Violet, very white and hard. There was no fear of her breaking down now. The fact of her father siding so entirely with her cast-off lover was as a tonic. It hardened and braced her.

“Certainly I do. He gave you the right answer, and on your own showing you insulted him—taking advantage of being a woman—several times over, for the fun of a squalid rabble that I am fool enough to allow to come and disport themselves on my property; but I’ll have them all cleared off tomorrow. Coward, indeed! Lamont a coward! No—no. That won’t do. I know men too well for that.”

“Then he was a brute instead,” retorted Violet, lashing herself into additional anger, as a dismal misgiving assailed her that she might have made a hideous and lifelong error of judgment. “A coldblooded, calculating brute, and that’s just as bad.”

“I don’t fancy you’ll get many to agree with you as to the last, my dear. Any man would rather be a brute than a coward,” said the Squire sneeringly. “And every man is a brute in the eyes of a woman if he doesn’t lie down flat and let her waltz over him, or fetch and carry, and cringe like a well-trained water-spaniel. Well, that’s neither here nor there. You’ve been engaged to a strong, level-headed, sensible man—one of the most sensible I’ve ever known—and you’ve publicly insulted him and thrown him over for no adequate cause whatever, I suppose if ever I see him again I shall have to apologise to him for the way he’s been treated.”

Violet could hardly contain herself throughout this peroration.

“Apologise to him?” she flashed. “Good Heavens! if the man went down on his knees to me, after what has happened, I wouldn’t look at him.”

“Well, you’re not likely to get the chance. Lamont is no such imbecile as to embark on any silliness of that kind. You’ve had such a chance as you’ll never get again, and you’ll live to regret it, mark me.”

The girl went from her father’s presence in a whirlwind of passion, but—it was mixed. Inwardly she raged against him for not sympathising with—not applauding her action. He had thrown another light upon the matter; hard, cynical, even brutal, but—still another light. And the sting lay in his last words. She would live to regret it, he had said. Why, she regretted it already.

Chapter One.

The Mopani Forest.

The man could hardly drag one step behind the other. He could hardly drag by the bridle the tottering horse, of which the same held good.

His brain was giddy and his eyes wearied with the unvarying vista on every hand, the straight stems of the mopani forest, enclosing him; a still and ghastly wilderness devoid of bird or animal life. He stumbled forward, his lips blue and cracked, his tongue swollen, his throat on fire; and in his mind was blank and utter despair, for he knew that he was in the heart of a waterless tract, extending for about a hundred miles, and for over forty hours no drop of moisture of any sort had passed his lips. Forty hours of wandering in the driest, most thirst-inspiring region in the world!

He had made a bad start. There had been festivities at Fort Pagadi the night before, to celebrate the Jameson Raid and drink the health of its leaders. In these he had participated to the full—very much to the full. He had started at daybreak with a native guide, a headache, and a thirst which a brace of long and early brandies-and-sodas had failed entirely to quench. He had started, too, with another concomitant incidental to these latter—a very bad temper, to wit; wherefore, the native guide proving irritatingly dull of comprehension, he leaned from the saddle and cuffed him; which proceeding that aboriginal resented by decamping on the first opportunity.

Then he should have gone back, but he did not. He took short cuts instead. This was the more idiotic as he was rather new to the country, to this actual section of it entirely so. In short, it is hardly surprising that in the logical result he should have found himself lost—irretrievably ‘turned round’; and now, after two days and a night of wandering to and fro, and round and round, in futile, frantic efforts to extricate himself from that fatal net, here he was hardly able to drag himself or his horse four hundred yards farther, the nearest water being anything between thirty and fifty miles away.

The scant shade of the mopani foliage afforded little protection from the sun, and even if it had, the oven-like atmosphere engendered by the burnt, cracked soil would have neutralised such. He had tried climbing trees in order to try and get some sort of bearings. As well might a swimmer in mid-ocean rise to the crest of a wave, hoping to descry a landmark. The smooth, regular expanse of bluish-grey leafage stretched away unbroken, in whatever direction he might turn his eager despairing gaze; and he had got stung by ants, and had wasted a deal of much needed vitality in the effort. That was all, and now he had not even the strength to climb half a tree if his life had depended upon it. Even an unlooked-for stumble on the part of the horse he was leading dragged him flat on his back, jerking at the same time the bridle from his hand.

“Come here, you infernal loathly brute!” he snarled, making an effort to recover the rein. But for some reason, instinct perhaps, the horse backed away, just keeping beyond reach.

He glared at the animal with hatred, not altogether unreasonable. For when he had been travelling about four hours, and was uneasily beginning to realise that he was lost, he had unslung his vulcanite water-bottle—which nobody travelling up-country should ever be without—and had placed it on the ground while off-saddling. But something had startled the stupid brute, which in its blundering, foolish plunges had put its foot clean through that indispensable receptacle, of course shattering it like an eggshell, and spilling every drop of the contents on the thirsty, sucking soil. He had intended, when the worst came to the worst, to kill the animal, and assuage his torturing thirst with the draught of its blood; and the worst *had* come to the worst.

Some instinct must have lurked within that stupid brain, for now neither cursing nor coaxing, tried alternately, would induce the horse to come within reach. Exhausted as it was, it would still slue round, jerking the bridle away with every attempt to seize it. Once, in desperation, he seized a stirrup leather, hoping to gain the saddle that way, and recover the bridle-rein, only to result in a nasty fall against a mopani stem.

Hideous and thick were the curses which oozed from the swollen lips of the despairing man, as he saw even this last chance of life—loathsome, revolting as it was—reft from him. He had no firearms; his six-shooter he had left for repairs at Fort Pagadi, and not being able to find the smith at the early hour of his start, with characteristic impatience he had come on without it: otherwise the difficulty would have been settled then and there. But as he resumed his stumbling way, the horse, apparently appreciating human companionship in that wild solitude, continued to follow him, though persistently defying all effort to secure it.

He glanced upward. The sun was throwing long rays now along the tree-tops. Another night would soon be here, bringing with it, however, no abatement of heat and thirst and torment—Ah! h!

The deep-drawn, raucous sigh that escaped the man can hardly be conveyed. In front the trees were thinning. There was light beyond. The road, of course! He had reached the road again, which he should never have left. There it would be hard but that some traveller or transport rider should find him, even if he had not the strength to drag himself on to the nearest human habitation.

With renewed strength, which he thought had left him for ever, he hurried forward. The line of light grew lighter. The trees ended. No road was this, but a stony dry *sluit*. It would run a torrent after a thunderstorm, but this was not the time of thunderstorms, wherefore now it was as dry as the hard rock that constituted its bed. The wretched wanderer uttered an exclamation that was half groan, half curse, but was expressive of the very acme of human despair.

He turned again to try and coax his horse within catching distance. But this time the animal threw up its head, snorted, and, with an energy he had not thought it still to possess, turned and trotted off into the depths of the mopani, its head in the air, and the bridle-rein swinging clear of the ground. With another awful curse the man fell forward on the baking earth, and lay, half in, half out of the line of trees which ended at the *sluit*.

He lay motionless. The sun was off the opening, fortunately for him, or its terrible focussed rays, falling on the back of his neck, would have ended his allotted time then and there. But—what was this? On the line of his track, moving towards him, shadows were stealing—two of them.

Shadows? They were like such, as they flitted from tree to tree—two evil-looking Makalaka—with their glistening bodies naked save for a skin *mútya* and a collar of wooden beads, with their smooth, shaven heads and broad noses and glistening eyeballs. And now each gripped more tightly an assegai and a native axe, as nearer and nearer, like gliding demons, they stole noiselessly upon the prostrate and exhausted white man.

The latter had not been so completely alone as he had supposed. Yard upon yard, mile upon mile, his footsteps had been dogged by these human—or hardly human—sleuth-hounds. Their ghoul-like exultation when they had discovered another lost white man, within what was to them as its web is to a spider, had known no bounds. *Another*! Yes. For more than one traveller had disappeared already within that trackless thirst-belt, never to be heard of again either in life or death.

To these, and such as these, this unfathomable tract of thirst-land was nothing. To the whisky-and-soda drinking Englishman, with his artificial wants, and general lack of resource and utter deficiency in the bump of locality, it was, as in the case of the one lying here, a tomb. To the lithe, serpentine savage, whose draught of water, and mess of coarse *impupu*, or mealie porridge—when he could get it—it was a joke. These two had learned this, and had turned it to account, even as they were about to turn it to account again. They had been on the spoor of the wanderer from the very first, with hardly more to eat or drink than he. But then, they had not started after spending a night toasting the Jameson Raid.

Now they looked at each other, and there was a complete inventory in each devilish glance. Summed up, it read: A suit of clothes; item a shirt, boots; item a revolver and a knife—which he was too exhausted and which they would not give him time to use; item a watch and chain—tradeable at some distant time and place; certainly some money—available immediately. The horse, too. They need not trouble about it now. They would find it easily enough afterwards, and then what a feast! Of a truth their Snake was favourable to them again!

There lay the victim—there lay the prey. Gliding like evil wood-demons from the edge of the trees they were over him now. One more glance exchanged. Each had got his rôle. The doomed man lay still, with eyes closed, and a churn of froth at the corners of the swollen lips. One slowly raised his axe to bring it down on the skull. The other gripped aloft his assegai. Both could not miss, and it was as well to provide against contingencies—when—

The fiend with the axe leapt high in the air, falling backward, then leaping half up again and performing a series of wondrous gyrations,—this simultaneously with a sharp crack from the cover opposite, on the farther side of the *sluit*,—shot fair and square and neatly through the head. The fiend with the assegai knew better than to waste time unprofitably by completing his stroke. He whirled round as on a pivot, darting within the friendly trees with the rapidity of a startled snake. But futilely. For one infinitesimal fraction of a second, Time decreed that that gliding, dark body should be in line with a certain slit-like vista in the mopani stems, and—Crack!—again. The second miscreant dropped, like a walking-stick you let fall on the pavement, and lay face downwards, arms outspread, motionless as his intended victim.

Then there was silence again in the mopani forest, where lay three motionless human bodies; dead silence, for—hours, it seemed. No; it was only minutes.

From among the trees lining the opposite side of the dry *sluit*, out of the burnt-up grass there now arose the figure of a man—a white man. He carried a .303 magazine rifle in his left hand, and a revolver of business-like size was slung

round him in a holster. He was rather tall than not, and loose hung; but from the moment he put down his foot to step forth from his cover, you could discern a sinewy elasticity of frame which it would take any two men's share of fatigue to overcome. His face was peculiar. Grey-bearded and high-nosed, it conveyed the impression of chronic whimsicality, especially just now, puckered with the chuckle which was convulsing its owner. But there was a steely clearness in the blue eyes, glancing straight from under the broad hat-brim, that you would rather not face looking at you from behind the sights of a rifle.

This curiously effective specimen of a guardian angel lounged across to the fellow-countryman whose life he had saved, and gazed down at the latter.

"Near go!" he ruminated. "Near a one as this Johnny Raw 'll ever have again. Why? 'Cause it couldn't be nearer. Good-looking feller whoever he is, but—he needn't know too much. Heave up—ho!" And laying hold of the heels of the savage he had first shot, he proceeded to haul the corpse of that assassin, to the accompaniment of very nautical-sounding cries, to a sufficient distance as to be invisible to the intended victim when the latter should wake to consciousness.

"No; he needn't know too much," he repeated, returning to the sufferer. "Now then, mister, wake up and have a pull at this."

"This" being a substantial water-bottle. Presumably there was something magnetic in its inviting gurgle—for the hitherto unconscious man opened his eyes, stared, then half leaping up made a wild snatch at the bottle.

"*Gahle—gahle*!" said the other, "and that means 'no hurry.' A little at a time is what'll meet your case. Here you are;" and he filled him out a small measure. But so tremulous were the sufferer's hands with eagerness and weakness combined that he spilled half its contents.

"That won't do, sonny. This stuffs too valuable till we get clear of the mopani belt. Here—give it to me." And he held it to the other's lips.

"More—more."

"No; that's enough to go on with. Well—a little more, then. Now, pull yourself together and come along with me. What? Starving? Oh ay. Well, chew at this chunk o' biscuit. It ain't soft tack but it's better than nothing, and I'm too old a sailor—prospector, I mean—to be navigating these seas without a shot in the locker."

The other munched fiercely at the brown, uninviting bit of biscuit. His succourer looked approvingly on.

"That's right," he said. "Now we'll serve out some more water. Then I'll put you on my horse—he's anchored t'other side of the *sluit*—and we'll shape a course for my donkey-carts. They're out-spanned on the road."

"The road? Are we near the road?" stammered the other.

"Mile or so. But keep your tongue down, sonny, until we get there. You don't want to talk a lot till you've had some proper skoff."

Chapter Two.

A Pioneer Farm.

The walls of the room were hung with dark blue "limbo," which gave an impression of refreshing coolness and restful, subdued light, in grateful contrast to the hot, white glare outside. The furniture of the room was pre-eminently of the useful order, consisting of a plain 'stinkwood' table, three or four ditto chairs much the worse for wear, a sideboard consisting of two packing-cases knocked into one, a bookshelf, and a camp bedstead whereon now reclined the, at present, sole occupant and—in general—proprietor of the place.

He had been indulging in a siesta, which had run into hours. The naturally dark face was tanned a rich brown by the up-country sun and winds, and it was just the face that the up-country life would go to strengthen—with its firm eyes and square, determined chin. As now seen it was clear that the thoughts of its owner were not of a pleasant nature. Briefly, they might be summed up somewhat in this wise—

"Is that foolery destined to haunt me for the remainder of my natural life? I shut it down and turned my back on it more than a year ago—and yet, and yet, I can't even take an afternoon snooze without dreaming all that idiocy over again."

The jaded lassitude usually attendant on immediately awakening out of a day sleep to those who seldom indulge in one was upon this man. Moreover, the last vision of his dreams had been one of a lovely, reproachful face—a recollection of a bitter parting and love turned to hate; a rehearsal of the whole heart-breaking experience, reproduced with that vivid reality which a dream can infuse. All of which hardly conduced to a cheerful frame of mind.

"Wonder when Peters will be back," ran on his reflections. "He said this evening. Peters is a most effectual antidote to the blues, and— By the way, there's nothing much for skoff. I'd better take a look round 'the poultry yard.'"

With a yawn he rose from the couch and stood upright. His erect, firmly-knit form was well set off by the prevailing costume of the country, namely, a light shirt, breeches and gaiters, and leather belt. He flung on the usual broad-brimmed cowboy hat, and, taking a gun and a handful of cartridges, stood in the doorway for a moment, looking forth.

The glare of the hot hours was already toning off into that exquisitely soft and mellow light, where afternoon merges into the African evening. He looked forth upon an expanse of park-like country, rolling away from his very door. Three or four great granite kopjes rose farther on, and, beyond these, a dark line, extending as far as the eye could reach, marked the margin of a vast forest tract. Taking a few steps forward he turned. Here an entirely different scene was before his gaze. Behind the rude house of plaster and thatch, from which he had just emerged, was a large circular enclosure, stockaded with mopani poles and thorny mimosa boughs, while another and smaller stockade, similarly constructed,

enclosed several conical huts. He had laughed at his native servants when they had urged the necessity of building such a stockade. Lions? Hyenas? Why, no wild animal would venture inside a hut. Look at his own house. It was not stockaded. To which they had replied in true native fashion that that might be so. The *Inkosi* was a very great and powerful white man, but they were only poor helpless black men; and, moreover, that wild animals *had* been known to take people out of their huts. So he had laughed and let them have their way.

Such was Piers Lamont's pioneer farm in Matabeleland. It had been granted him by reason of his services during the war of occupation in '93, and he had sold it—for a song—when he wanted a run home. He had bought it back—very much on the same terms—a few months previously, on his return to the old up-country life.

"Ho, Zingela!" he called.

"*Nkose*!" and a young native appeared from the enclosure containing the conical huts. He was tall and slim, and straight as a dart, and had a pleasing face.

"Come with me," said Lamont, speaking the Sindabele very fairly; "I am going down to the river bank to collect a few birds for the pot. You shall carry them."

"*Nkose*!" sung out the boy with great heartiness.

The South African native is a born sportsman, and if there is a service congenial to him it is the participation, even vicariously, in any form of sport.

They strolled leisurely down among the tree-stems by the river bank. The francolin, or bush pheasant, whirred up out of the tall tambuti grass one or two at a time. Crack! crack! went the gun, and in less than half an hour Lamont's cartridges, of which he had taken ten, were exhausted, and Zingela was carrying nine birds as they retraced their steps homeward.

"Cook them all, Zingela. The other *Inkosi* will be home to-night, and will be hungry." Then as the boy, with a murmur of assent, withdrew, Lamont dropped into one of the cane chairs on the low stoep, beneath the projecting verandah of thatch, and lit a pipe.

The sun sank lower and lower, and the evening light became more golden and entrancing. It was an hour and a scene to promote meditation, retrospection, and he did not want retrospection. Still it was there. Like most things we don't want, it would intrude. The influence of his recent dream was still upon him, and from it there was no getting away.

Rather more than a year ago, and Violet Courtland had indignantly, and in public, branded him as a coward. He had striven to put the incident from his mind and her and her recollection from his life—and had mostly succeeded. There were times when her recollection would be forced back upon him, though such occasions were becoming rarer and their effect fainter. Every occasion of the kind had been succeeded by a fierce reaction of vindictive rancour against one who could so have misjudged him, and so would this. Yet it was more vivid, more saturating, than any of them.

"Not if she went on her knees to me would I ever forgive her that one thing," he would say fiercely to himself on the occasion of such reactions, thus unconsciously paraphrasing the very words that had been said about him, more than a year ago, and upwards of seven thousand miles away. And there would occur to him the idea that life here was too easy, too stagnant. Yet he had not had things all his own way. The dread scourge which had swept steadily down from the north had not spared him; that rinderpest which had decimated his neighbours' cattle, as well as that of the natives, had decimated—was still decimating—his own. Even this, however, could not avail to afford him the anxiety which might constitute the one nail destined to drive out the other; for its ravages, however much they might spell loss, and serious loss, could never to him spell utter ruin, as was the case with some others.

Now a sound of distant lowing, and the occasional clear shout of the driver, told that his own herd was being driven in for the night; and then the calves which had already been brought in woke up, in responsive bellow, to greet the approaching herd. Lamont rose and went round to the kraal. Here was a possible source of anxiety, and narrowly and eagerly did he scan the animals as they passed him, lest haply he might discern symptoms of the dread pestilence. But none appeared, nor did a closer investigation as he moved about within the kraal show further cause for anxiety. So preoccupied was he with this that he entirely failed to notice the approach of a horseman in the growing dusk, until the circumstance was brought to his notice by the sharp crack of a whip and a cheery hail.

"Evenin', Lamont."

"Peters, by George! Well, I said you'd be back to-night. You're as punctual as a jolly clock, old man."

The speaker was outside the gate now, and the two men exchanged a cordial hand-grip.

"Jolly glad you are back too," he went on. "I've got on a fit of holy blues to-night."

"Oh well, then, it's a good job I've brought along a chum. He'll help liven you."

"A chum? Where is he?"

"With the carts. They're about at the three-mile *draai* now. His horse knocked out. This was the way of it," went on Peters, who, having off-saddled his own mount and handed it over to a boy, led the way to the house. "You know Fuliya's bend on the Pagadi road. No, you don't? Well, no matter. Here's luck, old man."

Down went two long tumblers of whisky-and-selzogene.

"We'll have another when the other chap turns up," said Peters, with a jolly laugh. "Well, as I was saying, just before I got to that bend I saw two ugly Makalakas cross the road."

"Nothing wonderful in that. Most likely they only wanted to get to the other side," said Lamont slily.

"Eh? Oh, I see. Well they did, of course. They dived into the mopani. But, you know, they gave me the idea of being

up to some devilment. They didn't see me neither, and they had axes and assegais, but of course it was none of my business if they were going to stick or hack some other nigger, so I just rode on. A mile or so farther, just the other side of a dry *sluit*, I saw a brand-new bush-buck spoor leading into the mopani. I could do with some fresh meat just then—dead sick of 'bully'—so started to see if I could get near enough to him with the .303. Well I didn't. I saw something else that drove the other clean out of my head. On the opposite side of the *sluit* from me a man staggered out from the trees—a white man—and fell. 'That's what those two devils were up to, was it,' I thought. They'd assegaied him from behind, and would be here in a minute to collect the plunder. You know, Lamont, more than one white man has disappeared in that mopani belt, but it's always been put down to thirst."

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, I just dropped down in the tambuti grass, and wormed forward to where I could see over a bit o' rock. Then I drew a careful bead on the exact spot where the nigger would stand to finish off the chap, and—by the Lord!—there the nigger was, with an axe all ready in his fist. In about a second he had skipped his own length in the air, and was prancing about on the ground. He'd got it through the head, you see."

"Good! Did the other show up?"

"Didn't he? They showed up together. He cleared. But he was too late. I got him too."

"Good old right and left! Well done, Peters! And the white man—who was he, and was he badly damaged?"

"He wasn't damaged at all. But he'd have been dead of thirst before night, even if the niggers had never sighted him. He's a Johnny Raw, and he'd been drawing sort of figures of eight all about that mopani patch for the last forty-eight hours. I didn't tell him there'd been any shootin', or any niggers at all, and ain't going to. That sounds like the carts," as the noise of wheels and whip cracking drew nearer and nearer. "Yes; it is."

As the carts drew up, Lamont went back into the room for a moment to get something he had left. When he turned, a tall figure stood in the doorway framed against the darkness beyond.

"Lamont—isn't it?"

This was a fairly familiar method of address from a perfect stranger, even in a land of generally prevailing free-and-easiness, and Lamont stiffened.

"Let me see, I know the voice," he said, staring at the new arrival. "But—"

The other laughed.

"Thought I'd give you a little surprise," he said. "I'm Ancram. We were staying at Courtland together, don't you remember?"

"Oh yes—perfectly. Come in. I didn't recognise you at first because—er—"

"I haven't had a shave for a week," supplemented the other, with an easy laugh. "Well, we can put that right now."

"It did make a difference certainly. Well, and how are you, Ancram?"

"Hallo!" sung out Peters, appearing at the door. "Brought off your surprise yet, Ancram? He said I wasn't to give away his name, Lamont, because he wanted to spring a surprise on you. Ha-ha!"

Chapter Three.

Taking in the Stranger.

Decidedly Lamont had had a surprise sprung upon him. Whether it was an agreeable one or not is another matter.

His greeting of the new arrival was polite rather than cordial; even pleasant, but not spontaneous. There was a vast difference in his handshake here to that wherewith he had welcomed Peters, for instance; nor did he use the formula, "Glad to see you." Ancram noticed this, and so did Peters.

Lamont was nothing if not downright, and would never say a thing he did not mean. Peters knew this, wherefore he began to feel mightily uncomfortable, and wished he hadn't brought the stranger along. But then Ancram had asked him point-blank if he could tell him where to find Lamont, who was a friend of his, and whom he had heard was settled somewhere in these parts; and he had received the question with a great roar of laughter, replying that no man in all Rhodesia was more fully qualified to give him that very information. But if this outsider's presence was going to prove a thorn in the side of his friend,—rather than do anything to annoy whom he would have cut off his right hand,—why, the sooner they scooted him off the better, decided Peters. Aloud he said—

"Here's luck, Ancram. What would you have given for this jolly long drink when you were strolling about in the *doorstland*, hey?"

"Just about all I was worth," laughed the other, sending down the remains of his whisky-and-selzogene with infinite gusto.

"I'm afraid you'll find these quarters a bit rough, Ancram," said Lamont. "New country, you know, and all that kind of thing."

The other protested that he liked nothing better than roughing it, and how awfully jolly it was to run against Lamont again. But even he was conscious of a something which restrained him from making further reference to Courtland.

Outwardly Ancram was a tall, well-built fellow, several years younger than Lamont. He was good-looking, but the face was one of a very ordinary type, with nothing about it to stamp itself upon the recollection. As a fellow-guest at Courtland, Lamont had rather disliked him for his own sake, and still more because he had tried to get between himself and Violet. Moreover, Ancram had been among those who muttered against him on the bank of the frozen mere what time his *fiancée* had put upon him that abominable and unmerited insult. And now the fellow turned up here, claiming his hospitality, and talking to him as if he was his dearest friend.

"Excuse my seeming inhospitality, Ancram," he said. "I must go and help give an eye to the off-loading, but if you like to go in there you'll find all the ingredients for a wash-up. We shall have supper directly."

"Oh, that's quite all right, old chap," was the airy reply, "By the way, I'll come with you."

Outside, by the light of three or four lanterns, several natives were busily unloading the donkey-carts and transferring their contents to the strongly-built hut which constituted the store-room: bags and boxes, and pockets of sugar, and packages of candles and soap—all sorts of necessaries and a few luxuries.

"Aha!" laughed Peters, shaking one case; "was beginning to think this had been forgotten. What'd become of us then, hey, Ancram?"

"Why, what is it?"

"Scotch. Pother's Squareface. Well, we're nearly through now, and I shan't be sorry to get my champers into a steak of that sable."

"Well, you won't be able to," said Lamont. "There's none left. But I went down into 'the poultry yard' and picked up a few pheasants."

"We call the river bank our poultry yard, Ancram," explained Peters, when they were seated at table discussing the products of the same. "When we first came up here, Lamont and I, if we wanted a bird or two we just went to the door and shot it. Now you have to go away from the homestead a bit, but you can always get as many as you want. Are you fond of shooting?"

"Rather. I say, Lamont, d'you remember what jolly shoots we had at Courtland?"

"Are you fond of fighting, Ancram?" said Lamont.

The other stared. There was a grim directness in the question. Both were thinking the same thing. It seemed an odd question to be put by a man who had been publicly accused of cowardice. Its propounder was enjoying the other's confusion.

"Fighting?" echoed Ancram.

"Yes. Because if you are you've come to the right shop for it. You'll get plenty if you remain in the country, and that before very long too."

"Why? Who is there to fight?"

"The Matabele."

"But I thought they were all conquered—licked into a cocked hat."

"So did, so do, a lot of other people who ought to know better. But they're not. Let this rinderpest go a little further, and when the Government has shot a few more of their cattle—then we shall see."

"By Jove! I had no idea of that."

"Or you wouldn't have come," Lamont could not help appending. He had detected a note of consternation in Ancram's tone. And Ancram was one of those who had stood by and endorsed the accusation of cowardice hurled against himself.

"Oh yes, I would," answered the other, with rather a forced laugh. "But I say, Lamont, what about you two fellows—and others in a lonely place like this? Where would you come in?"

"Nowhere, unless we got wind and scooted in time. But that's just the difficulty."

"Phew! But don't you take any precaution?"

"Not any. We take our chance instead. Chance is the name of a very great god up-country, as you'll find out if you stop out here long."

"Well, it would be a jolly good job if we did have a war," rejoined Ancram airily. "Give us lots of fun. I should enjoy it."

Peters looked quickly up.

"Fun! Enjoy it!" he repeated. "D'you hear that, Lamont? Wonder how much *fun* he'd have voted it—how much he'd have *enjoyed* it—if he'd been along with us on the retreat from the Shangani."

"Oh, damn the retreat from the Shangani!" burst forth Lamont. "Ain't you sick of that sick old yarn yet, Peters? Because I am."

Ancram stared. There seemed nothing to warrant the ill-tempered outburst—unless— Ah, that was it. Lamont had hoisted the white feather in some way while on the expedition referred to, and of course was shy of hearing it mentioned.

But, strangely enough, Peters didn't seem to resent the tone or the brusque interruption. On the contrary he inclined to the apologetic.

"Oh, keep your hair on, Lamont," he answered deprecatingly. "You know, Ancram, I shouldn't be here now if it hadn't been for—"

"Will you have another whisky-and-selz, Ancram, or will you try some black tea?" interrupted Lamont, speaking quickly. "Can't offer you any milk with it because of the drought, except tinned, and that makes it entirely beastly."

"I should think so," answered Ancram, again wondering at the rudeness of the pointed interruption. "But isn't it the deuce on the nerves? Keeps you awake, and all that."

"In civilisation it would. Not up here. I've often, while lying out in camp, polished off three big beakers of it—black as ink, mind—and dropped off fast asleep when only half through my first pipe."

"By Jove! that knocks a good old superstition endways, anyway."

"Good job if they were all knocked endways. Now here's another—" And then Lamont, fastening on to another topic proceeded to thresh it out, and, in fact, for him, became quite voluble, so much so that Peters could not have got a word in edgeways even if he had wanted to, which he did not. At him Ancram stole more than one glance, expecting to descry an offended look. But he descried nothing of the sort. Peters went on placidly with his supper, nodding occasional assent to the other's remarks. But Lamont had got what he wanted; he had got clean away from the retreat from the Shangani. There was no possibility of reopening that subject, short of dragging it in by the tail. All of which set the new arrival wondering still more.

"Then if these Matabele chaps were to rise," went on Ancram, "you—we—should all get our throats cut?"

"From ear to ear," supplied Lamont, with grim uncompromising crispness.

"Oh, come. I say, Lamont, you're getting at a fellow, don't you know."

"No, I don't. But if you don't believe me ask Peters."

"The Captain's—er—oh!—ah!—I mean Lamont's right," declared Peters, half briskly, half deprecatorily, as he noted the positive scowl which wrinkled his friend's dark brows. The reason wherefor was that the latter, having held a subordinate command during the war of occupation, had experienced much trouble in convincing Peters and others that they were not to call him 'Captain' ever after. That sort of tin-pot aping of military rank was bad enough while they were on active service, he declared—afterwards it was simply poisonous, and there were enough 'captains' and 'majors' and 'colonels' knocking about Matabeleland to stock a whole Army Corps with, if they had been genuine.

Again Ancram wondered. What the deuce did it all mean, he tried to unravel, that a tough, hard-bitten frontiersman, such as he had already estimated Peters to be, should care twopence for the frown or smile of a fellow like Lamont, whom he himself had seen show the white feather on an occasion when there was the least possible excuse of all for it—indeed, he wished he himself had been at hand at the time, instead of arriving on the scene just after the rescue had been effected? Yet, somehow, there was something very solid, very square, about this, as even he realised, involuntary host of his, sitting there the very embodiment of self-possession, devil-may-care-ishness, even masterful dominance. It did not fit in, somehow, with that scene in the falling dusk, by the frozen mere at Courtland, on Christmas Eve.

"But," he persisted, "do you really and seriously mean, Lamont, that if these chaps were to break out to-night they would cut all our throats?"

"Really and seriously, Ancram. But didn't I tell you that the great god Chance was a ruling factor up here? You'll soon tumble to his little ways. Here—try some of this Magaliesburg," pushing a large two-pound bag towards him.

"Er—thanks. I think I'll stick to my mixture. The fellows at Pagadi gave me some of that the other night, and I didn't care for it."

"Oh, that'll pass. You'll soon not look at anything else," chipped in Peters briskly, filling his own pipe. He had sized up the new-comer as being very raw, very green. But then he had seen plenty such before. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, listening intently.

"D'you hear that, Lamont?" he said eagerly.

"Yes," was the answer, after a moment of careful listening.

"Why—what—what is it?" broke in Ancram, and there was a note of scare in his voice. In the light of their previous conversation it must be at least the Matabele war-cry, he decided.

"There it is again," said Peters. "Did you hear?"

"Yes," answered Lamont. "You may be in luck's way yet, Ancram, and get a shot at a lion. They are over there, in the Ramabana Forest, though whether they'll be there still to-morrow is another thing. Let's get outside and listen."

Ancram, to be candid with himself, would much rather have remained inside. He had an idea that a lion might pounce upon him the moment he set foot in the darkness outside.

In the soft velvet of the black sky a myriad of stars hung. So near did they seem that the flash of flaming planets was even as the burning of distant worlds. The ghostly stretch of veldt around was wrapped in darkness and mystery, and from afar, just audible on the waft of stillness, came a succession of hollow, coughing roars.

"Don't send up your hopes too high, Ancram," said Lamont, emitting quick puffs from his pipe. "You may not get a show at them after all. Lions are very sporadic. Here to-night, fifty miles off to-morrow morning."

Ancram devoutly hoped these might be five hundred miles off, as he answered—

“Ah yes. That’s the beastly bore of it. I’d like to have had a shot at them, I must say.”

“Oh, we’ll fix you up with that, sooner or later, sonny, never fear,” said Peters cheerfully. “If not to-morrow, later on we’ll worry up a trip, and it’ll be hard if we don’t turn you out a big ’un.”

Then a friendly wrangle ensued between Lamont and Peters as to whether wild animals, and especially lions, would come into houses after anything. Lamont declared they wouldn’t, and Peters cited instances where they had, not at first hand however; and at length by the time the guest was told off to his makeshift couch in the living-room, he was so worked up to the terrors of this strange wild land, to which he had been fool enough to come, that he spent half the night wondering whether the outer door would for a moment resist the furious rush of a famished beast, or whether the window was of sufficient width to admit such.

Whereby it is manifest that Lamont and the other had taken in the stranger in more ways than one.

Chapter Four.

Peters—Prospector.

It was lunch time at Peters’ prospecting camp, and Peters, seated on a pile of old sacks, was busy opening a bully-beef tin. Having extracted its indifferently appetising contents, by dint of shaking out the same on to an enamelled metal plate, he chucked the empty tin away over his shoulder, thus mechanically adding another ‘brick’ to a sort of crescent-shaped miniature wall, some ten feet behind, which had been formed gradually out of exactly similar tins, and by a similar mechanical process. Three native ‘boys,’ squatted at a respectful distance, were puffing at their pipes and conversing in a drowsy hum, the burden of their debate being as to whose turn it might be to consume such remnants of the repast as their master might leave: such being, of course, a thing apart from, and outside of, their regular rations.

In the forefront was a windlass and a vast pile of earth and stones, for Peters was sinking a shaft. Two hastily run-up huts served to house the said boys, between which stood a Scotch cart, covered with tarpaulin. Peters himself slept at Lamont’s, on whose farm these mining operations were being conducted. In the ultimate success of these Peters had immense faith. “We’ll make another Sheba Reef out of this yet, Lamont,” he was wont to declare. “This place has gold on it, and plenty, if we only sink deep enough. You’ll see it has.” To which Lamont would reply that he only hoped it might, but that he didn’t for a moment believe it would.

Who Peters was, or where he had come from, nobody knew. He was a prospector, and had never been known as anything else. Some opined that he had at one time been a sailor, and there were certain grounds for believing this, in that he would, when off his guard, betray an acquaintance both extensive and accurate with the technique of the sea. Those who tried to draw him got no further. He never gave the idea of being particularly anxious to conceal anything: simply he never talked about himself. It was puzzling, but—there it remained.

Then certain inquisitive souls conceived the inspiration of getting him to talk in his cups. But the drawback to the carrying of it out lay in the fact that Peters never was in his cups. He could drink the whole lot of them under the table, if put to it; and indeed did so, on more than one occasion, sitting there smiling all the time, as they reproachfully put it. Oh, he was a hard nail!

He was good-nature itself, as long as no one tried to take advantage of it. When they did, then let them look out. His prime detestation was ‘side,’ as more than one young new arrival from England in the early days discovered to his own amazement and discomfiture. His prime predilection was Lamont, of whom, their mutual acquaintances were wont to pronounce, he made a little tin god on wheels. Yet no two men could, in character, be more utterly dissimilar.

Their friendship dated from the war of occupation, in which they had both served. During the historic retreat on the Shangani, Lamont had saved his life, and that under circumstances demanding an intrepidity bordering on foolhardiness. Wounded and incapacitated, he had dropped behind unnoticed what time the Matabele were pressing the sorely harassed column, and Lamont had dashed back to his rescue when his falling into the hands of the savages was but a question of moments—already indeed had he placed his pistol to his head rather than be thus captured. This was the incident he had been trying to relate to Ancram, when Lamont had twice cut him short with what the guest had deemed brusque and unnecessary rudeness.

Having finished his meal Peters lighted a digestive pipe, and sent his plate skimming away in the direction of the boys, who immediately pounced upon the scraps; for there is never a moment in life when a native is not ready to feed, and nothing eatable that he will refuse to feed on—except fish.

“Hey, Malvani?” he called.

“*Nkose*!” And one of the boys came trotting up.

“What of Inyovu? Will he come back, do you think?”

“*Ou nkose*!” said the fellow with a half grin. “Who may say? He is Matabele. We are not.”

“Well, get to work again.”

“*Nkose*.”

Peters sat a little longer thinking—and the subject of his thoughts was the man whose life he had saved—to wit Ancram.

“I don’t like the cuss,” he said to himself. “Wish I’d left him where he was—no—I don’t exactly that—still, I wish he’d move on. He’s an ungrateful dog, anyhow.”

The noonday air was sensuous and drowsy. Even the screech of the crickets was so unintermittent as to form part of the prevailing stillness. Peters began to nod.

"*Nkose*!"

The salutation was sulky rather than hearty. Peters started wide awake again, to behold his missing boy, Inyovu.

The latter was a young Matabele, tall and slight, and clad in nothing but an old shirt and a skin *mútya*. But his face was the face of a truculent savage—the face of one who would have been far more in his element as a unit in some marauding expedition sent forth by Lobengula in the good old times, than serving in the peaceful avocation of mine boy to a white prospector.

"I see you, Inyovu," returned Peters, speaking fluently in the Sindabele. "But I have not seen you for half a day when I should have seen you working." The point of which satire was that the fellow had taken French leave since the night before.

"*Au*!" he replied, half defiantly. "I have been to see my chief."

"Been to see your chief—*impela*! Who is your chief, Inyovu? The man who pays you or the man who does not?"

Natives are susceptible to ridicule, and Peters had a satirical way with him which lay rather in the tone than in the words used. The three Makalaka boys in the background sniggered, and this acted as a whip to the Matabele.

"My chief?" he blared. "My chief? *Whau, Mlungu*! Zwabeka is my chief."

The tone apart, to address his master as *Umlungu*—meaning simply 'white man'—was to invite—well, a breach of the peace. But Peters kept his temper.

"Then—O great chief Inyovu," he said, still more cuttingly, "in that case it might be as well to return to thy chief, Zwabeka. I have no use at all for servants who own two chiefs. No. No use."

"*Xi*!"

At the utterance of this contemptuous 'click' Peters did not keep his temper. His right fist shot forth with lightning-like suddenness and celerity, catching its imprudent utterer bang on the nose. He, staggering back, seized a pick-handle—an uncommonly awkward weapon, by the way—and, uttering a savage snarl, came for his smiter. The while the three Makalaka boys, in huge if secret delight, stood by to watch the fun.

And they got it—plenty of it. Peters was far too old a campaigner to be taken at any such disadvantage. He was upon the young savage in a flash, had him by the throat with one hand, and the pick-handle with the other, just as swiftly. Inyovu seeing the game was up wrenched himself free, and turned to run, leaving the pick-handle with the enemy. Alack and alas! The mouth of the shaft was immediately behind him, and, losing his footing on some loose stones, he plunged in and disappeared from view. Then Peters threw back his head and roared with laughter. So too did the Makalakas. In fact their paroxysms seemed to threaten ultimate dissolution, as they twisted and squirmed and hugged themselves in their mirth.

"*Woza*! We must get him out!" he cried at last. The shaft was no great depth as yet, luckily for Inyovu. Moreover, the bucket for hauling up the dirt was down there, and a spasmodic quiver of the rope showed that the ill-advised one was already climbing up, even if he had not arrested his fall by seizing the rope and holding on. Then, by their master's orders, the boys manned the windlass, though so weakened by their recurring laughter they could hardly turn the handle, indeed were in danger of letting go every minute. At last the unfortunate one's head rose above the mouth of the hole, and in a moment more he was standing glaring at his master with sulky apprehension.

But Peters had enjoyed a good laugh, and all his anger had vanished.

"Now, Inyovu," he said cheerily, "get to work again."

And Inyovu did.

Peace having been restored, the usual labour proceeded. Suddenly Peters' horse, which was knee-haltered among the bushes hard by, began to whinny, then to neigh. That meant the proximity of another horse, and a minute or two later Lamont rode up alone.

"Hallo, Peters! Nothing to make us millionaires to-day? What?" he sung out. "No sign of the stuff?"

"Oh, that'll come. You've got the grin now, but we'll both have it—in the right direction too—when this bit of bush-veldt's humming with battery stamps and you and I are boss directors of the new fraud," answered Peters equably. They were to be joint partners in the results—if any—of Peters' prospecting, at any rate while such was carried on upon Lamont's farm.

"'Hope springs eternal...' or there'd be no prospectors," laughed the latter as he dismounted from his horse. "See here, Peters. I wish you'd left our desirable guest where he was, or taken him away somewhere else—anything rather than bring him here."

"What could I do, Lamont?" was the deprecating reply. "He said he was a pal of yours, and had come up-country on purpose to find you."

"As for the first, he lied. I hardly knew the fellow, and what little I saw of him I disliked. For the second, I've no doubt he did. No. You brought him, and you'll have to take him away."

"Well, I'll try and think out a plan."

"If you don't, one of two things will happen. Either he'll take over the whole show or I shall be indicted for murder."

“Couldn’t we set up a sort of Matabele rising scare, and rush him off to Gandela?” said Peters, brightening up. “I’ve a notion he isn’t brimming over with eagerness for a fight.”

“The worst of setting up scares is that they’re apt to travel farther than you mean them to, especially just now when that sort of scare may any moment become grim reality. No, I’m afraid that plan won’t do.”

“Isn’t there anyone you could pass him on to? Why not give him an introduction to Christian Sybrandt, and fire him off to Buluwayo?”

“Because I wouldn’t give him an introduction to anybody—not on any account. See here, Peters. I don’t like the fellow—never did, and he knows it too. But he’s going to exploit me all he knows how, and—that won’t be far. You remember that—er—that rotten affair I told you about—you know, the thing that had to do with my coming out here again when I did? Well, this fellow Ancram was there at the time. Helped to hoot me down, you understand.”

“Did he? The rotten, infernal swine! If I had known half that perhaps I would have left him for jackal’s meat in the mopani before I moved finger, let alone touched trigger, to get him out,” said Peters savagely. “By the Lord! I wonder you let him set foot inside the door after that.”

“What could one do? You can’t turn a fellow away from your door, in this country, in a state of practical destitution,—for that’s what being without a horse amounts to. I wish you could have saved his horse, Peters. And now he’s been here ten days, and seems to think he owns the whole show. What do you think he’s been up to this morning?”

“What?”

“Why I sent him out to shoot birds, or anything he darn chose, along the river bank—anything to get rid of him. I sent Zingela with him to take care of him, and carry the birds. Blest if he didn’t start pounding Zingela.”

Peters whistled.

“That’s pretty thick,” he said.

“Thick! I should think so. Swore the boy had cheeked him, and he hated niggers, and so forth. Coming on to another man’s place—without an invite, mind you—and then sailing in to bash his boys. Eh?”

“Yes. But had Zingela cheeked him?”

“Small wonder if he had. But all I could get out of the boy was that Ancram abused him because he couldn’t find a guinea-fowl that had run. He owned to having answered he wasn’t a dog. Then Ancram let into him. I’m not a good-tempered chap, Peters, and there’ll be a most unholy row soon. What’s to be done?”

“I have it,” cried Peters, his whimsical face puckering all over with glee. “I have it. You know how skeery he looked when we were telling him about the possibility of a rising. Well then, let’s cram him up that the Matabele are awful vindictive devils, and Zingela will never rest till he has his blood. How’s that?”

“Well, that’s an idea.”

“Rather. He’ll wilt at the notion of a bloodthirsty savage, always looking out for his chance, day and night—especially the night, mind—of getting an assegai into him. I believe that’ll do the trick. What?”

“I shouldn’t wonder. By Jove, Peters, you’re a genius. Well, you work it. If we both do, it’ll look suspicious.”

“Right! I will. Still the fellow can be amusing at times. I’ll never forget that first time we introduced ourselves. ‘I’m Peters, prospector,’ says I. ‘And I’m Ancram, prospectless,’ says he, without a moment’s thought.”

And Peters went off into a roar over the recollection.

Chapter Five.

Ancram—Prospectless.

In crediting his unwelcome guest with a desire to ‘take over the whole show,’ Lamont was stating no more than was warranted by fact. For Ancram had made himself rather more than very much at home, to such an extent indeed that he might have been the owner of the place. Further, he had adopted a kind of elder-brotherly tone towards Lamont, and a patronising one towards Peters: and of this, and of him altogether, small wonder that both men were already thoroughly sick. Moreover, he showed not the slightest symptom of moving on.

As a sacrifice on the sacred altar of hospitality Lamont had conscientiously striven to conceal his dislike for the man, had even gone out of the way in order to make time pass pleasantly for him, in pursuance of which idea he had stood from him what he would have stood from nobody else. All of which Ancram put down to a wrong motive, and made himself more objectionable still.

“What are your plans, Ancram?” said Lamont, the day after the foregoing conversation.

“Oh, my dear fellow, it’s so jolly here with you I hadn’t begun to think of any.”

Lamont’s face was stony grim in its effort to repress a frown.

“It brings back dear old Courtland,” went on Ancram, watching his host narrowly. “Now you don’t knock up against anyone who knows Courtland too, every day out here, Lamont?”

“No. I don’t know that that’s any loss, by the way.”

“Not? Now I should have thought—er—that for old acquaintance’ sake you’d—er—but then—er—I was forgetting. What a fool I am.”

He little suspected how cordially his listener was agreeing.

“You see, it’s this way, Lamont. I came out here to see what I could do in the gold digging or farming line, or something of that sort. What could I?”

“Do you want a candid opinion, Ancram?”

“Yes. What could I?”

“Nothing.”

The other stared, then laughed unpleasantly.

“You left your things at Pagadi,” went on Lamont. “My advice is get back to Fagadi, pick up your traps—thence, to England.”

The other laughed again, still more unpleasantly.

“Meaning that you want me out of the country,” he said.

It was Lamont’s turn to stare.

“I’m very dense,” he said, “but for the life of me I can’t see what the devil interest your being in the country or out of it can have for me.”

“We were at Courtland together,” rejoined Ancram meaningly.

“A remarkable coincidence no doubt. Still—it doesn’t explain anything.”

“I thought perhaps you might find it awkward—er—anyone being here who was—er—there at that time.”

“Then like many another you have proved ‘thought’ a desperately unreliable prompter. Candidly, my dear fellow, since you put it that way, I don’t care a twopenny damn whether you are in this country or in any other. Now?”

Lamont spoke quickly and was fast losing his temper. He pulled himself up with a sort of gulping effort. Ancram, noting this, could hardly suppress the sneer which rose to his face, for he read it entirely wrong.

“That fetched him,” he was thinking to himself. “He’s funking now. He’s probably got another girl out here, and he’s afraid I’ll blab about the white feather business. All right, my good friend Lamont. I’ve got you under my thumb, as I intended, and you’ll have to put me in the way of something good—or—that little story will come in handy. It’ll bear some touching up, too.”

“I was speaking in your own interest, Ancram,” went on Lamont. “Anyone can see with half an eye that you’re not in the least cut out for life in this country, and you’d only be throwing away your time and money.”

“Wish I’d got some to throw. I thought perhaps I might stop and do a little farming with you.”

“But farming needs some capital. You can’t do it on nothing. It’s a losing game even then, especially now that rinderpest is clearing us all out. Don’t you know any people in Buluwayo who could put you into the way of getting some job under Government, or in the mining department or something?”

“Not a soul. Wish I did. But, I say, Lamont, why are you so jolly certain I’m no good for this country? I haven’t had a show yet.”

“Oh, I can see. For one thing, if you start pounding the niggers about, like you did Zingela yesterday, you’ll get an assegai through you.”

It came to him as an inspiration, in pursuance of their plan of the previous day. And Ancram was green.

“No! Are they such revengeful devils as all that?”

“Well, they don’t like being bashed, any more than other people. And—a savage is always a savage.”

“By Jove! What d’you think, Lamont? Supposing I gave this chap something? Would that make it all right? Eh?”

“Then he’d think you were afraid of him.”

And to Lamont, who knew that the gift of a piece of tobacco and a sixpence would cause honest Zingela positively to beam upon his assailant of yesterday, the situation was too funny. But he wanted to get rid of the other, and the opportunity seemed too good to be lost. The scare had begun.

“You have got a jolly place here, Lamont, and you don’t seem overworked either, by Jove!” went on Ancram, with more than a dash of envy in his tone, as he gazed forth over the sunlit landscape, dotted with patches of bush, stretching away to the dark line of forest beyond, for the two men were seated in front of the house, beneath the extension of the roof which formed a rough verandah.

"Yes. You were talking of Courtland—well, I'm nearly as big a landowner here as the old Squire. Funny, isn't it? As for being overworked, that comes by fits and starts. Just now there's nothing much to do but shoot and bury your infected cattle, and watch the remainder die of drought."

"Phew! I can't think how you fellows can smoke such stuff as that," said Ancram disgustedly, as the other started a fresh pipe of Magaliesburg. "The very whiff of it is enough to make one sick."

"Sorry; you must get used to it though, if you're going to stop in the country," rejoined Lamont, unconcernedly blowing out great clouds. "Have another drink? The whiff of that doesn't make you sick, eh?"

"You're right there, old chap," laughed Ancram. "This is a deuced thirsty country of yours, Lamont, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Oh dear, no! Never mind me. It's all that, even when there isn't a drought on."

"Now I could understand a fellow like Peters smoking that stuff," said Ancram, going back to the question of the tobacco. "But you, who've had an opportunity of knowing better—that's a thing I can hardly take in. By the way, Lamont, while on the subject of Peters, I think he's too beastly familiar and patronising altogether."

"Patronising—'m—yes."

If Ancram perceived the crispness of the tone, the snap in his host's eyes, he, thinking the latter was afraid of him, enjoyed being provocative all the more.

"Yes. For instance, I think it infernal cheek a fellow of that sort calling us by our names—without any mister or anything. And the chummy way in which he's always talking to me. It's a little too thick. A common chap like that—who murders the Queen's English. No; I'm getting damn tired of Peters."

"Quite sure Peters isn't getting damn tired of you?"

"Eh? Oh come, I say, Lamont! You're always getting at a fellow, you know."

Lamont was inwardly raging. He had exaggerated ideas of the obligations of hospitality, and this fellow was his guest—an uninvited one certainly, but still his guest. And he—could he control himself much longer?

"I told you you weren't in the least cut out for life in this country, Ancram," he said at last, striving to speak evenly. "For instance, according to its customs even the blasphemy of Peters daring to call you by your name doesn't justify you in abusing a man who has saved your life; for if it hadn't been for him you'd be a well-gnawed skeleton in the mopani belt down the Pagadi road this very moment. Wait a bit,"—as the other was about to interrupt. "It may surprise you to hear it—they call this a land of surprises—but there's no man alive for whom I have a greater regard than I have for Peters. He's my friend—my *friend*, you understand—and if you're so tired of him I can only think of one remedy. I can lend you a horse and a boy to show you the way. There's a hotel at Gandela. The accommodation there is indifferent, but at any rate you won't be tired by Peters."

It was out at last. Ancram had gone too far. Would he take him at his word? thought Lamont, hoping in the affirmative. But before the other could reply one way or the other there was a trampling of hoofs, and a man on horseback came round the corner of the house.

"Hallo, Driffield! Where have you dropped from?" cried Lamont, greeting the new-comer cordially.

"Home. I'm off on a small patrol. Thought, as it was near dinner-time, I'd sponge on you, Lamont. Where's Peters?"

"Up at his camp. He never comes down till evening. Er—Ancram. This is Driffield, our Native Commissioner. What he don't know about the guileless savage isn't worth knowing."

"Glad to meet you," said that official as they shook hands. "You needn't take in everything Lamont says, all the same," he laughed. "I say, Lamont, it's a pity Peters isn't here. I'm always missing the old chap."

"I'll send up for him, and he'll be here in half an hour or so. I'll see to your horse and start Zingela off at once. But—first of all have a drink. We won't get dinner for half an hour yet."

"Thanks, I will," laughed the new arrival. "Thirsty country this, eh, Mr —?"

"Ancram," supplied that worthy. "Thirsty? I believe you. We were talking of that very thing just before you came."

Two things had struck Ancram—the frank cordiality that seemed to be the predominant note among these dwellers in the wilderness, and that his own opinion of Peters was by no means shared by others. There he had made a *faux pas*. But he did not intend to take Lamont at his word, all the same; wherefore it was just as well that this new arrival had appeared on the scene when he had.

"What'll you have, Driffield?" said Lamont, as the four sat down to table a little later—Peters having arrived. "'Tisn't Hobson's choice this time—it's guinea-fowl or goat ribs."

"The last. They look young. I'll get enough game on patrol."

"Going to look in at Zwabeka's kraal, Driffield?" said Peters presently.

"If I do it'll be on the way back. I've got to meet Ames to-morrow evening at the Umgwane Drift, and settle which the devil of us Tolozi is under. Half his people are in Sikumbutana. Ames is quite welcome to him for me."

"Nice fellow, Ames," said Peters.

“Rather. One of the best we’ve got, and one of the smartest. He’s got a ticklish district, too, with the whole of Madula’s and half Zazwe’s people in it. Hard luck to saddle him with Tolozi into the bargain. Yes, Ames is a ripping good chap. Been long in this country, Mr Ancram?”

“Er—no. I’ve only just come.”

“Peters picked him up in the mopani veldt, down Pagadi way, and brought him on,” said Lamont. “He was nearly dead of thirst.”

“And something else” is how the whimsical look which puckered the quaint countenance of Peters might have been interpreted. Driffield whistled.

“You were in luck’s way, Mr Ancram,” he said. “That’s an awful bit of country. More than one man has gone missing there and never been heard of again.” And the whimsicality of Peters’ look was enhanced.

“I suppose you haven’t seen much of the country then?” went on Driffield. “I wonder if you’d care to come along with me now. I could show you a pretty wild slice of it, and any number of Matabele at home, into the bargain.”

“There’s your chance, Ancram,” cried Peters. “By Jove! there’s your chance.”

“I should like it. But—er—is it safe?” replied Ancram, bearing in mind Lamont’s remarks the night of his arrival. Driffield stared, then choked down his efforts not to splutter.

“Safe?” he said. “Well, I’ve got a life to lose, and so has Ames. And we neither of us expect to lose it just yet.”

“Yes; I’d like to come, but—I’ve no horse.”

“Daresay I can lend you one,” said Lamont. “You’ll want a couple of blankets too. How are your donkeys loaded, Driffield?”

“Lightly loaded, so that won’t be in the way. Very well, then. Can you be ready in an hour’s time?”

“Oh, there’s no such hurry, Driffield,” urged Peters. “Now you’ve lugged me away from my millionaire factory, you must make it worth while, and let’s have time for a smoke and a yarn.”

The Native Commissioner agreed to start an hour later; and then there was much chaff at Peters’ expense in his prospecting operations. Then Driffield said—

“You’ll be coming over to the race meeting at Gandela, I suppose, Lamont?”

“Don’t know. When is it?”

“End of week after next.”

“I don’t care much for race meetings.”

“Oh, but there’ll be a regular gymkhana—tent-pegging and all sorts of fun. Oh, and Miss Vidal says you are to be sure and turn up.”

“Oh, get out with you, Driffield, and take that yarn somewhere else.”

“It’s a solemn fact, Lamont. She was booming you no end the other day—saying what a devil of a chap you were, and all that sort of thing. I asked her if I should tell you to roll up at the race meeting, and she answered in that candid, innocent way of hers ‘Of course.’ You can’t stay away after that. Can he, Peters?”

“Not much.”

“Oh well, I’ll go then.”

“You’re in luck’s way, Lamont. Miss Vidal’s far and away the nicest girl anywhere round here.”

“She’s all that, I allow.” But a subtle note in the tone was not lost upon one—and that one Ancram.

“So there is a girl in the case!” pronounced that worthy to himself. “I thought there would be. And he would have cleared me out? Not yet, friend Lamont. Not yet! Not until I’ve turned you to real good, material use.” And he now congratulated himself upon the Native Commissioner’s invitation to join his expedition, for in the course of the same he would contrive to pump that official on the subject of Lamont and his circumstances and standing in the locality, in such wise that it would be hard if he could not turn the knowledge to the account of his own especial advantage.

Chapter Six.

The Desire of Gandela.

“What on earth have you been doing to Jim Steele, Clare?” said Mrs Fullerton, as she came into her drawing-room, and sank into a cane chair. “He passed me in the gate looking as black as thunder. He made a lug at his hat, growled like a dog, and was off like a shot. Look! there he goes,” pointing to a fast-receding figure pounding down the strip of dusty road that fronted the straggling line of unpretentious bungalows.

“I only refused him,” was the half-laughing, half-sad reply. “What else was I to do when I don’t care two brass buttons about the man? Really, Lucy, there are drawbacks attendant on life in a country where there are not enough women to

go round. He is only the fifth since I've been up here." Even had there been enough women to go round, as the speaker put it, assuredly she herself would not have come in last among them, if there are any powers of attraction in an oval face and straight features, a profusion of golden-brown hair, deep blue Irish eyes thickly fringed with dark lashes, and a mouth of the Cupid-bow order. Add to this a beautifully proportioned figure, rather tall than short, and it is hardly to be wondered that most of the men in the township of Gandela and all the region round about went mad over Clare Vidal. Her married sister, Lucy Fullerton, formed a complete contrast, in that she was short and matronly of build, but she was a bright, pretty, winsome little thing, and correspondingly popular.

"Well, you shouldn't be so dangerous, you queenly Clare," she retorted, unpinning her hat and flinging it across the room. "Really it was an act of deadly hostility towards all our good friends to have brought you up here to play football with their hearts and their peace of mind. Not that Jim Steele is any great catch, poor fellow."

"Oh, he'll get over it," said Clare. "They all do."

From this it must not be imputed to her that she was vain and heartless. For the first, she was wonderfully free from vanity considering her powers of attraction. For the last, her own heart had never been touched, wherefore she was simply unable to understand the feeling in the case of other people, apart from the fact that her words were borne out by the results of her own observation.

"There was Captain Isard," went on Mrs Fullerton, "and Mr Slark, who they say has good prospects, and will be a baronet at his father's death. You sent them to the right-about too."

"For the first—life in the Matabeleland Mounted Police doesn't strike me as ideal," laughed Clare. "For the second—fancy going through life labelled Slark. Even, eventually, *Lady* Slark wouldn't palliate it. Besides, I don't care twopence for either."

"Who do you care twopence for, among all this throwing of handkerchiefs? There's Mr Lamont—"

"He never made a fool of himself in that way. He hasn't got it in him," struck in Clare, speaking rather more quickly.

Her sister smiled to herself at this kindling of animation.

"Hasn't got it in him?" she repeated, innocently mischievous. "You mean he's too great a fool?"

"I mean just the reverse. He's got too much in him."

"But—you know, dear, what they say about him—that he's—er—a bit of a funkstick."

"Bit of a funkstick! Pooh! Look at his face, Lucy. How can a man with a face like that have an atom of cowardice in his composition? Why, it's too ridiculous." And the whole-souled contempt which Clare infused into this vindication would have inspired wild exultation in the breast of any one of her multifold adorers near and far, had it been uttered in his own behalf. Yet her acquaintance with the object thereof was of the slightest. "Well, you know they say that one evening there was a bit of a row on over at the hotel—horrid, quarrelsome, fighting creatures men are—and someone insulted Lamont, or trod on his toes, or something, and, when he objected, the other wanted him to fight; and he quite climbed down."

"I don't believe it—or, at any rate, the motive they put upon it," said Clare decidedly. "People have a way of piling on to their stories in the most recklessly top-heavy manner. In all probability he was more than the other's match, and kept out of it on that account."

"You make an effective champion, Clare," laughed the other, mischievously. "Well I don't know the ins and outs of it. Dick knows more about it than I do."

"Oho! What does Dick know more about than you do?" hailed a voice outside the window, and its owner immediately entered, accompanied by another man. "Anyhow, that's a big bit of news to start with—that Dick should know more about anything under the sun than you do. Here's Driffield, and he's going to stay lunch."

"Dick, don't be silly. How do you do, Mr Driffield," greeting the Native Commissioner. "We were talking about Mr Lamont, and what they say about him. Clare says she doesn't believe a word of it, and I was saying you knew more about it than I do, Dick."

"Do you mean the breeze at Foster's?"

"Yes."

"Well, he did climb down. There's no doubt about it. And the funny part of it is, that with the gloves on there's hardly a man anywhere in these parts who can touch him."

"There you are, Lucy," cried Clare triumphantly. "Didn't I tell you it was because he was more than the other's match?"

"Well, it hadn't got a look that way at the time, and that was what struck everybody who saw it. Certainly it struck me," replied Fullerton. "But the next time you girls start taking away your neighbours' characters, don't do it at the top of your voices with window and door wide open. We could hear you all down the road. Couldn't we, Driffield?"

"Mr Driffield sets a higher value on his immortal soul than you do on yours, Dick," retorted Mrs Fullerton loftily. "Consequently he isn't going to back you in your—ahem!—unveracity."

"No. But he's dying of thirst, Lucy. So am I."

She laughed, and took the hint. Then as the two men put down their glasses, Fullerton went on—

"Talking of the gloves—that reminds me of another time when Lamont climbed down. That time he put on the gloves

with Voss. It was a beautiful spar, and really worth seeing. Then, just as the fun was at its height, Lamont suddenly turned quite white—as white as such a swarthy beggar can turn, that is—and chucked up the sponge then and there.”

“Yes. I remember that. It looked rum certainly—but all the same I’ll maintain that Lamont’s no coward. He showed no sign of it in the war of ’93 anyway. If anything rather the reverse.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Clare significantly.

“May have lost his nerve since,” said her brother-in-law, also significantly.

“Well, I like Lamont,” said Driffield decidedly.

“I don’t,” said Fullerton, equally so.

“Mind you, he’s a chap who wants knowing a bit,” went on the Native Commissioner. “Then he’s all right.”

“Is he coming to the race meeting, Mr Driffield?” said Clare.

“Yes. He didn’t intend to, though, until I gave him your message, Miss Vidal. We pointed out to him that he couldn’t stop away after that.”

“Message! But I sent him no message.”

“Oh, Miss Vidal! Come now—think again.”

“Really, Mr Driffield, I ought to be very angry with you for twisting my words like that,” laughed Clare. “But—you mean well, so let it pass. You are forgiven.”

“Talking of Lamont,” struck in Fullerton, who had a wearisome way of harking back to a subject long after everybody else had done with it, “there’s a yarn going about that he had to leave his own neighbourhood in England for showing the white feather. And it looks like it, remembering what a close Johnny he is about himself.”

Driffield looked up quickly.

“I believe I know who put that yarn about,” he said. “Wasn’t it Ancram—that new man who’s putting up at Foster’s?”

“Most likely,” said Fullerton. “I never heard it myself till a day or two ago.”

“Why, what a sweep the fellow must be,” declared Driffield. “Lamont has been putting him up since Peters picked him up in the mopani veldt, nearly dead with thirst. Saved his life, in fact. I know it’s Ancram, because he pitched me the same yarn—of course ‘in strict confidence.’ Confidence indeed!”

“What a cur!” pronounced Clare. “Oh, what a completely loathsome cur!”

“Hear—hear!” ejaculated Driffield.

“Cur or not,” said Fullerton, who over and above his dislike of Lamont was naturally of a contradictious temperament, —“cur or not, the story has a good deal of bearing on what we know out here—”

“If it’s true,” interjected Clare, with curling lips.

”—He left a kid to drown. Said he wasn’t going to risk his life for a gutter kid—and wouldn’t go in after it even when the girl he was engaged to implored him to. She called him a coward then and there, and gave him the chuck. This chap Ancram saw it all. He was there.”

“Then why didn’t he go in after it himself?” suggested Clare, with provoking pertinence.

“Says he couldn’t get there, or something. Anyway Lamont’s girl chucked him then and there. She was the daughter of some county big-wig too.”

“Of course I wasn’t there,” said Clare, “and the man who enjoyed Mr Lamont’s hospitality, as a stranger in a strange land, was. Still, I should like to hear the other side of the story.”

“What if it hasn’t got another side?” said her brother-in-law shortly.

“What if it has? Most stories have,” answered Clare sweetly.

“Anyway,” struck in Driffield, “Ancram’s no sort of chap to go around talking of other people funking. I took him on patrol with me the other day from Lamont’s. Thought he’d like to see something of the country perhaps, and the Matabele. Incidentally, Lamont lent him a horse and all he wanted for the trip. Well, the whole time the fellow was in the bluest of funks. When a lot of the people came to *indaba* us, he kept asking whether they might not mean treachery, or had arms concealed under their blankets. As to that I told him yes, and legs too.”

Clare went off into a ringing, merry peal.

“Capital!” she cried.

“Oh well—” said Driffield, looking rather pleased.

“But he was in a terrific funk all through. The acme of it was reached the night we slept at the Umgwane drift. Ames voted him a devil of—er, I mean a superlative nuisance. He kept waking us up at all hours of the night, wanting to know if

we didn't hear anything. We had had a big *indaba* that day with Tolozi and his people, and this chump kept swearing he heard footsteps, and they must be stealing up to murder us in our sleep. I wonder if Peters had been filling him up with any yarns. But, anyhow, Ancram's a nice sort of chap to talk about other people funking, isn't he?"

"Why, yes," said Clare. "But his behaviour with regard to Mr Lamont is too contemptible, spreading stories about him behind his back. Why should he do it, Mr Driffield? What on earth motive can he have?"

"Cussedness, I suppose—sheer cussedness. A good deal more mischief is made under that head than is due to mere motive, I imagine."

"I believe so. By the way, did you persuade Mr Ames to come over for the race meeting?"

"Persuade! I tried to, Miss Vidal. But there's no getting Ames that far out of his district unless on leave or on duty. Ames spells conscientiousness exaggerated."

"That's a pity," said Clare. "He's one of the nicest men I know."

"Except Mr Lamont, Clare," appended her sister mischievously.

"They're so different. You can't compare them," pronounced the girl, her serenity unruffled. And then they talked of other things, and had lunch; and after a digestive smoke the two men went back to their offices—Fullerton being by profession a mining engineer.

The township of Gandela consisted of a number of zinc-roofed houses, all staringly new, straggling down what would be the main street when the town was properly laid out, but at present was only the coach road. There was a market square, with—at present—only three sides to it; an ugly red-brick building representing the magistrate's court; ditto another, representing the Church of South Africa; a farther block somewhat more substantially built, which was the gaol, and from which not more than a dozen or so of prisoners had escaped since the place was first laid out two years previously. At a corner of the market square aforesaid stood the only hotel the place boasted, run by one Foster, to whom reference has been made; while away across the veldt, about half a mile distant, were the barracks of the Matabeleland Mounted Police, a troop of which useful force watched over the town and patrolled the neighbourhood. Scenically Gandela was prettily situated, strategically badly. It stood on a pleasant undulating plain, dotted with mimosa, but on one side dominated by a long, thickly-wooded hill called Ehlatini, the first of a range, likewise thickly-wooded, extending farther back. Well, what mattered that? The natives were thoroughly under control, men said. They had been so knocked out by the pioneer force and the Chartered Company's Maxims during the war of occupation, that they would not be anxious to kick against the white man's rule again in a hurry.

Would they not? We shall see.

Chapter Seven.

Fellow Travellers.

"Well, good-bye, Lyall. Next time you want to do another cattle deal send me word. Only do it before the rinderpest has swept me clean. So long."

And Lamont, swinging himself into his saddle, rode away from Lyall's store, quite content with the price he had obtained from that worthy for a dozen young oxen, which he had delivered the day before. Moreover, he could not sufficiently congratulate himself that when he arrived home that evening he would not find Ancram.

He chuckled to himself as he thought how they had got rid of that extremely unwelcome guest. When Ancram had returned from his trip with Driffield, more jaunty than ever, Peters began to play his part, launching forth into awful and blood-curdling instances of the vindictiveness of the Matabele, and what a mistake it was that Ancram should have done anything to incur a feud that might extend through any amount of relationships. Thoroughly yet deftly did he rub it in, and soon Ancram's nervousness reached such a pitch that he had come to regard poor Zingela—who had no more idea of cutting the strange Makiwa's throat than he had of cutting his own—as a perfectly ferocious monster, ever on the watch for an opportunity of having his blood.

"You'll be able to amuse yourself alone for a few days, Ancram," Lamont had said one morning when the requisite stage of scare had been reached. "Peters and I have got to be away, but we'll be back in a week at the outside."

Ancram's look of blank dismay was something to behold. Couldn't he come, too? he asked. No, he couldn't, because there was no spare horse that was in condition for the journey.

"But," added Lamont consolingly, "you'll be all right here. Zingela will look after you and show you where to find game, and so on."

Would he indeed? thought Ancram to himself. Not if he knew it. He supposed it was with a purpose that Lamont proposed to leave him alone with this ferocious savage, to be butchered by him and his relatives—Peters had spread it on thick—but that purpose he intended to defeat. Yes, that was it. He, Ancram, was the only man in the country who knew about the Courtland affair, and of course Lamont wanted to get rid of him at all costs, now that there was another girl in the case.

"Well, old chap," he had answered, "I think I won't stop on. The fact is I get beastly bored all by myself, and I think you said there was a hotel in Gandela."

"Yes. It's not first-rate, but Foster's a very decent fellow. If you tell him you've been stopping with me he'll do his best for you," Lamont had replied.

"But I don't know anyone there."

“You’ll very soon get to. There are some very good fellows in Gandela—only don’t go on the wait-to-be-introduced tack.”

Mightily did Lamont chuckle to himself over this reminiscence as he rode along, and his mirth was quite undashed by the consciousness that Ancram bore him no goodwill—and the certainty that he would injure him if he could. For this, however, he cared nothing. The Courtland story might leak out and welcome. There was no one whose opinion he valued sufficiently for it to matter. Wait. Was there not? No. There was no one.

His way lay over undulating mimosa-studded ground, beautiful but for a parched and burnt-up look, due to the prolonged drought; passing now and again a native kraal, heavily stockaded with mopani poles and thorn boughs, for lions were not altogether unknown in that part, as we have seen. A brief off-saddle for lunch, and to cool his horse’s back, and he took the track again.

Lamont was well mounted, and his steed stepped forth at a long, swift, easy walk. In the afternoon heat he became drowsy, and was soon nodding. The art of sleeping on horseback is one that can be acquired by pressure of circumstances, and if the animal is steady in its paces, and knows its way, why, then, there is no further difficulty—and of this one both these conditions held good. Suddenly a loud whinny on its part started the rider bolt awake again.

They were now travelling down a path skirting a range of stony hills. Below, and in front at no great distance, was another horseman proceeding in the same direction. It took but one moment to determine him a white man, and not many more to overhaul him and range up alongside. The stranger was dressed in serviceable khaki and a sun-helmet, all of which was in keeping with the bronzed face and short black beard, but not altogether with the round clerical collar. Catching the sound of hoofs behind, he reined in and turned, and Lamont recognised him as Father Mathias, one of the priests attached to the Buluwayo Mission.

“Good evening, Father,” he called out, as he came up. “Rather far afield, aren’t you? This is an unexpected pleasure. I hope we are travelling the same way, because I’m already a good bit sick of my own company.”

“Mr Lamont, is it not?” said the priest, speaking with a foreign accent. “Ah yes. We met in Gandela, did we not? I too—I shall be very glad of company.”

They rode along, chatting. The while, Lamont was eyeing the other’s horse, a sorry-looking beast at best, and, besides its rider, was loaded up with a fair amount of luggage, in the shape of a large rolled valise across the horn of the saddle and a couple of well filled-out saddle-bags on each side.

“You’d better let me help you with some of that load,” he said at last. “In fact we’ll transfer the lot. My horse is as fresh as paint, and won’t feel it.”

“Oh, I could not think of letting you do that, Mr Lamont. A few pounds more or less make no great difference.”

“Don’t they? I don’t know if you have ever walked with a knapsack, Father, but I have—and it’s just that very pound or so extra that makes all the difference in the world. Are you going to ride that horse all the way to Buluwayo?”

“Yes. But I shall have a day’s rest at Skrine’s Store, where I have to look after some of our people.”

“Thirty-five miles. You will hardly get him there—certainly not to-night. You had better come home with me.”

The other feared that this was impossible, as, after they had journeyed together up to a certain point, it would be right in the contrary direction. But he ceased to combat Lamont’s offer to relieve him of some of the load.

“You don’t travel light, Father,” laughed Lamont, as he finished strapping the valise across his own saddle.

“But this is not my own luggage. I have been on a round of visitation, and wherever I find some of our people they are glad of the opportunity to hear Mass. It is the ornaments required for the Mass that are in these saddle-bags.”

“Oh, I understand now,” said Lamont. “I thought it was camping outfit. Well, that is shepherding the flock and no mistake—and that over a pretty wide run.”

“That is what we are here for, Mr Lamont. It is possible we may miss some, but we try not to.”

“I’m sure you do,” assented Lamont heartily. “Why, you are proverbial in this country as models of energy.”

“That is pleasant to know. But, speaking personally, I like the life. I am strong, and it does me no harm.”

They chatted of other things and everything. The priest was a cultured man, and as they covered mile after mile of hot, steamy Matabeleland, both he and his companion hardly noticed it, for they were back in the various centres of artistic Europe, discussing its treasures with eagerness and appreciation. They off-saddled for half an hour, then on again.

“I think we are getting near where my road turns off,” said Father Mathias at last. “But, Mr Lamont, I am so glad we have been able to travel together. I have not noticed the distance at all.”

Lamont cordially replied that the same held good of himself. Then, looking quickly up—

“We are going to have a change, and if it means rain—why then, hooray! Otherwise I don’t like the look of it ahead—no, not at all.”

In their conversation as they rode along they had, as we have said, lost sight of outside features. Now a deep, low growl of thunder recalled such. Over the range of hills they were skirting peered a ridge of black cloud, mounting higher and higher to the zenith in a huge solid pillar, spreading in black masses, lighted fitfully with the gleam of quickly successive flashes. The sun had already gone down.

“We are in for it,” said Lamont, looking up. “We shall get an exemplary ducking, unless—but then you might not care

about that—we were to take shelter in Zwabeka's kraal. It's only just the other side of that bend in front."

"Let us do that," said the priest. "Zwabeka is a considerable chief, is he not? I would like to see him."

"This is going to be no fool of a storm," went on Lamont, again looking upward. "The sooner we get under cover the better."

The booming growl had changed into a well-nigh unintermittent roar, as the huge cloud, towering pillar-like, now spread its black wings in a dark canopy in every direction. The horses pricked up their ears and snorted with alarm at each blinding flash. So far no rain had fallen, and there was a smell of burning in the very air.

Now a barking of dogs sounded between the rolls of thunder, and rounding a spur they came in sight of a large kraal, lying at the mouth of a lateral kloof, densely bushed and extending far up into the range of hills. The conical huts stood within the strong encircling stockade, and among them dark forms stood about in groups, gazing skyward, and indulging in deep-toned speculation as to the probability of a copious and welcome rain to relieve the parched-up and drooping crops in the lands. But the two white men, as they rode in through the still open gateway, thought to detect an unwonted sullenness instead of the cheerful greeting of welcome which should have been theirs. A ringed man came forward.

"Greeting, Gudhlusa," called out Lamont, to whom the man was known. "We would shelter, and have a talk at the same time with Zwabeka the chief. Is he in his house?"

"I see you, Lamonti. *Au*! Zwabeka? He is asleep."

"No matter. It will do when he wakes. Meanwhile we will go into a hut, for the rain will be great."

"'M—'m!" assented the bystanders in a guttural hum. "The rain will be great. Ah! ah! The rain will be great!"

There was a significance in the repetition hardly observed at the time by the new arrivals. One of them, at any rate, was to appreciate it later. To one of them, also, the utter absence of geniality on the part of the people supplied food for thought, combined too as it was with the use of his native name—in this instance a corruption of his own—instead of the more respectful '*Nkose*.' But then Zwabeka's people were mostly Abezantsi—or those of the old, pure-blooded Zulu stock, and therefore proud.

"Come this way, *Amakosi*," said the man he had addressed as Gudhlusa, pointing to a small enclosure. "We will put your horses there, and give them grain. Yonder is a new hut with the thatch but just on. There will ye rest."

"That is good, Gudhlusa," said Lamont, giving him some tobacco. "Later, when the chief is awake we will talk with him."

The new hut proved to be a very new one, which was a huge advantage in that it ensured immunity from the swarming cockroaches inseparable from old ones, and even worse. On the other hand, the thatch 'just put on,' was not as complete as it might be, for a glint of sky visible through a hole or two in the roof did not give encouraging promise of a water-tight protection from the average thunder-shower. The saddlery and luggage was accordingly disposed in what looked likely to prove the driest side of the hut.

"Well, Father, I'm inclined to think we can see our quarters for to-night," said Lamont cheerfully, as he filled his pipe and passed on his pouch to his companion.

"Thanks. I think so too. Well, we might do worse."

"Oh yes. A dry camp is better than a wet one. Do you talk the Sindabele?"

"A little. Enough to make myself understood for the ordinary purposes. But I am learning it. You seem to have got it well, though."

"I wish I had it better. You see I am a bit interested in these people. They—and their history—appeal to me. Poor devils! I can't help sympathising with them to a certain extent. It must be rotten hard luck for a lot of these older ones, like Zwabeka for instance, who have been big-wigs in their time, having to knuckle down to a new and strange form of government in which they come out very under-dog indeed. Still, it's the universal law and there's no help for it. But—I'm sorry for them for all that."

Could he have seen what was in Zwabeka's mind,—Zwabeka, nominally asleep in one of the huts a few yards away,—could he have heard what was on Zwabeka's tongue, yea, at that very moment, where would his sympathy have been? The course of but a few days was destined to change it, like that of many another who desired to treat the conquered race with fairness and consideration, and who like himself were sitting on the brink of the hitherto quiescent vent of a raging volcano.

Chapter Eight.

Zwabeka's Kraal.

"Isn't that a perfect picture of savage life, set in a savage surrounding?" said Lamont, as he stood with his travelling companion before the door of the hut allotted to them. "It is artistically complete."

"It is indeed," was the answer.

And it was. The circle of the kraal, with its great open space and the conical huts, four deep, ringing it in: the dark, lithe forms of its occupants, unclothed save for a *mútya* of dangling monkey skins; or in the case of the women a greasy hide apron: the sinuous movements as the young men and boys ran in and out among the multi-coloured cattle: the reek of smoke and kine: the wild background of wooded ridge and craggy rock, and the swirling streamers of the storm-cloud above, pouring forth jetty beams of steely blue light and reverberating roll against the bushy spurs and darksome

recesses. All this in the fast-gathering dusk made up a picture of sombre, impressive grandeur, the very soul of which seemed to permeate the minds of its two civilised spectators.

Then the full force of the storm broke overhead, and it was as though the whole world were on fire, and split in twain; what with the unintermittent electric glare, and the ear-splitting crashes, hardly more intermittent. But, with it all, not a drop of rain.

"It's grand; but I've a notion it's beastly dangerous," said Lamont. "We'd better get inside. There's more electricity in us than in a roof. They say," he went on, as they gained their shelter, "that dry storms are more dangerous than when it rains, but that may be a popular superstition. Anyway everyone doesn't share it, for here's somebody coming."

Even as he spoke, there crept through the low doorway, which had been left open, a young man followed by two girls, one bearing a basket of green mealies roasted on the ashes, the other a large bowl of *tywala*. The youth explained that they were sent by Gudhlusa, who was sorry he could not send meat, but the people were poor, since Government and the pestilence had killed all their cattle, and they had no meat.

"We shall do famously," said Lamont. Then to the young man: "We thank Gudhlusa. And thou, *umfane*, make ready and broil these birds for us. Here is of the white man's money; for thyself."

"*Nkose*!" cried the youth delightedly, taking up the two francolins. "It shall be done. My father, Gudhlusa, also said that the chief, Zwabeka, is not able to see and talk with the *Amakosi* this night. He is sick."

Lamont expressed his concern for the chief's health, not believing a word of the above statement, and the messenger withdrew.

Half an hour or so later they were reclining snugly in their blankets, beginning on the broiled birds and roast mealies by the light of an old waggon lantern the boy had rummaged out. "The only thing wanting is salt," pronounced Lamont. "However, just a grain of this makes a sort of substitute. Try it."

He cut open one of his cartridges, which were made with black powder, and poured some of the latter out on to a piece of paper.

"But it does. Why, what a perfect travelling companion you are, Mr Lamont. You provide us with the salt—with the poultry—with everything."

Lamont laughed.

"Oh, as to the last," aiming a whack at a native dog, which was skulking in at the open door with an eye to plunder, "I always carry a shot-gun when travelling across country. It is an easily portable larder. The whole land swarms with birds, and you need only get off and shoot if you want skoff. Once, when I first came up here, I was travelling, and my horse went lame when I was about three hours from anywhere. I was in a great state of starve. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the bush was full of clucking pheasants—why the deuce didn't I shoot one, light a fire and broil him? Well, I did, then and there. Ever since then I've always travelled with a shot-gun."

"I, for one, am very glad of it, to-day especially," laughed the priest. "These birds are delicious."

They did ample justice to the bowl of *tywala* too, then lit their pipes, and lay chatting, at ease, the hollow roaring of the receding storm—or was it another approaching?—enhancing the sense of comfort within, under the influence of which conversation soon became disjointed. Father Mathias started as his half-smoked pipe dropped from his mouth, while his companion was already nodding. Both laughed.

"I think we had better say good-night," said the latter. "For my part, I feel as if I could sleep till the crack of doom."

The kraal was wrapped in silence, save for an indistinct hum here and there, where some of its occupants still carried on a lingering conversation. At last even it died away, and as hour followed hour the midnight silence was unbroken and profound.

Lamont was rather a light sleeper than otherwise, consequently it is not surprising that, the burden of his last waking words notwithstanding, a feeling of something half-scratching, half-tickling his ear, then his cheek, should start him wide awake. Following a natural impulse, though not perhaps a wise one, he brushed the thing off, and as he did so a shudder of loathing and repulsion ran through him, for it had a sort of feathery, leggy feel that made him guess its identity. Quickly he struck a light. Sprawling over the floor of the hut was a huge tarantula, looking more like an animal than an insect in the dim light of the burning vesta. Then, alarmed, it moved across the floor at a springy run, and before the spectator had decided how to put an end to its loathly existence it disappeared within a crevice in the side of the hut.

"Phew! what an awful-looking beast!" said Lamont to himself, with a natural shudder at the thought of how the hairy monster had been actually about to walk over his face in the darkness, and further, of what a narrow escape he must have had from its venomous nippers as he brushed it off. "They grow them large here, for that's the biggest I've ever seen—by Jove it is!"

He struck another match. His companion was sleeping peacefully, but as for himself all desire for sleep had fled. With his large experience of sleeping in all sorts of places, it would have been odd if a similar disturbing incident had not come his way before, and that not once only: yet the feeling of repulsion was none the less real, none the less unpleasant, now. He would get through the remainder of the night outside. The ground was open, and there was no thatch overhead to drop hairy horrors upon him in his sleep. Taking his blanket, he crept out through the hole which did duty for a doorway.

All traces of the storm had disappeared, and overhead the stars shone forth in the blue-black vault in a myriad blaze unknown to cold northern skies. By their light he could just see the time. It was half-past one.

The night air was fresh, not to say chilly, and he shivered. No question was there of further sleep, at any rate not for some time. Wrapping his blanket around him he decided to walk about a little.

On one side of the hut which had been allotted to them was open ground, by reason of it being the site of several old habitations which had been removed to make way for new ones. This would supply him with excellent space for his

sentry-like walk.

So still was the great kraal that it might have been the abode of the dead—the clustering huts so many mausoleums. Not even a dog was astir, which might be accounted for by the fact that there were but few in the place, and they probably away on the farther side. And then it occurred to Lamont that nocturnal perambulation with no external, and therefore legitimate, object, especially during the small hours, was an unpopular form of exercise among natives. Only *abatagati*, or evil-disposed wizards, prowled about at night, they held, wherefore his present wandering was injudicious—might even prove dangerous. He had better go in.

Now, as he arrived at this conclusion, his perambulations had brought him to the other side of the open space above described—that farthest removed from his own hut, and as he turned to carry it into effect he stopped short—a thrill of astonishment tingling through his frame. For his ear had caught the low murmur of voices and—in among them—the native version of his own name.

Yes, there it was again, distinctly—'U' Lamónti.' What did it mean? The whole kraal should by rights have been plunged in slumber, yet here was quite a conclave of its inhabitants, not only very wide awake, but engaged in some apparently earnest discussion—in which his own name seemed to hold no unimportant a place. A curious warning prescience took possession of his mind, and moved him to adopt a course from which he would, by every natural instinct, have recoiled with loathing. He was going to play eavesdropper.

The hut from which the sounds proceeded was an outer one just within the main circle, standing almost against the thorn stockade. By creeping up on this side, the shadows of both would be in his favour, and, lying flat, with his ear as close to the doorway as he dared venture, it would be hard if he could not catch at any rate the gist of their discussion.

Lying there in the darkness it seemed to the listener that the loudness of his own heart-beats must betray him, for no sooner was he in position than the very first words he caught were such as to thrill him through with excitement and eagerness.

"It is not yet the time for killing," a voice was saying.

"Not the time?" hummed several others.

"Not the time. He has said it. Before the next moon is dead, were the words of Umlimo. And it is not yet born."

"But that was for the eating up of all Amakiwa," objected another voice. "These who are in our midst are only two. No one will miss them. Who saw them come into our midst? None but our own people."

"*Eh! hé*!" assented the others.

"U' Lamonti. He has fire-weapons, and we need such," went on the last speaker. "These will be ours."

The listener lay, cursing himself for a very complete idiot. For the mention of firearms brought back to him that at the present moment he was totally unarmed. He had unslung his revolver when he lay down to sleep, and on coming out of the hut had left it there. Did any of them discover his presence now he was defenceless!

Now it was urged that the plan of stealing upon and murdering their two guests in their sleep was a bad one, and impolitic in that it would cause inquiries to be made, and so put the other Amakiwa on their guard. Then another voice said—

"You cannot kill the white *isanusi*. His *múti* is too powerful."

"Ha!"

"Too powerful," went on the speaker. "*Hau*! he is a real *isanusi* this one. He has a magic house, wherein he brings down fire from the sky—*lapa gu' Buluwayo*. I know, for I have seen. *Impela*!"

The murmur of wonder or incredulity evoked by this statement having subsided, the other continued—

"I am not lying. I saw it. The Amakiwa in that house bent to the very ground, and sang great songs in praise of that wonder—fearing it. There were captains among them too, ha! Now I would ask if the fighting Amakiwa feared this *isanusi* and his *múti*—they fearing nothing—how then shall we have power against him? It may not be."

Notwithstanding his peril a ripple of mirth ran through the listener, as he grasped what the speaker was feeling around—and which meant that that unlearned savage had by some means or other obtained a glimpse into the church at Buluwayo what time his travelling companion was exercising his sacerdotal functions, and was now recording his impressions of that experience.

"But Qubani—he too is an *isanusi*" said another voice. "He can match his power against that of this white one. Is it not so, Qubani, thou wise one?"

And from the tone, the listener gathered that the man addressed was held in great respect. It inspired in him no surprise, only rekindled interest, for he had heard of this Qubani as an *isanusi* of some renown.

"Meddle not with the white *isanusi*" was the laconic but decided answer. It was received with a hum of respectful assent, followed by a moment of silence.

"And the other, U' Lamónti. Shall we not kill him, my father?"

Again the listener's nerves thrilled as he crept a little more forward to catch the answer. It came.

"He may not be hurt—not now. He is under the protection of the white *isanusi*."

This dictum was accepted without question, and, very considerably relieved in his mind, Lamont was preparing to

creep away, when a new discussion arose, and the first few words of it were of so momentous and startling a nature, that he decided to remain and hear more—and that at any risk. And such risk became graver and graver with every moment.

Chapter Nine.

What Lamont Heard.

In telling Ancram that the Matabele were likely to give trouble in the event of a further extensive destruction of their cattle, Lamont had been indulging in prophecy that was a good deal *in nubibus*. He had thought such trouble might very likely occur, but not just yet. Now, as he lay there in the darkness, a participator, unknown to them, in the most secret counsels of the plotting savages, he was simply aghast at the magnitude and imminence of the peril which the whole white population of the country either laughed at or ignored.

"Not yet the time for killing," went on the voice of the one who had first proposed the listener's own death. "*Hau*! But something else was said by Umlimo—ah-ah—something else! When Amakiwa are killed then it will rain. So said he. Our cattle are all dead, and our crops are dying. But—it has not yet rained. When Amakiwa are killed the rain will be great. Ah! ah! The rain will be great!"

As though burned in letters of fire within his mind there flashed back upon Lamont the recollection of these words. The sullen, uncordial reception, the reiteration of these words by those who witnessed their arrival—the meaning of all was clear now. This infernal Umlimo, whose quackeries and influence already had caused some stir in the land, had promised them copious rain on condition that the whites were slain.

"But so far there is none," went on the speaker. "The storm of this night, which should have revived our thirsting cornlands, has passed over us dry. Yet it was such a storm as should have brought with it a flood. *Whou*! And these two Amakiwa are in our hands. But enough of them. *Há*! U' Gandela. The talk is about *it*."

"*Eh! hé*!" assented the listeners. "The talk is about it."

"When the sun rises to-morrow," went on the speaker, "it will rise on a great company of fools. All the Amakiwa, for a long journey around, will be hurrying into Gandela, where they are going to race horses, and play games, and drink strong waters. The day after, the sun will rise upon all this, but—it will set on no more Amakiwa—not at Gandela."

"No more Amakiwa! 'M—'m!" hummed the audience.

"Yet the other plan might be better," urged one of these. "To strike them all by twos and threes, all over our country. Thus would they be the quicker dead but with less trouble to us. How is that, Zwabeka?"

"Ours is the better way, Zazwe. You would first strike the tail of the snake, I and others the head. This is the best."

"Zwabeka? Zazwe?" More than ever now did the listener prick up his ears. So it was Zwabeka himself—Zwabeka who was supposed to be sick—Zwabeka whose guest he was—Zwabeka the most influential chief in the Matyantatu district—who had been advocating the murder of himself and his travelling companion, and now was planning a treacherous and wholesale massacre of all the whites, when they should be gathered together wholly unsuspecting, and probably almost wholly unarmed, at the race meeting and gymkhana which was to be held at Gandela on the day after to-morrow! And Zazwe—an equally important chief located in the adjoining district of Sikumbutana! and from this he began to suspect what was in point of fact correct—that this meeting embraced some half-dozen or more of the most influential chiefs of Matabeleland. Here was a pretty sort of conspiracy he had all unconsciously been the means of getting behind.

Crouching low he listened with all his might and main. His brain seemed bursting. The very hammering of his pulses seemed to impair his sense of hearing. Oh, but it must not—it should not! Then a dog began barking on the farther side of the kraal. Oh, that infernal cur! The lives of hundreds of his unsuspecting countrymen—and women—depended on what he might hear next, and were they to be sacrificed to the yapping of an infernal mongrel cur! But still the brute yelped on.

And now as regarded his own safety this man thought nothing, he whom we have heard referred to as a 'funkstick,' as prone to show the white feather, and so forth. Whether the imputations were true or not, lying there now, listening for the continuation of the bloodthirsty and murderous plot, Lamont felt absolutely no shred of a sense of fear—instead, one of savage irritation. That yapping cur which interfered with his sense of hearing—could he but have strangled it with his bare hands! He was no longer Piers Lamont, an individual. He was an instrument, a delicate and subtle, though potent machine, and he felt as though the destined smoothness of his working had been interfered with and thrown out of order.

"Here then is the plan," went on the one he had identified as Zwabeka, after a little general discussion which the barking of the dog and his own excitement had prevented him from adequately grasping. "When these Amakiwa are gathered at Gandela, on the next day but one, Qubani, who is known to some of them, will be in their midst. The place where they race their horses is outside the town, and it is overhung by a bush-covered mountain-side. Good! On that mountain-side, in the bushes, a strong *impi* will muster—and watch. When the sign is given—*Ou*! in no time will there be any Amakiwa left alive. Tell it again, my father."

"This is it, Amakosi," took up the voice, which the listener recognised as that of the famous witch-doctor who had spoken before, "Zwabeka has said I am known to some of the Amakiwa. To-morrow I shall be known to another of them, this Lamonti, whom I will talk to before he goes his way. Now see how more useful he is to us alive than dead—for the present. I will go in and talk with them pleasantly and look at their horse races. But it is afterwards, when they all collect to receive rewards for those who have won in races—then it is that our time will have come. They will all be collected together, having no thought but for who is to receive rewards. And they will all be looking one way, and shouting, and—all throwing up their hats. *Whau*! All throwing up their hats!"

A hum of expectant eagerness ran through the listeners. Could the—never so justified—eavesdropper have seen through that wall of grass and rough plaster he would have seen a tense, a bloodthirsty look on each set, thrust-forward face, hanging on what was to follow.

"Ha! All throwing up their hats. And I, Qubani, will be throwing up mine."

"'M—'m!" hummed the listeners.

"Yet, how shall we see that, when so many hats are being thrown up?" asked Zwabeka's voice.

"This way. I have a red cap, given me by one of them when last I was at Buluwayo. It will I throw up. The Amakiwa do not wear red caps."

"But—if the time is not ripe?" struck in a voice which the listener thought not to have heard yet. "If, by chance, the Amakiwa are suspicious and are all armed—what then?"

"*Au*! That is not likely. But I will wear two caps—a white one under the red. If the time is ripe, the red one goes into the air—then those who are elsewhere will receive news by swift signal that all the Amakiwa in their part of the country be at once and immediately slain. If I see that the time is not yet, then I throw the white signal in the air. So must we sit still and deliberate further. It is the red signal or the white."

"The red signal or the white!" echoed his hearers. "Ah! ah! The red signal or the white!"

"That is understood," said Qubani. "The red signal or the white."

"*Eh! hé! Siyavuma*!" hummed the others.

Now the listener thought to detect signs that the deliberations had come to an end, and if so, some, at any rate, of those within would be coming forth. Two courses suggested themselves to him. He lay between the hut and the outer stockade. The chances were that anyone coming out would take the other side, between the huts, to make their way to their respective quarters. But chances, unless one is driven to take them, are uncertain props, wherefore he decided to beat a retreat while there was yet time. Accordingly he crawled backwards a little, then stood upright, and, keeping against the dark background of the outer stockade, was lounging at unconcerned pace back in the direction of his hut, when—

"Sleep well, brother. *Au*! I think we need it."

He had nearly cannoned against a tall figure which appeared round the side of a hut. The deep tones he recognised as those of Zwabeka. Clearly the chief mistook him in the darkness for one of those who had taken part in the *indaba*. He drawled an assent in a sleepy voice, and fervently blessed the unknown influence which had caused him to leave his large-brimmed hat in the hut when he had come forth on his midnight wandering, and now, with his blanket over his head, he might pass very well in the darkness for one of themselves, and, indeed, had so passed. But his trial was not over yet.

As the chief passed on there stepped forth two more figures, lazily chatting; this time behind him. The thing was too risky. In front of him yawned the black hole of the doorway of one of the huts, left open, perhaps, on account of the heat—only it was not hot. Through this he crept, without a moment's hesitation, as though it were his own dwelling. Hardly was he within than the two who had been behind him likewise entered.

He stretched himself on the ground, emitting a forced yawn—very forced. The others, on their side of the tenement, followed his example. He could determine, by sounds of light snoring, that the tenement already contained others before these late arrivals. Soon the latter were likewise in the Land of Nod.

Lying there in the pitchy darkness Lamont realised that his position was exciting, to put it mildly. Here he was, in the same hut with two of the conspirators, and how many others he could, of course, not determine. The next thing was to get out again. But for that he must take his time. Hurry would be fatal.

If ever minutes had seemed to him hours, assuredly they did so now. And with this idea a new source of peril struck him. In the dead silence he thought to hear the ticking of his watch. What if other ears should hear it too. He thought to stop it—but how so much as get it open in the darkness without breaking the glass; and then just one fragment on the floor of the hut would betray him in the morning. Still, with his blanket tightly round him, the ticking might not be heard. At last he reckoned it time to make a move.

It is a mistake to imagine that savages are necessarily light sleepers. When no particular reason for watchfulness exists, your South African native is anything but that. Rolled up in his blanket, head and all, he will sleep as soundly as the dead, and will require little short of violence to awaken him; wherefore the other inhabitants of the hut, being utterly unsuspicious of the presence of a stranger in their midst, had attained to exactly that stage of somnolence; consequently, when the said stranger crept through the door, no one was aware of it. Again his nerves thrilled as he found himself once more in the chilly night air. He had still a little way to go. What if the dogs should wind him as he crossed the open space, and raise a clamour? But they did not, and with a sigh of infinite relief he found himself safe within his own hut. He could hear his travelling companion mildly snoring. What an extraordinary piece of luck that they should have met when they did, for, by the light of what he had heard, he had no doubt but that his treacherous entertainers would have murdered him. Had he spent the night alone in that kraal, such would have been his fate, but the superstitious dread in which, for some reason or other, they seemed to hold the priest, had saved him, and in the result would save a good many more.

Then the grisly agency of his awakening occurred to him, and indeed no more effective means could have been employed not merely to do so but to keep him awake. His fellow traveller would, he supposed, have called it the hand of Providence, and he thought it looked very much as if such were the case, for Lamont was no scoffer.

"I suppose I ought to make a vow never again to kill a tarantula," he said to himself; "for what would have been the result had I slept as hard and long as our good friend over there, well, Heaven only knows."

Sitting there in the darkness, waiting for dawn, he was thinking, and thinking hard. There had been warning rumours here and there that the natives were not so content under the white man's rule as was supposed—nor that they deemed themselves anything like so roundly squashed and beaten less than three years earlier as they should have. Such rumours, however, were not acceptable to the "powers that were," and their originators discouraged; and bearing this in mind, what was seemingly the most obvious course—to lose no time in warning the proper authorities, to wit—was the very last thing that Lamont had determined to follow. If he started warning people, nobody would believe him. They would simply laugh and say he had got the funks, meanwhile it would be sure to leak out to the natives that such

warning had been given. They would put two and two together, and, connecting it in some way with his presence at their kraal that night, would entirely change their plan, probably with disastrous result to the white population. On the other hand, if the massacre at Gandela were averted, it would show, as they had agreed, that the time for rising was not yet ripe—which would afford him time to turn his warning to proper account, a thing he could not possibly do in one day.

That the massacre at Gandela should be averted he was fully determined, and that he himself should be the means of averting it—he alone, working to his own hand.

Chapter Ten.

What Lamont did.

“That is a very great *isanusi* in there, *umfane*,” said Lamont, as he splashed his head and face in a large calabash bowl. His travelling companion the while was engaged in his devotions inside the hut.

“A very great *isanusi*?” echoed the youth, who was Gudhlusa’s son, the same who had attended to their wants the night before. “Ha! Is he as great as Qubani?”

“Yes.”

“*Ou*!”

Lamont knew perfectly well that the other didn’t believe him, but he was talking with an object. “Can he foretell things?” went on the youth. The while two or three more had sauntered up and were listening interestedly.

Lamont was on the point of answering in the affirmative, when it occurred to him that to do so would be to make a fatal slip in view of what the next day was to bring forth. So he replied—

“He cannot foretell things. He can do them.”

“*Hau*!” burst forth from the group, and hands were brought to mouths and heads turned aside, expressive of indescribable incredulity. “An *isanusi* who cannot foretell things! Now, *Nkose*, what sort of *isanusi* is that?”

“Nevertheless his *múti* is great—greater than that of Qubani—in its way.”

“In its way—ah! ah! in its way,” they hummed.

“Talking of Qubani,” replied Lamont. “Now that *is* an *isanusi*. I would fain see one like that. But—I suppose he does not live here, son of Gudhlusa.”

“But he is here, *Nkose*.”

“That is good news, and I have a gift for him. When we have eaten, I will talk with him. When we have eaten, I say.”

The youth grinned, and, taking the hint, walked off, presently to return with some more roasted mealies and *tywala*.

“You had a good night of it, Father,” said Lamont as they sat discussing this fare. “By Jove! you slept through it all like a humming-top.”

“I believe I did. I was very tired. And you—did you sleep well?”

“Until a whacking big tarantula woke me up by promenading over my ear. I couldn’t get to sleep again all at once after that.”

“That was very unpleasant. Did you kill it?”

“No. It got away into a crack. Daresay it’s there yet.”

“Ah well, I am glad we are not going to sleep in the same hut again to-night.”

Lamont chuckled to himself as he thought of what momentous issues of life and death would hang—were hanging—upon the incident. Looking round upon the great kraal, its dark inhabitants going about their peaceful avocations in the newly risen sun, he could hardly realise that the events of the night had been other than a bad dream. The first thing he had done on coming forth had been to glance eagerly at the ground. No. The hard and parched soil showed no footprints. He had grumbled the previous evening because the storm had brought no rain, but since then he had had abundant reason to be thankful for the fact; otherwise the marks of shod footprints, leading to and from the place of conspiracy, would tell their own tale. He had mentioned nothing to his travelling companion of what had happened—judging it better not. Then, as time wore on, Lamont was getting anxious. They would have to saddle up directly, and the witch-doctor had not appeared. It was absolutely essential that he should be able to identify him; and as yet he was unfamiliar with his outward aspect.

“*Nkose*!”

He turned at the salute. An elderly, thick-set native had approached, and as he stood, with hand uplifted, Lamont supposed it was one of the plotting chiefs. His head, too, was surmounted by the small Matabele ring.

“I see you, father,” he answered. “Am I speaking to a chief?”

A flash of mirth shot into the other’s eyes, and he simply bubbled with glee.

"A chief! Ha! I am Qubani, *Nkose*."

"The great *isanusi*! Then you are indeed a chief, my father—the chief of all *izanusi*."

The other beamed. Then putting forth his hand, he asked for tobacco, which was given him.

The while Lamont was wondering. He had expected to see a lean, crafty, evil-faced Makalaka, instead of which the famed witch-doctor turned out a stout, comfortable, and well-bred looking Matabele; a ringed man withal, and overflowing with good-nature and geniality. And this was the man who was to give the signal for the massacre of a whole township full of Europeans on the morrow. Yes, on the morrow.

It was puzzling. The Abantwana Mlimo—or children of the mystery—its hierarchy to wit, were all, so far as he knew, of the subject race of Makalaka; yet here was a man obviously of pure Zulu descent, and carrying himself with all the natural dignity of that kingly race. Could he be the genuine Qubani? There was absolutely nothing suggestive of the witch-doctor about him.

"This, too, is Umtwana Mlimo?" said the sorcerer, with a good-humouredly quizzical look at Father Mathias.

"Of the Great Great One above—yes," answered the latter.

"*Ou*! The Great Great One above! I am a child beside such," rejoined Qubani. "My father, *u'gwai* (tobacco) is scarce among us at present," reaching out his hand.

Laughing, the priest gave him some. Then, as they chatted further, Lamont became impatient, though he did not show it. He had got at all he wanted. He had seen Qubani, and now he wanted to start, and it was with unmitigated relief that he hailed the arrival of Gudhlusa, who came to tell them that Zwabeka was no longer sick and hoped they would not depart without coming to bid him farewell. The chief's quarters were in a little enclosure apart, right on the opposite side of the kraal. Leading their horses, which they had already saddled up, they accompanied Gudhlusa; the *isanusi* also falling in with them. Zwabeka was a tall, elderly, rather morose-looking savage; and his tone as he talked with them was dashed with melancholy. The times were bad, he said—yes, very bad. Their cattle were all dying of the pestilence, and such as did not die, the Government had killed. "Where was U' Dokotela?" (Dr Jameson.)

Now Lamont became wary. It was impossible to suppose that the news of the Raid had not reached these people—for natives have a way of obtaining news, at almost whatever distance, rather quicker than Europeans with all their telegraphic facilities. So he answered that he was away, but would soon be back.

"He should not have gone," was the chief's rejoinder. "While U' Dokotela was in the country it was well. He was our father, but now—whom! Well, the Government is our father instead."

This, uttered with an air of beautiful resignation, was tickling Lamont to the last degree. But he answered gravely that that was so indeed. Then he announced that they must resume their way, but first he had a gift for the chief—producing a half-sovereign.

"*Nkose! Baba*!" cried Zwabeka with alacrity, receiving it in both hands, as the way is with natives. "And the white *isanusi*—is he not my father too?"

"I am a poor man, chief," answered the priest, mustering his best Sindabele. "Yet—here is something."

Zwabeka looked at the silver without great enthusiasm, while the bystanders muttered—

"A poor man? *Yau*! An *isanusi* a poor man! *Mamoi* was ever such a thing heard of?"

"It is true *amadoda*," said Lamont. "The white *isanusi* give away all the gifts *they* receive—and more."

A ripple of undisguised laughter ran through the group. An *isanusi* give away all he received, and more! No, that was too much. Lamonti was trying to amuse them.

They bade farewell to the chief, and those present. Outside the enclosure Lamont picked up his gun, which in accordance with native etiquette he had left there, taking care, however, that there were no cartridges in it, in case of accidents. As they mounted their horses at the farther gate, the witch-doctor came running up.

They had forgotten something, he declared. These great ones had forgotten him.

"That is true," said Lamont, with a laugh, "yet not altogether. I did not want the chief of this kraal to know that I thought the chief of *izanusi* equal to him by giving him an equal gift. Here it is."

"*Baba, Nkose*!" sung out Qubani, turning inquiringly to the other. But Lamont laughed.

"Now nay, Qubani—now nay. Two brethren of the same craft do not take gifts from one another. They take them from those outside."

The old man chuckled at this, and with sonorous farewells he dropped back.

"I'm afraid that has been rather an expensive visit—for you, Mr Lamont," said Father Mathias, as they rode along.

"Yes. But I had a reason for it, which may or may not hereinafter appear," was the somewhat enigmatical reply. And soon they came to the point where their roads separated, Lamont no longer pressing his companion to come on and visit him. In fact he would have been seriously embarrassed had his former invitation been accepted—now in the light of subsequent events. He wanted to act unhampered, and to do that he must be alone. But as they parted he said—

"I don't want to set up a general scare, but if you were to warn the people at Skrine's Store, or any other whites you come across, that if they keep their eyes open for the next few weeks, and take care not to run short of cartridges—why, they won't be doing the wrong thing. You know I've always said we should have more trouble up here, and have been

jeered at as a funkstick. But I've just learnt something that tells me that that trouble is a great deal nearer than we think; in fact, right on us."

"What? Here—at this kraal we've just left?" said the priest, astonished and startled.

"Perhaps. But you'd better not give me as your authority or the silly fools will take no notice of it, and get all their silly throats slit. You can give out that you've every reason to know that mischiefs brewing—and by Jove, you have! you may take it from me, Father. Well, good-bye. I've been very glad of your company."

"Indeed, and I have been very glad of yours. I will bear in mind your warning, Mr Lamont, and I hope we may meet again."

They were to meet again, but under what circumstances either of them little dreamed.

No man living owned a cooler brain and less excitable nature than Piers Lamont, yet as he rode leisurely on he was conscious of an element of excitement entering into his scheme. He alone would avert the impending horror, and the means he had already determined on. That he might fail never entered into his calculations.

But on arrival at his farm, he met with the first check. His spare horse, which he had lent Ancram to ride into Gandela with, was not there. He had sent Zingela in for it before starting on his recent trip. Both should have been back the day before yesterday, but there was no sign of either. This did not look promising. The boy might have taken the horse and gone over to the enemy. There came out to receive him an elderly Matabele, whose business it was to look after the cattle and whom he reckoned trustworthy.

"Zingela should have been back by now, Ujojo," he said.

The man agreed, suggesting however that perhaps the strange *Inkosi* might have wanted to use the horse longer. Lamont frowned.

"I want to go into Gandela for the races to-morrow," he said. "And there isn't a horse on the place, and this one I've just brought in is beginning to go lame. Well, take the saddle off him and give him a good feed, Ujojo. I shall have to ride him, lame and all, if the other doesn't turn up by this evening."

Ujojo led the animal away, wondering. Lamont was fidgety about his horses beyond the ordinary, and yet here he was proposing to ride one of them that was lame, and just off a fair journey into the bargain, a distance that would take him the best part of the night to cover. Yet he was totally unsuspicious as to the real motive for such insane behaviour. He concluded his master must be in love with some girl, and would go to any trouble, and make any sacrifice to get to her; as he had seen others do before him. These Amakiwa were an extraordinary race, so clever and so sensible about most things, and yet such very complete fools where their women were concerned; making themselves their servants, and carrying loads for them, and indeed doing *konza* to them in the most abject way. *Whau*! he had seen it, he, Ujojo, many times, else had he refused to believe a tale so incredible. And now his master, whom he had reckoned quite above that sort of madness, and had respected accordingly, was going to prove himself after all just as foolish as the rest. Ujojo clicked disgustedly, and spat.

His said master the while had opened the gun-chest—a strong and solid structure, secured in addition by a patent lock—and was loading a magazine rifle to its fullest carrying capacity, slipping several additional cartridges into a coat pocket. Peters was away at Buluwayo, and he had the place to himself. Then, having refreshed the inner man, he lay down for an hour's snooze—and in truth he needed it, for he had got but little sleep last night, and would get none at all this.

And—the night after?

Chapter Eleven.

The Race Meeting.

The race-course at Gandela lay just outside the township, and between it and the bushy ridge Ehlatini.

It was a large, circular space, surrounded by a not particularly strong bush-fence, and now on the day of the race meeting and gymkhana it presented a very lively scene indeed; for not only was practically the whole population of Gandela there gathered, but that of the surrounding district. Settlers from outlying farms, prospectors from remote camps, storekeepers and others, had all come in to see or join in the fun. And in contrast to the swarm of bronzed and belted men—coatless, and wearing for the most part the broad-brimmed American hat—a flutter of bright colour here and there of blouse and sunshade showed that the ornamental sex, as represented in fa-away Matabeleland, was quite as ambitious of being up to date as anywhere else. Taking it altogether they were having a good time of it, as was bound to be the case in a locality where man was largely in preponderance, and where, in consequence, there were not enough women to go round, as we heard Clare Vidal remark.

She herself was looking altogether winsome and delightful, as she flashed forth jest and repartee among the group surrounding her, for she was holding quite a little court. Men—among them fine gallant-looking fellows who had served with some distinction in the former war—seemed to hang upon her words, or was it her tones, her smiles?—laying up for themselves, perchance, store of future heartache. Her brother-in-law, who was one of the stewards, declared she was causing a positive obstruction. A hoot of good-humoured derision arose from the group.

"Oh, go away, Fullerton, you jolly old policeman," cried one man.

"Send him off, Mrs Fullerton, do," said another.

But before Lucy had time to reply, two bronzed giants had seized the offender one by each arm, and gently but firmly marched him across the course to where an impromptu bar under a canvas awning was doing a roaring trade.

"That's better for you, old man," said one, as three glasses were set down empty.

"And unless you give us your word not to bother Miss Vidal any more we'll keep you here all day," said the other.

"Oh, I'll give you my word for anything you like," laughed Fullerton. "We'll have another round, and then I must get back."

It must be conceded that the racing was poor, but then, so for the most part were the horses, thanks to the protracted drought and the necessity of their training consisting of the process of earning their keep. But the day was lovely—cloudless and golden—and the heat rose in a shimmer from the mimosa-dotted veldt and the dark, bushy slope of Ehlatini lining up to the vivid depths of heaven's blue. A sort of impromptu grand stand had been effected by placing chairs and benches along a couple of empty waggons, and at the corner of one of these Clare sat—still holding her court—while her fervid worshippers talked up to her from the ground. The luncheon hour was over—so, too, were the races, but the afternoon would be devoted to tent-pegging and other sports.

"Hallo!" said one of the favoured group. "Blest if that isn't Lamont over there, and—he's got his coat on."

"Where else should he have it, Mr Wyndham?" said the girl mischievously.

"He shouldn't have it at all. You know, Miss Vidal, it's an unwritten rule up here that none of us wear coats."

"But I notice that you are all mighty particular about your collars and ties," laughed Clare.

"'M—yes. But wearing a coat stamps you as a new-comer. Even Ancram here has fallen into our way."

Ancram had, and moreover mightily fancied himself accordingly; and had turned on an additional swagger which he flattered himself still further marked him out as the complete pioneer. He had been introduced to Clare, but inwardly raged at the marked coldness in her demeanour towards himself. It was no imagination, he was satisfied, her frank sunniness of manner towards everybody else placed that beyond a doubt. Others had remarked on it too.

"What have you been doing to Miss Vidal, old chap?" one of his newly-found friends inquired. "She seems to have a down on you." And Ancram had replied that he was hanged if he knew.

"Why, he's missed all the races," went on the first speaker, referring to Lamont. "He's looking a bit seedy too. And—no, he hasn't. He hasn't got on his revolver."

"That's rum, for he never moves without it," said another. "We chaff him a bit about that, Miss Vidal, but he says he prefers being on the safe side."

"Lamont would prefer that," said Ancram significantly.

"Haven't you just been stopping with him?" said Clare rather sharply, turning on the speaker. "He's a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"Um—ah—yes, yes. Of course," was the somewhat confused reply.

"I'm not sure Mr Lamont isn't right," she went on for the benefit of the rest. "This is a country full of savages, and savages are often treacherous. Aren't they, Mr Driffield?"

"Aren't who, and what, Miss Vidal?" replied the Native Commissioner, who was in the act of joining the group. She repeated her remark.

"Oh yes. You'll get Ancram to agree with you on that head," he added significantly.

"There!" she cried triumphantly.

"I say, though, Miss Vidal," objected another man, "you surely wouldn't have us all roll up at a peaceable gymkhana hung round with six-shooters, like the conventional cowboy? Eh?"

"Well, where should we be if a Matabele impi were to rush in on us now?" she persisted. "Utterly at its mercy, of course. Imagine it charging out from there, for instance," pointing towards the dark line of bush on the slope of Ehlatini.

Some of the other occupants of the 'grand stand' here raised quite a flutter of protest. It was too bad of Miss Vidal to indulge in such horrible imaginings, they declared. It made them quite uncomfortable. Many a true word was spoken in jest—and so forth. But the men laughed indulgently; utterly and sceptically scornful their mirth would have been but for the sex and popularity of the speaker.

Many a true word spoken in jest! Yes, indeed. Here a lively holiday scene—the clatter of the horses, laughter and jollity and flirtation—nearly a couple of hundred men, besides women and children, the former unarmed,—all save one. The wretched ryot returning at sunset to his jungle village is not more blissfully unconscious of the lurking presence of the dread man-eater, which in a moment more, will, with lightning-like pounce, sweep him out of existence, than are these, that yonder, upon the bushy slope almost overhanging their pleasure ground, a thousand armed savages are hungrily watching for the signal which shall change this sunny, light-hearted scene into a drama of carnage, and woe and horror unutterable. All—save one.

"You've got such a lively imagination, you ought to write a book about us, Miss Vidal," suggested Wyndham. "You could make some funny characters out of some of us, I'll bet."

"I don't doubt it for a moment. Shall I begin with yourself, Mr Wyndham?"

"Oh, I say though, I don't know about that. Here's Driffield, he'd make a much better character than I would. Or Lamont—here, Lamont," he called out, as the latter was passing near. "Roll up, man, and hear your luck. Miss Vidal is going to write a book and make you the principal character."

"Really, Mr Wyndham, I wouldn't have believed it of you," laughed Clare. "To tell such shocking taradiddles. It's

obviously a long time since you attended Sunday school. Now, go away. I won't talk to you any more—for—let me see, well, not for half an hour. Go away. Half an hour, mind."

He swept off his hat with comic ruefulness. Then over his shoulder—

"I resign—*vice* Lamont promoted—for half an hour."

"That means a whole hour, now," called out Clare after him, whereat a great laugh went up from her hearers.

From all but one, that is; and to this one all this chaff and light-hearted merriment was too awful, too ghastly—he, who *knew* what none of these even so much as suspected.

"And the flood came and destroyed them all," he quoted to himself. And as he contemplated all these women occupying the 'grand stand'—cool and dainty and elegant in their light summer attire—and this beautiful girl queening it over her little court of admirers, it seemed to him that the responsibility resting upon his own shoulders was too great, too awful, too superhuman: and the thought flitted through his brain that perhaps he ought never to have assumed it. A warning to the authorities to postpone the race meeting and put the township into a state of defence—would not such have been his plain duty? But then they would only have laughed at him for a scare-monger and have done nothing. Moreover, even had he decided on such a plan, the Fates had already decided against it, for the lame horse on which he had started for Gandela had gone lamer still, with the result that he had been obliged to abandon the animal, and cover nearly half the distance on foot. He had further been forced to make a considerable *détour*, in order to avoid the mustering impi, portions of which he had seen, and all heading for the point arranged upon—consequently it was not until the early afternoon that he gained the township at all.

There was yet time. The prize-giving was the crucial moment, and that would not take place for at least three hours. He made a good meal at the hotel—an absolute necessity—and sent it down with a bottle of the best champagne the house had got. Even then, when he arrived on the course, he drew the remark that he was 'looking rather seedy,' as we have heard.

"Why, Mr Lamont, you are quiet," said Clare brightly. "Shall I offer you the regulation penny?"

He smiled queerly.

"Am I? Oh, Driffield's making such a row one couldn't have heard oneself speak in any case."

"I like that," exclaimed the implicated one. "By Jove, old chap, you do look chippy! And—you've got a coat on."

"Yes. Premonitory touch of fever. No good taking risks. That you, Ancram? I say, why the dickens didn't you send back my gee again? I've been wanting him more than enough, I can tell you."

Ancram explained that he thought a day or two more or less didn't matter, and he was awfully sorry, and so on, the while he was thinking what a beastly disagreeable chap Lamont could be if he liked, and what rotten form it was kicking up a row in public about his old bag of bones, which he probably hadn't really been in want of at all.

"I'm tired of sitting here," pronounced Clare. "I want to walk about a bit. Help me down, someone!"

Half a dozen hands were extended, but it was on Lamont's that hers rested as she tripped down the cranky, wobbly steps, knocked up out of old boxes.

"You coming, Lucy? No? Too hot? Oh well."

Lamont was obviously the favoured one to-day, decided the others, observing how decidedly, though without appearing to do so, she took possession of him; wherefore they refrained from making an escort, except Ancram, whom she promptly cold-shouldered in such wise that even he was not proof against it, and finally dropped off, wondering what on earth any girl could see in a dull disagreeable dog like Lamont, who hadn't three words to say for himself.

"Will you do something for me if I ask you, Mr Lamont?" said Clare, as they found themselves a little apart from the rest, who were watching some high jumping.

"Certainly I will, Miss Vidal—er, that is—if I can."

Really he was in good sooth doing his best to deserve Ancram's verdict. That sweet bright face, looking up at him in a way that most of those present would have given something to occupy his shoes, surely deserved an answer less frigid, less halting. Clare herself felt something of this, and she replied—

"Oh, it's nothing very great. I only want you to enter for the tent-pegging."

He was relieved. He had contemplated the possibility of her requiring some service that would necessitate him leaving his post—hence the hesitation.

"Of course I will. But isn't it too late to enter?"

"No. If it is they'll have to waive the rule. I'm going to put money on you."

"Oh, don't do that. You'll lose. That fellow Ancram has been riding my horse to death, the groom at Foster's was quite surprised I should want to ride him up here now, all things considered. However, there he is. I'll enter with pleasure, but don't you plunge on me."

"But I will, and you must win. Do you hear, you must win."

"I'll try my best, and can't do more."

“That’s right,” she said.

Lamont was very much of a misogynist, and was impatient of the sex and its foibles, but there was something in this girl that disarmed even him. Her very voice sounded caressing, and the quick lift of the deep blue eyes—well, it was dangerous, might soon become maddening. She had appealed to him from the very first, he admitted as much deep down in his heart of hearts, but there, and there only. Now, amid this sunny, light-hearted scene, as he looked at her he thought how, under other circumstances, he might have talked to her differently. But the horror invisibly brooding on yonder sunlit hill was still to be reckoned with, and now another anxiety was deepening within his mind. The witch-doctor had not yet arrived, and his presence was essential to the carrying out of the plot—and its frustration.

The tent-pegging, like the racing, proved, for the most part, poor; so much so indeed that it was hard to work up any great enthusiasm over it, though there was abundance of chaff. At the end, however, flagging interest revived, for now the win lay between Lamont and Orwell, the resident magistrate. Tie after tie they made, always neck and neck, and it became a question whether it would not end in a tie. There was plenty of excitement now, and shouting. Then there was dead silence as the two men awaited the word for the last time.

Lamont settled down to his saddle. He would win, he felt, to miss would be impossible. They were off. His lance was unerringly straight for the peg. But as they thundered along he looked up—only one lightning-quick glance, and then—his lance ploughed up the bare turf while that of his adversary whirled aloft, the wedge of wood impaled upon it hard and fast. And amid the roar of cheers that rent the air, Lamont recognised that that quick side-glance he had been betrayed into taking had lost him the day.

But that look—which had clouded his brain and unsteadied his wrist—not upon her for whom he was here in these modern lists was it directed, but upon a red object moving among the groups near the entrance gate of the enclosure.

Chapter Twelve.

The Red Signal—Or the White?

“Why—it is. It’s old Qubani,” said Driffield.

“And who might old ‘Click’-ubani be?” asked Clare.

“He’s a thundering big Matabele witch-doctor. Fancy the old boy rolling up to see the fun. Wonder they let him in.”

“It was thanks to you, Driffield,” said a man who was within earshot. “He was asking for you. Told them at the gate that you and Lamont had invited him to come.”

“Then he told a whacking big lie, at any rate as far as I am concerned. Well, I suppose I must go and talk to him, and incidentally stand him something. In my line it’s everything to be well in with influential natives.”

“Can’t you bring him here, Mr Driffield?” asked Clare. “I’d like to talk to a Matabele chief—didn’t you say he was a chief?”

“No; a witch-doctor, who, in his way, is often just as big a pot as a chief—sometimes a bigger. You’d better come over with me and talk to him, Miss Vidal; then, when you’ve had enough of him, you can go away, whereas if I bring him here he may stick on for ever.”

Old Qubani, who was squatting against the enclosure talking to a roughish-looking white man, rose to his feet as he saw Driffield, and with hand uplifted poured forth lavish *sibongo*. Then he turned to Clare.

“*Nkosazana! Uhle! Amehlo kwezulu! Wou! Sipazi-pazi*!”

“What does he say?” she asked.

“He hails you as a princess, says that you are beautiful, and have eyes like the heavens—and that you are dazzling. That’s why he put his hand over his eyes and looked down.”

“Silly old man; he’s quite poetical,” she said, looking pleased all the same.

“*Indhlovukazi*!”

“Now he’s calling you a female elephant.”

“Oh, the horrid old wretch. That is a come down, Mr Driffield.”

“Yes, it sounds so, but it’s a big word of *sibongo*, or praise, with them.”

“Oh well, then I must forgive him.”

“*Intandokazi*!”

“What’s that?” said Clare, but Driffield had cut short the old man’s rigmarole and was talking to him about something else. He did not care to tell her that she was being hailed as his—Driffield’s—principal—or rather best-loved—wife. Two white men, standing near, and who understood, turned away with a suppressed splutter.

There was the usual request for tobacco, and then, Qubani glancing meaningly in the direction of the bar tent, remarked that he had travelled far, and that the white man made better *tywala* than the Amandabeli, as, indeed, what could not the white men do.

“A bottle of Bass won’t hurt him,” declared Driffield, sending across for it.

“Why does he wear that great thick cap?” said Clare. “He’d look much better without it.”

“This?” said the old man, putting his hand to the cap of red knitted worsted, surmounted by a tuft, which adorned his head—as the remark was translated to him. “*Whau*! I am old and the nights are not warm.”

“Why, he’s got on two,” said Clare, as the movement, slightly displacing the red cap, showed another underneath made of like material but white. “Goodness! I wonder his head doesn’t split.”

“Native heads don’t split in a hurry, Miss Vidal,” said Orwell, the Resident Magistrate, who had joined them in time to catch the remark.

“I don’t believe I ought to speak to you, Mr Orwell—at any rate not just yet. You had no business to win that tent-pegging. I had backed Mr Lamont.”

The Magistrate laughed.

“Let me tell you, Miss Vidal, that you had backed the right man then. In fact it’s inconceivable to me how he missed that last time, unless the sense of his awful responsibility made him nervous. It would have made me so.”

Again, many a true word uttered in jest. The speaker little knew that he had stated what was literally and exactly the case.

“Nonsense. I wonder where Mr Lamont has got to. He hasn’t been near me since.”

“That I can quite believe. He’s afraid. I know I should be.”

“Nonsense again, Mr Orwell.” And talking about other things they turned away, quite forgetting the old witch-doctor. There was one, however, who was not forgetting him—no, not by any means.

The while Jim Steele, the latest rejected of Clare, was very drunk in the bar tent. When we say very drunk we don’t mean to convey the idea that he was incapable, or even unsteady on his pins to any appreciable extent—but just nasty, quarrelsome, fighting drunk; and as he was a big, powerful fellow, most of those standing about were rather civil to him. Now Jim Steele was at bottom a good fellow rather than otherwise, but his rejection by Clare Vidal he had taken to heart. He had also taken to drink.

He had noticed Clare and Lamont together that day, and had more than once scowled savagely at the pair. Moreover, he had heard that Clare had backed Lamont—and had made others do so—in the tent-pegging, and now he was bursting with rage and jealousy. It follows therefore that this was an unfortunate moment for the object of his hatred to enter the tent, and call for a whisky-and-soda. Upon him he wheeled round.

“You can’t ride a damn!” he shouted.

“I never tried. I prefer to ride a horse,” said Lamont, setting down his glass.

“But you can’t,” jeered Steele. Then roused to the highest pitch of fury by the other’s coolness, he bellowed: “Look here. Can you fight, eh? Can you? Because if so, come on.”

Something akin to intense dismay came into Lamont’s mind at this development. That this drunken, aggressive idiot should have it in his power to dig not only his own grave—that would have been a good riddance—but all their graves, was a new and startling development in a situation that was already sufficiently complicated. For apart from his horror and repulsion at being perforce a party to a drunken brawl in the bar tent—how was he going to impress Qubani, at the crucial moment, with a bunged-up eye, perchance, or a bleeding nose. He would only look ridiculous, not in the least impressive, and it was of vital importance he should look impressive.

“Yes, I can,” he answered shortly, “but I’m not going to—now.”

A murmur of disgust arose from among some of the bystanders. Lamont had funked again.

“Then you’re a blanked coward,” yelled Steele, and the murmurs deepened. And yet—and yet—there was a look in Lamont’s dark face which made some of them pause, for it was not exactly the look of one who was afraid, rather was it that of a man who was trying to restrain himself.

“I’m not going to now,” he said shortly, “but I’ll accommodate you where and when you like, after the gymkhana’s over. We can’t start bruising now, with a lot of ladies on the scene. Now, can we?”

The bystanders, thus appealed to, saw the sense of this. Besides, they were not going to be done out of their fun this time. It was only fun adjourned.

“No, no. That’s quite right and reasonable. Jim, you can’t kick up a row here now. Take it out of him afterwards,” were some of the cries that arose.

“He won’t be there. He’ll scoot.”

“Oh no, I won’t,” answered Lamont. “I’ll be there,”—“if any of us are,” he added to himself grimly.

He finished his liquor and went outside. There was a lull in the proceedings, and people were moving about and talking, pending the distribution of the prizes.

“Greeting, Qubani. That is good. Last time we talked was ‘kwa Zwabeka.’”

"*Ou*! Lamonti is my father," answered the old witch-doctor. Then, having fired off a long string of *sibongo*, he concluded that the sun was very hot, and it was long since he had drunk anything.

"That shall be presently when these are gone," said Lamont. "But first—walk round with me, and I will show you where the horses race. It is good to see the chief of all *izanusi* again."

The old ruffian complied, nothing loth. He was thinking that the more exuberant his friendliness the more completely would he lull all suspicion among these fools of whites. He professed himself profoundly interested in everything explained to him.

"I saw you ride, Lamonti," he said. "*Whau*! but you did pick up the little bits of wood with the long spear. That was great—great. But the other *Inkosi* was greater."

"Yes, the other was greater, Qubani, but what made me miss that stroke was joy at seeing my father, the greatest of all *izanusi* in our midst."

"*Whau*!"

"Mr Lamont, do come and help us with the prizes. They balloted for who should distribute them, and Lucy was chosen. Do come and stand by us and help. They are going to begin now."

"I'm most awfully sorry, Miss Vidal, but I can't just now."

"You won't?" said Clare curtly, for she was not accustomed to be refused.

"I can't," he repeated. "Do believe I have a good reason—and don't direct any attention to me just now. Believe me, a great deal hangs upon it."

"Very well," she said, and left him, marvelling. It must be as he had said—still that he should refuse to do something for her and prefer to talk to this squalid old savage instead—why, it was incomprehensible.

"What is covered up on that waggon, *Nkose*!" said the witch-doctor, pointing to a waggon which stood just inside the fence. Its position, perhaps, directly facing the Ehlatini ridge, suggested an inspiration to Lamont. He answered—

"*Izikwa-kwa*." (Maxim guns.)

"'M—'m! *Izikwa-kwa*?" hummed the other, wholly unable to suppress a considerable start of surprise. Then, recovering himself, he grinned, in bland incredulity.

"*Inkosi* is joking," he said. "There is no war."

"Nevertheless those are *izikwa-kwa*, loaded and ready to pour forth a storm of bullets for the rest of the day;" and the speaker devoutly prayed that the bar-keeper might not send his boy to get out another supply of soda-water bottles from beneath the sail and thus expose the fraud.

"Come. We will go and see them receive the rewards, those who have won them. But first I would have something to remember the chief of *izanusi* by. So sell me that red cap which is on thy head, Qubani," producing some silver.

"Now nay, my father, now nay, for the nights are cold and this red cap is warm—ah! ah! warm. See, here is a fine horn snuff-box, be content with that instead, as a gift."

"Here I hold the lives of twelve men—six on each side," answered Lamont, showing him the butt of a revolver, in one of his side pockets. "If I receive not that red cap this instant, the first life it shall spill will be that of the chief of all *izanusi*."

Qubani grunted, then his hand went slowly to his head. It was a tense, a nerve-racking moment. Would this savage, defying death, hurl the blood-red symbol high in the air, or—

The two were alone together now, the whole assembly having gathered round the prize tent. Lamont had drawn a revolver.

"Move not, save to hand me that cap," he said.

For a moment the savage hesitated. But the ring of steel pointing straight at his chest, perhaps the awful and fell look on this man's face, from which every drop of blood had vanished, and whose eyes were glittering like those of a wild beast, decided him. His hand came slowly down from his head, and the red cap was in Lamont's left hand.

Yes, it was a tense moment, and in the excitement of it Lamont had all he could do to keep his nerves steady. With a mind characteristically attuned to trifles at such a moment he found his attention partly shared by such. Apart from the crowd a very pretty girl was rating a man, in voluble English with a foreign accent, apparently for having paid too much attention elsewhere during the day. He heard Jim Steele snarling and cursing in the bar tent, and idly wondered if his language would reach ears for which it was not fit. He felt an interest in Orwell's dog, running about in search of its master—in short, a dozen other trivialities raced through his brain. Then a loud cheer broke the spell. The first prize had been distributed.

"This is not the unarmed gathering you would think, Qubani," he said, speaking in quick low tones. "Each man—and there are nearly two hundred of them—has his weapons all ready, and would have them in his hand in far less time than it would take you to run—say from here to Ehlatini."

"*Whou*!" ejaculated the witch-doctor, bringing his hand to his mouth.

"Moreover, all round Gandela there is laid that which would blow a whole impi into the air did such walk over it. The whites know where it is, but it would be very dangerous for strangers."

"Ha!"

Another cheer went up, as another prize was given away. Incidentally Lamont thought how fortunate he had been in not winning the tent-pegging competition, for he could not have received his prize by deputy, and it was still important to keep a close watch on Qubani.

"And now, O great *isanusi*," he went on, "what would be thy fate did those here know what my *múti* has told me? No quick and easy death, I fear."

A troubled and anxious look came into the old man's face.

"You are my father, Lamonti, but your talk is dark—very dark. *Ou*! Yet though I understand it not, I will do all you wish."

"That will be wise. Now we will look at them receiving the rewards. Come."

The prize tent was at the farther end of the enclosure and facing the Ehlatini ridge, towards which the spectators' backs were, by the position, of necessity turned. But Lamont, as he manoeuvred his prisoner on to the fringe of the crowd, took care that his was not. He noticed, moreover, a thread of smoke arising from the summit of the ridge. Well, there was nothing very extraordinary about that—or—there might have been.

"Throw up thy cap, Qubani," he said pleasantly, as another cheer broke forth and some hats were thrown in the air. "Throw up thy cap, and rejoice with us. Thy white cap."

The witch-doctor dared not refuse. With a broad grin, as though he were entering into the fun of the thing, he threw into the air—*the white signal*.

Again, and again, every time the cheering broke forth, Lamont banteringly bade him throw it higher, promising much *tywala* when the proceedings were over, till finally many of the spectators turned their attention to him and laughed like anything, cheering *him*. And one of them remarked that it was worth coming for alone, just to see the old boy flinging up his cap and hooraying like a white man and a brother.

They little knew, those light-hearted ones, that but for one man's nerve and presence of mind the red signal would have gone up, and then—

Chapter Thirteen.

On Ehlatini.

When Clare Vidal awoke on the morning after the race meeting, and her thoughts went back to some of the events and incidents of that sporting and festive gathering, she was fain to own herself sorely puzzled: and those events and incidents, it may as well be said, comprised the extraordinary behaviour of Lamont. He had deliberately snubbed her. He had been especially favoured in being singled out and asked to help her—and, incidentally, her sister—and had, lamely, but decidedly refused. Refused! Why, not a man there present but would have sprung to comply with such a request—such a command—as she laughingly recalled how on their first arrival in the country, by the Umtali route at the close of the war of occupation, she had been christened 'The Queen of the Laager,' when a passing scare had rendered it advisable to laager up. Yet this one had refused—refused her! Well, what then? He was simply a morose, unmannerly misogynistic brute! No. She could not look upon it in this light at all.

She had awakened early, and felt that a walk in the cloudless morning air, before the sun rays developed into an oppressive steaminess, would do her good. Gandela at large had not awakened early. There had been a good deal of late carousing among the rougher spirits there gathered together for the occasion, and a good deal of house-to-house visitation, also late, on the part of the more refined. So Gandela at large slept late proportionately.

The Fullertons' house was on the very outskirts of the township, and she stepped forth straight on to the open veldt. The dew lay, sparkling and silvery, upon the green mimosa fronds, and made a diamond carpet of the parched burnt-up grass upon which her steps left footprints. How beautiful was the early morning in this fresh open land. The call and twitter of birds made strange unknown melody as she passed on her way, leaving the shining zinc roofs of the straggling township, turning her face toward the free open country. There lay the race-course, away on her left, and her face was set toward the dark bushy ridge of Ehlatini.

Two 'go-away' birds sped before her, uttering their cat-like call, as, with crest perkily erect and flicking their tails, they danced from frond to frond. How cool the inviting depths of that bush line looked, billowing down the slope of the hill, challenging exploration of their bosky recesses.

Clare was in splendid physical form, and walked with a straight willowy swing from the hips, rejoicing in the sheer physical exercise of her youth and strength. She looked up at the ridge above her, then back at the scattered township behind. To gain the summit would mean a fine view, also taking in the far, unknown stretch of country beyond. She had never wandered this way before, and it would be a novelty and something to expatiate upon to those lazy people whom she had left behind in a state of prolonged slumber. Slumber! and on such a morning.

The morning air blew balmy and warm, straight down from the Zambesi and beyond; straight down from the heart of the great mysterious continent. Later on it would be hot, oppressive. And in the shade of the mimosa, and wild fig, and mahobo-hobo, birds piped and called to each other.

Clare struck into a narrow path, which wound up, a mere cattle-track, through the thickness of the bush. It was delightful this roaming about a wild land alone. Soon, with no great effort or tax upon her powers of wind and limb, she had gained the summit of the ridge.

And then, on the farther side, other ridges went ribbing away in the distance, like billows of dark verdure; but on the right, where they ended, sloping abruptly to the more even ground of the gently undulating country beyond, far away in a film of light and vista, to lose itself in a hazy blue on the skyline nearly a hundred miles distant, stretched a vast

mysterious wilderness. Then she sat down beneath the shade of a large overhanging wild fig, to take it all in.

She was used to wildness, and loved it. Reared in one of the wildest tracts of wild Ireland, she had delighted to go forth on solitary rambles, with trout rod and creel, more than ankle deep in soft bog soil, tramping laboriously to her field of action in high mountain lough, where the shrieking gust of a squall every half hour or so drove her to refuge beneath some great rock, what time the trout sulked, only to rise fast and furious when the rain squall had passed, and the raven croaked from the shining wet crags. And this solemn blue vista, stretching away in its vastness, formed a contrast indeed to the stormy glistening grandeur of her former mountain home; here with its hot, sub-tropical steaminess; yet there was that in common between both of them—that both were the wilds.

In the dreaminess of her reverie she started suddenly. The loud neighing of a horse, together with the violent flapping of an empty saddle as the animal shook himself, caused a sudden inroad upon her meditations that produced that effect. There, hitched to a bush, stood a horse, one moreover that she seemed to recognise. Yes, it was the large, high-withered roan that Lamont had ridden when, at her urgent request, he had entered for the tent-pegging competition and—had not won.

In a moment Clare's meditations, dreamy and otherwise, were scattered to the winds. There was the horse, but—where was its owner? A strange inclination—impulse, rather—to get away, to return before he should discover her presence, came upon her. Yet—why? Why on earth—why?

But whatever the ground for such aspirations they were not to be fulfilled, for at that moment a voice hailed her—an astonished voice.

"Why, Miss Vidal, good morning. Who in the world would have dreamed of meeting you up here?"

"I might say the same, Mr Lamont. I thought I would take a bit of a stroll while all Gandela was sleeping off last night's orgies. Strange, but I've never been up here. I suppose it is because the climb rather froze Lucy off—and I didn't bother to come alone. Do you know I think this country makes people very lazy."

"Oh yes. There's a steaminess about it that gets on to one's energies somehow. It'll infect you too when you've been out here a little longer."

"Now don't talk down to me, Mr Lamont. I feel quite an old pioneer. I came up here during the war, you know."

"Yes, yes. Just over two years ago."

"Well, you needn't be so supercilious. Especially as you don't seem to have been over-successful yourself this morning."

"Successful? Oh, I see," following her glance to the magazine rifle he carried. "No. Game is scarce since the rinderpest, and especially right near Gandela, like this."

"Look what I found just now, in the bush, before I got to the top here," she said. "It must be some sort of native ornament."

She held out to him two white cow-tails, fastened to a kind of bracelet of twisted sinew.

"Yes, it is. Very much of a native ornament."

The tone was dry, and—she thought—rather curious. She went on—

"I have more than one grievance against you, Mr Lamont. First of all, why didn't you come in and see us last night? We had quite a number of men dropping in."

"All the more reason why I shouldn't, isn't it? Too much of a crowd, you know."

"No, I don't. We can never have too much of a crowd of our friends."

He laughed—again, she thought, strangely.

"That's novel doctrine to me, anyway," he said. "I was always under the impression one could—and very much so. But I don't think your brother-in-law likes me. Isn't that good enough excuse?"

"No, it isn't. Dick doesn't constitute the whole establishment. But, here is another thing. I own I've been dying of curiosity over it ever since. Why was it of so much importance that you should spend the rest of the day with that snuffy old savage? You were sticking to him closer than a brother. In fact you were at each other's elbow all the time. More than one noticed it."

"Oh, did they?" and here she noticed a touch of concern in his tone. Then, as if he had come to some sudden resolution, "I believe you have good nerves, Miss Vidal?"

"Yes," wonderingly.

"Well, get Fullerton to take, or send, you and your sister into Buluwayo without further delay."

Now Clare wondered indeed.

"Why?" she said simply.

"Yes, that's a fair question. But if I explain, will you undertake not to get panic-stricken, and also to leave events to me—in short, not to give away what I may tell you, no, not even to your sister."

"Why, of course. But—you don't mean to say these savages are meditating a war—on us?"

"Yes I do. And not only that, but the whole thing is cut and dried, and it's only a question when to begin. Now I shall be able to answer your other question. You thought me no end boorish and ungracious yesterday. Well, the reason why I stuck to old Qubani like a brother, instead of being of service to you, was that, if I had not, the whole of Gandela would at this moment be a heap of ashes, and the race-course piled with the bodies of every man, woman, and child in the place."

"Good Heavens! You don't mean that?" ejaculated Clare, staring at him.

"Certainly I do. There was an impi stationed here—up here where we are sitting, and at a signal from Qubani it was to rush the whole show. And then—"

"What was the signal?"

"He was to throw up the red cap he was wearing. It was to be done during the prize-giving, so as to be less noticeable."

"And—you prevented him?"

"I should think so. I showed him a six-shooter—I had one in each pocket—and promised to blow his head off if he didn't give me that red cap right there. Now a native is nothing if not practical, and the fact of all in Gandela being massacred was nothing to this one if he wasn't there to see the fun, as, of course, he wouldn't be. So—he handed over the red cap. I own, though, it was rather a tense moment while he was sort of hesitating whether to do so or not."

Clare could only gasp, and stared speechless at this man, whom she had heard her brother-in-law, and others, describe as something of a coward—and of whom she, in spite of her better instincts, had thought sorely and with resentment only yesterday, by reason of what she termed to herself his 'rudeness' in flatly refusing to do what she had asked him. Good Heavens! And all the time, by his nerve and cool-headedness, he had saved her and the whole settlement from a hideous death. What a cool, masterful, resourceful brain was here.

"But, Mr Lamont," she broke forth at last, "how did you know that this awful thing was contemplated—was to happen?"

"Well, that's something of a story. I heard it among them—heard the whole scheme in all its details. Of course they don't know that, or I shouldn't be alive here, talking to you at this moment. Indeed, the amazement of the old witch-doctor at finding himself euchred imparted a comic element into a most confoundedly tragical situation."

Clare looked at him in silence. She was turning over in her mind the events of the previous day. She remembered how the fact of him appearing in a coat had been commented on as an out-of-the-way circumstance. Now it all stood explained. It was to conceal the deadly weapon wherewith he had compelled the treacherous Matabele to abandon his murderous plan. And what an awful contrast was there—that gathering, as unsuspecting and light-hearted as though in the midst of peaceful England, while not a mile away hovered a storm-cloud of bloodthirsty savages awaiting the signal to overwhelm the whole in a whirlwind of massacre and agonising death. And this had been averted by the coolness and resolution of one man.

"You may or may not have noticed that the old ruffian was wearing two caps, a red and a white?"

"Yes, I remarked on that," said Clare. "I wondered his head didn't split."

"Well, the white cap was to be the signal that the time was not ripe. I made him throw up that, and hooray with the rest of us."

"Yes, I remember that too, and how we all laughed."

"Of course I primed him with the state of preparedness we were all in, though not seeming to be—and that there were Maxims hidden under that waggon sail instead of soda-water bottles. Good Lord, if the bar-keeper had sent his boy to get out a fresh box of the same! but he didn't, luckily."

"Yes, indeed. But what have you done about the affair, Mr Lamont? and is the old witch-doctor in prison?"

"As yet I've done nothing except come up here the first thing this morning and verify the whole affair. And I have. There are abundant traces that a large number of Matabele have occupied this ground for hours. Look at the thing you picked up—do you know what it is?"

"This?" said Clare, holding out the cow-tails on the string.

"Yes. Well, that is part of the regular war-gear. It is tied round the leg above the calf—and this thing you found forms an important '*pièce de conviction*.' It is never worn when moving about in the ordinary way. Well, old Qubani is not detained, because I saw it answered my purpose best to let him go."

Chapter Fourteen.

A Good Understanding.

"To let him go?" echoed the girl. "But—ought you not to have had him arrested as a traitor and a murderer? Good Heavens! The whole plot is too awful."

"And so I divulge it to you first, instead of to my fellow-man Orwell, R.M., or Isard, commanding the Matabeleland Mounted Police in Gandela. Why?"

Clare looked puzzled.

"I don't know why," she said. "But it seems a dreadful responsibility."

"So I was inclined to think—in fact, very much did think—when having mapped out my plans everything seemed to conspire to smash them up. Yourself among the said everything."

"Myself? Now, how?"

Lamont smiled that queer sour smile again.

"Why, certainly. Didn't you make a point of my entering for the tent-pegging? What would have happened if I'd won? I couldn't receive a prize by deputy. Didn't you want me to help you and your sister, what time to have left the side of our worthy and reverend magician would have been fatal?"

"Yes. I did that," said Clare penitently. "But, Mr Lamont, how on earth could I have foreseen that anything of the kind was brewing?"

"No, you couldn't. I'm not blaming you, you understand, no, not for a moment."

What was this? Not blaming her? Blaming *her*! Clare Vidal was not accustomed to be 'blamed' any more than to have her requests refused, especially in this land where there were not even enough women to go round, as she was fond of putting it. She was wondering what awful and scathing rejoinder she would have made to any man who should have ventured on such a remark to her a day or two ago. Yet to this one, lounging back there with one elbow resting on a big cold stone, lighting his pipe, she had no thought of scathing rejoinder. She was all aglow with admiration of his nerve and self-reliance.

"Then there was a bore of a fellow—Jim Steele—who was rather screwed, and wanted me to fight him, silly ass! Of course I wasn't going to do that there, under any circumstances, but he—and the other idiots who thought I was afraid of him—little dreamt how they were trying to dig their own graves. For our worthy schemer Qubani would have thought me grotesque with a swelled eye, and you are bound to sustain some such damage in a rough-and-tumble with a big powerful devil like Steele. It was important then that Qubani should not think me grotesque."

"Yes, I know. I've heard about that affair. There's very little that doesn't get round to us, in a small place like this, Mr Lamont. And you told him you'd meet him later—I know all about it, you see. Well, you mustn't. It's not at all worthy of grown men to act like a lot of overgrown schoolboys. It's undignified."

"Oh, I very much more than quite agree with you there. But then I promised the chap. Now, how can I go back on a promise?"

More than ever now did her brother-in-law's insinuations with regard to this man come back to Clare. And it struck her that he did not plead that cowardice might be imputed to him if he failed—only that having made a promise he ought to keep it. "He isn't a bad chap at bottom, Jim Steele," went on Lamont, "except when he's squiffy, and then he gets quarrelsome. Probably he'll have forgotten all about everything by the time he wakes, or if not will recognise that he's made an ass of himself."

"I should hope so, indeed. But we are getting away from the witch-doctor. Why did you let him go?"

"Instinct, pure instinct. Natives are queer animals, and you don't always know quite how to take them. If we had kept old Qubani, the township might have been rushed this very night. By turning him loose, full up with what I told him—well the move is justified by results, or you and I would not be talking together up here comfortably at this moment. Now this one has taken on a sort of respect for me—they do that, you know. I asked him what he thought would happen if I gave away for what purpose he was there. He wilted at that. Then I told him I gave him his life, and he must not be less generous. He talked round and round for a little, then said that I had better begin to move with my things at a time of the moon I reckoned out at somewhere about a fortnight hence. So now you see why I want you to get Fullerton to take you in to Buluwayo."

"But, he won't do it. He might if you were to put it to him."

"That's just when he wouldn't. You know what they'd say, Miss Vidal 'Lamont's got 'em again'—meaning the funks."

This was said with little bitterness, rather with a sort of tolerant contempt. Clare felt ashamed as she remembered all the remarks to which she had listened, reflecting on this man's courage, and all because he did not take kindly to some low, pothouse brawl. She kindled.

"How can anyone say such a thing—such a wicked thing—when you have saved the whole settlement from massacre?"

"Oh, that wouldn't count. To begin with, they wouldn't believe what I've just been telling you—would say I'd invented it. They'll believe it fast enough in a week or two's time though. By the way, it was the sight of old Qubani and his red cap that made me miss that last tilt at the peg, and a good thing I did miss it. Providential, as Father Mathias would say."

"Father Mathias? Have you seen him lately?" said Clare.

"We travelled part of the way together when I was coming back from Lyall's. We were caught in a nasty dry thunderstorm and took refuge in Zwabeka's kraal. It was there I overheard that nice little conspiracy."

"And so you travelled with Father Mathias?" said Clare. "I hope you were nice to him. He is a great friend of ours."

"Nice to him, Miss Vidal?" answered Lamont, raising his brows as if amused at the question. "Why not? He is a very nice man. Why should I be other than nice to him?"

"Oh, I don't know. Except that—well, he is a priest."

"What then? Oh, I see what you mean. But I have no prejudice against priests. On the contrary—my experience of

them is that they are kindly, tolerant men, very self-sacrificing and with considerable knowledge of human nature. When you've said that, it follows that they are almost invariably good company. This one was decidedly so. Why on earth should I not be 'nice' to him?"

"Oh well, you know—you Protestants do have prejudices of the kind," she answered somewhat lamely.

"But I am not a Protestant."

"Not a Protestant? I don't quite understand."

"Certainly not I don't protest against anything or anybody. I believe in competition, and if the Catholic Church were to capture this country, or England, or the entire world for that matter, I should reckon that the very fact of doing so would be to establish its claim to the right to do so."

Woman the apostle—woman the missioner—felt moved to say, "Why don't you examine her claims to do so, and then aid in furthering them?" But Clare Vidal, looking at the speaker, only quoted to herself, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of heaven."

"As a matter of fact," went on Lamont, "I find among Catholics far more tolerance—using the word in its broad, work-a-day sense—than among those belonging to any other creed. By the way—are you one, may I ask?"

"Why, of course."

"I didn't know. Well, you must take my opinion—given in utter ignorance of the fact—for what it's worth. There's a sort of a Catholic colony near my place at home, and the priest is one of my most valued friends."

Clare brightened.

"Really?" she said. "How nice. But, Mr Lamont, how is it you live over here? Do you prefer this country to England?"

"I think it prefers me. You see, I can't afford to live in my own place. It's dipped—mortgaged, you understand—almost past praying for. So it's let, and here I am."

"So that's why you are here?"

"Yes. The life suits me too. I believe if a miracle were to be worked, and my place started again clear for me, I should still stick out here, or at any rate come out every other year."

Clare looked at him, and the beautiful Irish eyes, their deep blue framed by thick dark lashes, were sympathetic and soft. She was thinking of the abominable stories Ancram had been spreading about this man; how he had been hounded out of his county for cowardice, and so on. She repeated—

"So that is why you are out here?"

"Of course," he answered looking at her with mild astonishment. "Why else should I be?"

"Oh no. I hope you don't think me very inquisitive, Mr Lamont. Why, it really seems as if I were trying to—to 'pump' you—isn't that the word?"

"But such a thought never entered my head. Why should it?"

Clare felt uncomfortable. There was manifestly no answer to be made to this. So she said—

"By the way, who is this Mr Ancram? You knew him at home, didn't you?"

"Oh yes. Slightly, and didn't care for him at that. He turned up at my place here one night. Peters had picked him up in woeful plight down Pagadi way—and gave me the idea he had come to stay. I've nothing to say against the chap, mind, but I don't care for him."

Clare was no mischief-maker, still she could not help saying—

"Well, I don't think he's any friend of yours, from what I've heard."

"No? I suppose not. He's been putting about a yarn or two of his own here with regard to me, with just that substratum of truth about it that makes the half lie the most telling. But—good Lord, what does it matter?"

Clare's eyes opened wide. There was no affectation about this indifference—and how different this man was to the general ruck. Instead of getting into a fume and promising to call the delinquent to account, and so forth, as most men would have done, this one simply lay back against the hard cold stone, puffed out a cloud of smoke, and said, "What does it matter?"

"Then you are indifferent to the opinion of other people about you?" she said.

"Utterly. Utterly and entirely. I look at it from this point of view. If anything is said to my discredit, those whose opinions are worth having won't believe it. If they do, their opinions are not worth having—from my stand-point. See?"

"Yes, I do. You are a practical philosopher."

"I don't aim at being. The conclusion is sheer common-sense."

Then there fell silence. The rays of the newly risen sun poured down hotter and hotter upon the parched-up land, but the air was wonderfully clear. Behind lay the township, its zinc roofs flashing and shimmering in the unstinted morning

radiance. Before lay roll upon roll of billowy verdure, and, on the right, a vast expanse stretching away, blue with distance, to the far skyline. Bright, peaceful and free, yet at that moment seething with demoniacal hate and the planning of demoniacal deeds. Yet here they sat, these two, conversing as unconcernedly as though such things were as completely impossible, as completely of the past, as one of them, at any rate, had up to half an hour ago imagined.

"I must be going back," said Clare. "This is only a before breakfast constitutional."

"I'll go too. I've found out all I want to. I shall start back home this evening."

"This evening? Why, you are never going back to that lonely farm again, with these savages plotting to murder us all?"

"Yes, I am. They won't do it yet I am persuaded of that."

Clare's eyes dilated, as he walked beside her, leading his horse. The 'coward' again, she could not help thinking to herself. How many of those who so decried him, knowing what he did, would have started on a long solitary ride across the country to return to a solitary, and practically defenceless, dwelling at the end of the journey?

"But get Fullerton to take you into Buluwayo for a time," he repeated, as they neared the township. "This place is too small, and straggling, and might be rushed."

"But he won't. He'd laugh at the idea, if I put it to him."

"Yes. I know. Fullerton's a pig-headed chap—very. Still you needn't put it on its true grounds. Make out you want to shop, or see a dentist, or something, and get your sister to back you up. It'll be strange if you can't work it between you. Only—do it—do it."

She was impressed by his earnestness, and duly promised.

"Do look in and see us before you go out, Mr Lamont," she said, as they regained the township. "When do you start?"

"About sundown. There's a nice new moon, and it's pleasanter to ride at night, also easier on one's horse."

"Well, we shall be at home all the afternoon, Lucy and I. Good-bye for the present."

Chapter Fifteen.

A Council of War.

When the strokes of the horse's hoofs told that he had mounted and was riding away, Clare could not resist turning to glance back at him. How well he looked in the saddle, she thought, and then the calm strength of the almost melancholy face as he talked to her, the easy indifference to what would have irritated and stung most men, came back to her. This was an individuality absolutely new to her experience, and one of vivid interest, so vivid indeed that she began to recognise with a sort of wonder that she could not get it out of her thoughts. She recalled their conversation. If he had laid himself out to say exactly the right thing all through it, he could not have pleased her more, and yet it was obvious that he was talking perfectly naturally, and without premeditation—certainly without an idea of pleasing anybody. But—was she going to make a sort of hero of the man? Well, it certainly began to look something like it. So when at the breakfast-table Fullerton remarked—

"Didn't I see you talking to Lamont just now, Clare, over by the Sea Deep stands?" she felt that the mere question evolved within her quite an unexpected degree of combativeness.

"Yes, you very probably did," she answered. "We met during my morning constitutional while you lazy people were snoring. He's very interesting."

"Is he?"

The tone, savouring of curt incredulity, whipped up the combative instinct still more, as she answered, with quite unnecessary crispness—

"Certainly. He's got ideas, anyhow. So there's that much interesting about him, if only for the scarcity of those who have."

"Ideas or not, he funked again yesterday. When Jim Steele wanted him to take his coat off," sneered Fullerton. Then the accumulated combativeness broke its barriers and fairly overwhelmed the incautious sneerer.

"Funked again!" echoed Clare. "I don't believe he ever did such a thing in his life—no, nor ever could. Because he was too much of a gentleman to be drawn into a disgusting tap-room brawl to please a drunken rowdy, you call that funking. Well, I don't, and I shouldn't have the good opinion I have of Mr Lamont if he had acted otherwise. You forget, too, that we were all there, and even in Gandela I suppose it's hardly the correct thing to indulge in prize fights in the presence of ladies."

"Phew!" whistled Fullerton. "So that's the way the cat jumps; Clare has struck her flag at last, Lucy. Lamont's captured her."

"Oh, go easy, Dick. I won't have Clare teased," was all the response he got in the conjugal quarter.

"She seems jolly well able to take care of herself anyhow," pronounced her brother-in-law resentfully.

"I like fair play," rejoined the girl, "and a great many of you don't seem to know the meaning of the word. Because somebody says one thing, and somebody else another about a man who is really too much of a man to bother himself

about it—you all go to work to make him out this and to make him out that. You’re worse than a pack of spiteful women.”

Oh, how she longed to tell them all she knew—how the man they were decrying had spent the day watching over the safety of all present, how his cool nerve and unflagging resource had averted from them the ghastly peril that threatened. But this she could not do. She was bound over to absolute and entire secrecy.

“By Jingo, I’ll tell you another thing now,” said Fullerton. “Blest if I didn’t meet this very chap, Lamont, at the bend of the road, just beyond the house, at twelve o’clock last night—you know, just after those fellows left us. He was strolling this way, and he’d got a Lee-Metford magazine rifle. I asked him what the deuce he was playing at sentry-go like that for, and he grunted something about getting his hand in, whatever that might mean; and when I wanted him to come in and have a whisky—for you can’t be inhospitable even though you don’t care much for a fellow—he wouldn’t, because he was afraid of scaring you all if you saw him with a rifle at that time of night, and of course he wouldn’t leave it outside. What was he up to, that’s the question. I own it stumps me.”

“Ah!” said Clare, with a provoking smile. “What *was* he up to?”

But a new light had swept in upon her mind. In view of what she had learned that morning there was nothing eccentric about this lonely watcher and his midnight vigil. And yet—and yet—why should he have singled out Richard Fullerton’s house as the special object of his self-imposed guardianship?

Meanwhile a sort of council of war was going on elsewhere. It consisted of four persons, Orwell the Resident Magistrate, Isard the officer in command of the Mounted Police stationed at Gandela, Driffield the Native Commissioner, and Lamont. To the other three the latter had just unfolded his tale of the conspiracy, and the steps he had taken to avert its execution on the previous day.

It had been received in varying manner. Orwell, a recent importation from England, and who deemed himself lucky in drawing a fixed salary from the Government of the Chartered Company as against years of waiting as a briefless barrister, was inclined to treat it flippantly. Isard, on the other hand, thought there might be something in it, but was resentfully disposed towards Lamont for not consulting him from the very first. He was responsible for the safety of the place, in a way, even more than the R.M., he deemed, and should have been informed of what was going on in order to take the necessary steps. But Driffield was fully awake to the gravity of the situation. He moved constantly among the natives, and understood not only their language perfectly but their ways of thought, and customs, and now this development seemed to fit in with, and piece together, what he had only heard darkly rumoured and hinted at among them.

“One thing about it puzzles me,” said Orwell. “You say that these fellows were actually posted up there on Ehlatini watching us all the time, Lamont. Now, how on earth could you find that out for certain?”

“Spoor. A considerable body like that could not have got up there and gone away again without leaving plenty of tracks, even when the ground is as dry as it is now. Now could it?”

“Oh, I suppose not,” answered Orwell rather hastily, for to him the mysteries of spoor were simply a blank page.

Lamont went on, “I’ll take you up there and point it all out to you. What do you say, Isard?”

“Yes, I’d like to see it,” was the answer, sceptically made, for Isard was a retired military man, with but little experience of veldt-craft.

“Here is another trifle or two which is corroborative evidence,” went on Lamont, producing the cow-tail ornament which Clare had picked up, as also one he himself had found.

“Ah yes. Well, but two swallows don’t make a summer,” said Orwell, still flippant.

“No, and two cow-tails don’t make an impi,” rejoined Lamont equably. “But these things are never worn as peaceable adornments. Driffield will bear me out in that.”

“That’s a fact,” said the Native Commissioner decisively.

“We ought to have been told, Orwell and I,” pronounced Isard briskly. “We’d have arrested this witch-doctor, and laid him by the heels as a hostage.”

“You’d have spoilt the whole show,” answered Lamont calmly. “The rest would have seen that something was wrong and would have rushed us at a disadvantage. What then? There wasn’t a man Jack on that race ground yesterday with so much as a six-shooter in his hip pocket. Where would they all have come in—and the women and children? Think it out a moment. No, my plan was the best.”

“Lamont’s right,” said Driffield. “By Jove, Lamont’s right! I’ve always said we go about a deuced sight too careless in this country, with no more means of defence than a toothpick, a pipe, and a bunch of keys.”

“Well, the point is,” struck in Orwell, rather testily, “what are we going to do now? Yes. What the very devil are we going to do now? Supposing I—or rather Isard and I—get laagering up the township, we incur the devil’s own responsibility, and then, if nothing comes of it, maybe we shan’t get into high hot water at Buluwayo for raising an all-searching scare.”

“I still think we ought to have boned the witch-doctor,” said Isard, “even if we waited until everybody had gone home. How’s that, Lamont?”

“It isn’t. In the first place, I had pledged myself to let him go away safe. In the next, you’d have brought matters to a head a lively sight sooner than was wanted. As it is, we have nearly a fortnight to get ready in.”

“How do you get at that?”

“Well, I’ve got at it—never mind how. The point is to see that you profit by the knowledge. I shall. I’m going back to

my farm to-night.”

“Going back to your farm? The devil you are!” exclaimed Orwell.

“Of course. I’m not going to be the one to start the scare. I’ve warned every fellow I could, but they took it as a howling joke—like in the case of old Noah when he was knocking up the ark.”

There was a laugh at this.

“Well, I’ve done all I could,” he went on. “If you see an idiot sprinting straight for the edge of a precipice and when you warn him off he persists in swearing there’s no precipice there—what can you do? Nothing. Your responsibility ceases, unless you are physically strong enough to hold him back. Now, I am not physically strong enough to hold back the whole Matyantatu district. Give us another fill of your ’bacco, Orwell. Mine has all run to dust.”

“The thing is, what’s to be done?” went on Orwell, now rather testily.

“You and Isard must settle that,” answered Lamont. “I’m not responsible for the safety of the township. Only remember,” and here he became impressive, “you have women and children in the place, and lots of the houses are rather outlying. What I would suggest is to formulate some scheme by which you could run together some sort of laager at very short notice. Get all the waggons you can, and sand-bags and store-bags and so on, and warn quietly all the most level-headed of the community, and fix up that they shall get inside it if necessary. Only, do the thing quietly, so you will escape the obloquy of posing as scare-mongers and yet not give it away to the natives that you’re funking them. Isard, with his knowledge of strategy, ought to be able to arrange all that to a hair.”

This was rather a nasty one to Isard, whom the speaker happened to know had been one of those who was too ready to take in the insinuations of cowardice that had been made against himself, and had been a bit short and supercilious in consequence.

“That’s all very fine and large,” retorted the police captain. “But what we should like to know is, how the devil we’re going to get that very short notice.”

“You have native detectives attached to your force,” answered Lamont, “who may or may not be reliable—probably not. But failing them, or in any case, if I’m above ground I’ll contrive to give it you.”

“You? Why, how?”

“I told you I was going to start out for my farm to-night. After that I’m going to pay another visit to Zwabeka’s kraal.”

“The devil you are!” And Orwell and the police captain looked at each other. The same thought was in both their minds. This Lamont had acquired a reputation for being careful of his skin. Why, even the new arrival, Ancram, who had known him at home, had added to such reputation by the tale he had put about as to the reason why Lamont had found his own county too hot to hold him. Yet here he was proposing to go and put his head into the lion’s mouth. The subject of their thoughts, reading them, smiled to himself.

“Certainly I am,” he said. “You see, now, I was right in keeping faith with old Qubani. I’ll be able to find out something, and when I do I’ll let you know by hook or by crook. Meanwhile get everything prepared—quietly if you can, but—prepared. Now I don’t think we’ve any more to talk about, so I shall get back to Foster’s. Coming, Driffield?”

“Yes,” answered the Native Commissioner.

The two officials left together looked at each other for a moment in silence.

“Can’t make that fellow out,” said Orwell, breaking it. “I like Lamont well enough, but there’s no doubt about it that on at least two occasions, irrespective of Ancram’s yarn about him, he—well, er—caved in. Yet now he’s as cool and collected as a cucumber.”

“’M—yes. A collected cucumber,” said Isard.

“Oh, don’t be an ass, Isard. Now, I wonder if it’s a case of the nigger lion-tamer who used to stick his head in the lion’s mouth every evening, but when some fighting rough threatened to take it out of him he ran. That cad wouldn’t have gone into that lion’s cage even, let alone stick his head into the brute’s mouth. No, I expect we are all funksticks on some point or other. What?”

“Perhaps,” said Isard frostily, not in the least agreeing. Outwardly he was a tall, fine, soldierly man, looking well set up and smart in his uniform and spurs, and ‘Jameson’ hat. He had a bit of a reputation for ‘side,’ and now he little relished playing second fiddle to a man he esteemed as lightly as he did Lamont. “I don’t know that the fellow’s yarn isn’t all cock-and-bull and mare’s-nest,” he went on. “You see, it’s in his interest to pose as the saviour of Gandela.”

And he clanked out, not quite so convinced of what he preached, all the same.

“Say, Mr Lamont,” grinned the bar-keeper, as he and Driffield entered the hotel, “I’m afraid you won’t be able to pull off that scrap with Jim Steele to-day. He’s much too boozed.”

“Is he? Oh well, I really can’t be expected to hang about Gandela waiting till Jim Steele condescends to be sober again. Now can I? I put it to anyone.”

“Certainly not,” said Driffield. “You’ve given him every chance.”

A murmur of assent went up from those in the room, with one or two exceptions. These, charitably opined, though they did not say so, that it was ‘slim’ of Lamont putting off the affair, knowing what sort of state the other man would be in for the next three days at least. Lamont went on—

“He can take it on any time he likes. For the matter of that he can come out to my place and have it there. I’ll put him

up for the occasion. Peters ’ll see fair play. What more can I do!”

It was agreed that the speaker stood vindicated.

Chapter Sixteen.

First Blood.

Peters was fossicking away at his shaft sinking, rather as if nothing had happened, yet all the while he was thinking out the situation from every side.

For a good deal had happened, and that since the averted tragedy of the race meeting. True to his word Lamont had made another visit to Zwabeka’s kraal, and had persisted in making it alone. This Peters would not hear of, and after considerable altercation they had gone together. But for all they elicited—anything definite, that is—they might just as well have stayed at home; yet there was a something in the demeanour of the savages that seemed to make up for this. They were altogether too cordial, too effusive—in short, over-acted their part. From this, also true to his word, Lamont had duly sent in to Orwell the deductions he had drawn.

It had been a risky venture, knowing what they did. They had avoided spending a night there, and all the while, not seeming to be, were keenly on the alert, outwardly chaffing at ease with their doubtful entertainers. Qubani was away; where, nobody knew. *Au*! an *isanusi* was not an ordinary mortal, they said. His goings and comings were perforce mysterious at times. However, they had returned in safety and had experienced no overt manifestation of hostility.

On these things was Peters pondering as he kept his boys tolerably hard at their job. The new development of affairs was particularly vexatious to him, in that he had of late detected signs that this time he was not toiling in vain. Any day, any moment, might disclose a rich field, and then what fun it would be to go to Lamont and say—“What have I always told you? We’ve ‘struck ile’ at last, and now you can get away home—and clear off all the encumbrances on your family place, and then—where the devil do *I* come in?” Yes, he had often rehearsed the revelation, and doing so had come to the conclusion that even luck had its seamy side.

What on earth would he do when Lamont had gone for good? Lamont would probably marry and take up his position, and then he, Peters, with all the wealth he was going to take out of this hole in front of him—why, he was far happier as things were.

You see, he was rather an out-of-the-way character was Peters.

Now a murmur among his boys attracted his attention, and Lamont himself appeared on the scene.

“Here, what the devil d’you think, Peters?” he said glumly, as he slid from the saddle. “Here’s this fellow Ancram turned up again.”

“Ancram? Good Lord! Has he come to stay?”

“Rather. He borrowed a horse from Fullerton, and he’s got luggage enough on his saddle to weigh down two railway porters. Said he had such a good time before that he must come and see us again. I couldn’t turn him away, and so there he is, damn him.”

Peters roared.

“Don’t you get your shirt out over it, old chap,” he said. “We’ll work him out with a real scare this time—and that mighty sharp.”

Here again how little did the speaker know how much earnest there was underlying this promise. The shimmer of heat rose from the pleasant roll of undulating country. The tranquil life of the veldt lay outspread around, peaceful, sunny, smiling; but—beneath?

“That’s all jolly fine,” rejoined Lamont disgustedly. “But he’s grown too knowing since he’s been at Gandela. I believe he smokes that we were ‘kidding’ him before.”

“Well, we’ll do it more to the purpose this time, and no mistake. Oh, don’t you bother about it, Lamont. We’ll get the biggest grin out of him we ever got yet. He shall earn his keep that way, by the Lord Harry!”

“It’ll have to be a big one then; I detest the chap. Well, I must be getting on. Two more rinderpest cases. What do you think of that?”

“Nothing. Wait till I get a little deeper here; and if all the cattle in Matabeleland were to snuff out, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Well, that’s what they’re going to do. This is a God-forsaken country, after all. So long.”

About an hour after Lamont had gone, two young Matabele came into the camp, and saluted pleasantly.

“Why, who are these, Inyovu?” asked Peters, seeing that in outward appearance they were the very image of his boy.

“They are my brothers, *Nkose*.”

“Your brothers? And what do they want?”

“They would like to work at the mine, *Nkose*.”

“But I don’t want them. I have boys enough.”

"But such are only Makalaka, *Nkose*. These are much better. *Au*!"

With the last exclamation the speaker turned sharply. As he did so, Peters instinctively turned his head to look in the same direction, and—received a whack on the back of it that made him stagger. A shout was raised—

"Throw him in! Throw him in!" The mouth of the shaft gaped behind him. The three young savages closed with him, and Inyovu called to the other two to pinion him while he got in another blow with the pick-handle. They were young, and athletic. Peters was not young, but was athletic too, and the struggle became a furious one. He could not draw his revolver, because, foreseeing the attempt, one of them had kept a hand upon it. Inyovu the while was dancing round the combatants, holding a pick-handle all ready to strike when he saw a chance of not felling one of his brothers instead. Then Peters saw his chance, and—kicked. Right in the pit of the stomach it caught the man who was giving him most trouble. With a gasp of anguish this fellow staggered back, then doubling up, toppled down the shaft behind him. Quick as lightning, and taking advantage of the momentary panic, Peters shot forth his left fist, and caught Inyovu under the jaw. It was a regular knock-out blow, and Inyovu dropped. The other, however, still hung on, and, looking up, the reason for this became clear.

Heading for the spot at a run came quite a number of natives, and shields and assegais glancing through the sparse bush told upon what sort of errand were these. It was manifest that the rising had begun.

Do what he would Peters could not throw off his wiry antagonist, who hung on to him like a terrier, utterly impervious to kicks or blows, the object being to prevent him from effecting his escape until the others should come up, and then—good-night! The Makalaka boys had already taken to their heels and were fleeing wildly.

Then fortune favoured him. His adversary slipped on a loose stone, and in trying to save himself loosed the hand which had been gripping the revolver holster. It was a slip there was no retrieving, and in a twinkling a bullet crashed through his ribs, sending him spinning round and round, to flatten out, face downward, to the earth.

A wild shout went up from the advancing savages. At them Peters sent one look and pointed his pistol. No, they were not near enough for a shot to prove effective, but quite near enough for him to start running—and that at nearly his best pace—homeward, for he had no horse.

As he turned to run, the pursuing Matabele set up a series of the most appalling yells; which, however, so far from appalling the object of their pursuit, caused him to laugh grimly to himself as he thought how these idiots were wasting wind in making a wholly unnecessary noise.

Peters was as hard as nails, and absolutely sound in wind and limb—yet he started handicapped by reason of the strain upon both effected by his recent struggle. And he had about two miles to cover before reaching the homestead. Even then, was safety there? Lamont might not have returned, in all probability would not have—and then these might waylay and murder him at their leisure; whereas the two of them might have made a good show of defence. Of Ancram's presence he took no account whatever.

All this passed through his brain as he ran—yet ran with judgment. He had not put forth his best pace as yet. A glance over his shoulder from time to time told him that his enemies, though they kept the distance equal, were not gaining on him, and that being so, he would reserve a spurt for emergencies. Thus the chase sped on, and the pursuing savages strung out upon the track of the one white man like a pack of hounds in full cry.

Ancram the while was sitting in the shade of the rough verandah, reading a novel, and, alternately, thinking. He had returned there with a purpose, and that was to force Lamont to do something for him; wherefore the ill-concealed ungraciousness of his welcome had no effect upon him whatever. He could make it unpleasant for Lamont—very unpleasant; he had already noticed a growing coolness towards the latter since he had insinuated here and there the tale—his version—of the affair at Courtland Mere. And Clare Vidal? Watching her furtively but keenly he had recognised that she entertained a high opinion of Lamont, but not of himself. Well, that might be altered, with a little judicious innuendo, as to the first, at any rate, if not as to the last. She certainly was a splendid looking girl, and ought to have her eyes opened. Lovely eyes they were, too, by Jove!

Looking up now, he saw Lamont strolling across from the stable.

"I say, old chap, do you go to bed with that magazine rifle?" he said banteringly, in allusion to the weapon the other always carried during the last few days.

"You may yet come to see the sound judgment even of that," he answered grimly.

And such are the coincidences, the ironies of life, that even as he spoke a couple of shots snapped forth from among the thorns along the top of the river bank, together with an astonishing whoop.

"Hi-ha! Lamont! Look out! Look out! The devils are coming!"

"That's Peters," he said.

"Why, what the deuce—" began Ancram, looking blank, as a horrible suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon him.

Both men stood staring in the direction of the sounds. Then one of them instinctively and characteristically slipped under cover of the house. But that one was not Lamont. Now Peters appeared, sprinting in fine form across the open. Behind him, a flourish of shields above the thorn-bushes, and some threescore savages sprang forth at a run, determined to fall on the place before its surprised inmate or inmates should have time to realise what had happened. But they reckoned without one of the said inmates.

The magazine rifle spoke, and a bedizened warrior flung his shield in the air and plunged forward upon his face. Another followed suit—then another. A magazine rifle, accurately handled, is a terror, and so the assailants realised as a third went to ground, and then a fourth, and all in a moment's space. With a loud cry of startled warning they halted, then dropped down into the cover of the bushes and stones, yet not before the marksman, detecting a momentary bunching of the crowd, had let go another shot, this time with more deadly effect still.

"What's the bag, Lamont?" cried Peters, with a laugh, though still panting with his run.

“Five, for cert. I think two or three more are damaged as well. Fired into the brown that last time.”

“Well done—well done. Now I’m going to take a hand;” and diving into the house he quickly opened the armoury chest, of which he had a duplicate key, and produced a weapon exactly similar to Lamont’s.

“Hallo, Ancram, you back again?” he cried in hurried greeting to that worthy. “Now you’re going to see that fight you were spoiling for,” going to the window which commanded the point of attack. “Oh, blazes! The devils ain’t going to give us a show after all.”

For the enemy seemed to have vanished into empty air. Yet both knew that they were lying there meditating on the situation. Lamont’s prompt and accurate shooting had been of incalculable moral effect; and that one man, standing out in the open, should be able to do such execution, all with the same gun and not even pausing to reload, was not less so. Would that gun go on shooting for ever? was what they were asking themselves.

“Dig us out a drink, Lamont, while I keep an eye on our black brother,” said Peters. “My tongue’s hanging out after that run, I can tell you.”

“That holds good of all hands, I guess,” was the answer; and Ancram, after a considerable stiff dose, began to grow valiant and hold the fighting qualities of the concealed foe exceeding cheap.

“Don’t crow yet, Ancram,” said Peters grimly. “These are only the advance guard of a much bigger lot. You’ll get all you want of them before to-night.”

“No! Why d’you think that?” and even the abundant infusion of Dutch courage was not quite abundant enough to stifle the anxiety underlying the query.

“Because— Ah! There you are! I thought so.”

A whiz of something, together with a double report. A bullet thudded hard upon the outside wall, knocking up a cloud of chips and dust. Then a regular fusillade rattled from the nearest thorn-bushes, and the vicious hum of missiles in uncomfortable proximity. At the same time tossing shields and glinting assegais stirred along the mimosa fringe, as a swarm of savages broke into view, hurrying to the support of those who had first attacked.

Chapter Seventeen.

A Trap.

Ancram felt his face going cold and white. He was not by temperament especially brave, and had never seen a shot fired, or a blow struck in anger, with lethal weapon that is, in his life, and now the whiz and impact of these humming missiles, any one of which might knock him into the next world in less than a second, struck terror into his soul. So too did the sight of those long bright blades in the grip of these threatening savages, brawny of frame and ferocious of aspect, in their wild and fantastic war-gear of cow-tails and monkey skins and variegated hide. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he was badly scared, and, what was worse, looked all that.

“Here—hi! Hold up!” cried Lamont, as ducking spasmodically to avoid a bullet that had whizzed nearly a yard over his head Ancram cannoned violently against him. “Confound it, you’ve upset all my ‘peg,’ which is a waste of good liquor. Never mind, there’s plenty more, fortunately. You’d better have another yourself, Ancram.”

“Er—ah—I think I had.”

But the hand that held his glass trembled so violently that he spilled nearly half of what he had just mixed for himself. At the same time Peters burst into a roar of laughter, but not at this.

“There’s a nigger,” he explained, “who keeps bobbing his head round a stone, but he’s in too much of a funk to keep it there; and the expression on his face as he bobs it back again is enough to kill a cat.”

Ancram stared, and gave a sickly grin. He couldn’t have raised a spontaneous laugh then—no not to save his life. Yet these other two were keenly enjoying the joke.

“They won’t show in a hurry,” said Lamont. “These magazine guns of ours have put the fear of the Lord into them.”

“Will they go away then, and leave us?” said Ancram eagerly.

“Not much. They’ll lie low till it’s dark. Then they’ll have things all their own way.”

Ancram went pale again.

“But—but— D’you mean to say,” he stammered, “that we shall be—at their mercy?”

“Just that,” answered Lamont, who was busy lighting his pipe. “I say, Ancram, it’s different here now to that day at Courtland Mere. Slightly warmer, eh?”

He took a fiendish pleasure in the situation, as the incidents of that memorable day came before him once more. Then, and since, this man had held him up as a coward, this man standing here now with the blanched face and staring eyes. Yet if ever any man was in a blue funk, that man was Ancram—here at this moment.

“Oh, come now, Lamont,” objected the latter, with a forced laugh. “You’re humbugging, you know. You wouldn’t be so jolly cool and contented if it was really as you say.”

“As to being cool, you’ve got to be in these fixes. As for contented—I tell you I’m most infernally discontented. D’you think it’s any fun to have my place burnt down, and all sorts of things in it for which I still have a use? Well, it isn’t.”

“But ourselves—our lives?” urged Ancram wonderingly.

“We’re not going to lose those if we can help it. We’re going to skip.”

“But how? When?”

“Soon as it gets dark enough. Buck up, man. You’re in luck’s way. Why, you’ve got here just in the nick of time to see some of the fun you were hankering after that first night you arrived.”

“In luck’s way! Fun!” At that moment Ancram would have given a great deal more than he had ever possessed to find himself back safe and sound within even the doubtful security afforded by Gandela.

“You remember,” went on Lamont cruelly, “that night you arrived? It would be a jolly good job if we did have a war. It would be no end fun, and you’d enjoy it. Well, there’s a whole heap of enjoyment sticking out for you on those terms—if we get through to-night, that is.”

“What are our chances, then?”

“About one in three. Stand back. You’re getting into line with that window again.”

Ancram stepped aside with wondrous alacrity.

“Er—I say, can’t you lend me a gun of some sort?” he said.

“A gun? Done any rifle shooting?”

“Not much—in fact very little.”

“Then a bird gun is the thing for you. With buckshot cartridges it’s a terror—especially at close quarters. By Jove, Ancram! that last shoot we had at Courtland, you little thought that next time you and I were fellow guns it wouldn’t be as against the harmless homely rocketer, but the whole real live Matabele?”

“No, rather not,” answered Ancram, a little more confidently, for the cool, devil-may-care fearlessness of the other two was beginning to infect him. “And—er, Lamont, I think I’ll have another peg, if I may.”

The hot afternoon drowsed on, and the assailants, or besiegers rather, after the first few volleys made no further sign. It was clear that Lamont had accurately sized up their programme. Once, Peters had thought to descry the head of a savage peering round a bush, and had promptly sent a bullet where he judged the body should be, but there was nothing to tell with what success or not. Clearly they were playing a waiting game, for they made no attempt to occupy the cattle kraal, and rake the house from there. Those awful magazine rifles had established within them a wholesome fear.

But they had no idea of abandoning their plan, for all that. That house would be worth plundering. Its owner was known as one of the well-to-do settlers, and there would be stores of all kinds, and ammunition and firearms—good ones too. For the rest, they had already lost several warriors and thirsted for revenge.

During the hours of daylight the occupants were not idle. The position being menaced from one side only, they need only give cursory vigilance to the other, where the ground was too open for any wily savage to venture to risk his skin. So, while one watched, the other was busy putting up in portable packets a sufficiency of provisions to last for some days at a pinch, likewise as much ammunition as could be carried.

“Now we’ll have a feed,” said Lamont. “That’ll last us the night through, and spare our supplies for the road. They’re bound to burn this shack down in any case. Aren’t they, Peters?”

“Cert.”

“All right then. Now for the trap.”

And Ancram looked on with mystified eyes, while Lamont was arranging what seemed like a dummy parcel on a beam over the centre of the room, and connecting it by a string to a cross string, fastened about half a yard above the ground. This anybody exploring the room was bound to trip over, and then—down came the dummy parcel, hard and violently upon the table. Having tested it several times, he untied it from the string and chucked it into a corner.

“That’ll be all right. There’ll be some vacant places in kingdom come filled up before sunrise,” he said. And to Ancram’s inquiries as to what sort of booby trap they were concocting, the answers of both men were dark.

The sun dipped to the far horizon, throwing out his long sweeping rays of gold across the silent land. But there was no sign of the returning herd of cattle, of which Ujojo was in charge. It was significant, too, that no sign of a native servant was visible among the huts since the time that Peters had been chased in. Ujojo had, of course, run off the cattle as his share of the spoil. The few calves in the kraal were bellowing impatiently for their defaulting mothers, and some fowls were clucking and scratching about. In a few minutes it would be quite dark.

“Ready, Ancram?” said Peters.

“Ye-es. But—who’s going to fetch the horses?”

“Nobody,” said Lamont briskly. “We travel per Shanks his mare.”

“But—what’ll Fullerton say? I borrowed a horse from him.”

“Then he’ll lose it. Why, if anyone tried to get out the horses he’d make such a devil of a row over it that our scheme would be blown upon right there. And they wouldn’t funk rushing us in the dark, when we couldn’t see to shoot straight.

Now then—got your gun and cartridges? That’s right. Out of that window, and stick hard to Peters. For your life walk quietly and don’t let a sound be heard. I’m going to set the trap.”

But Peters protested this was his job—protesting, however, to deaf ears.

“Well then, for God’s sake, Lamont, be careful,” he whispered earnestly.

For all they had primed him liberally with ‘Dutch courage’ Ancram’s heart sank into his boots, as he found himself in the fresh, cool night air, and realised that anything over a hundred savages lurked within hardly more than three times that number of yards of him, thirsting for his blood. No need to enjoin caution upon him. He stepped as though walking on hot bricks. Suddenly he gave a violent start, and some special extension of the mercy of Providence alone restrained him from blazing off his gun. For he felt, rather than heard, stealthy footsteps behind him. Then the merest whisper breathed through the darkness.

“It’s all right. I’ve done it. Now let’s get on.”

And Ancram’s knees tottered under him in the revulsion of feeling. No murderous savage was this, stealing up to transfix him in the darkness. It was only that they had been joined by Lamont.

“*Whau*! it is near the time,” whispered Jabula, a fighting induna of the old Insukamini regiment. “It will never be darker than this, and these fools will be asleep by now. They believe we have gone away.”

“Not yet, not yet,” cautioned another man of equal rank. “When they have drunk a little more they will be less watchful I know these whites and their ways.”

After some more whispered discussions it was agreed that they should wait a little longer; and they lay there, in the darkness, impatiently fingering their blades, and thinking hungrily over all the good things they would find within that house when they had cut its occupants to pieces.

Savages rarely embark on night attacks, any more than they are keen to venture against unknown odds. These knew the odds they were facing: two cool and resolute men—of Ancram’s presence they were unaware—armed with rifles which seemed to require no reloading, and who rarely missed their aim. If such were to be overpowered, without terrific loss of life to themselves, it must be during the hours of darkness. That was the only chance, and even it was a desperate one. But for nearly two hundred of them to retire before two men, however resolute, however well-armed—no, that was not to be thought of.

The time had come, and now each supple, crawling shape moved noiselessly through the darkness. Those who had white among their war adornments had removed such, and were indistinguishable from the blackness that enveloped them. On the edge of the cover they halted, listening intently, but that dark silent house, now quite close, gave forth no sound, showed no glimmer of a light. They moved forward once more, those creeping snakes, a portion of them spreading out over the open ground, their tactics being to surround the place completely, lest its occupants should endeavour to escape in the darkness.

The circle closed in, and now they were right under the walls. Still no sound! What did it mean? Simply that the man who had counselled further delay had spoken the right word. The occupants were probably fast asleep.

Softly, noiselessly, Jabula put forth his hand and grasped the handle of the door; softly, noiselessly, he turned it. To his amazement the door readily opened. It was not even fast.

He whispered a moment to those behind him, and he and several others entered the room. Then, as prearranged, a blaze sprang up as one of them had struck a match and lighted an impromptu torch of grass and sticks intertwisted, and rubbed over with grease. More amazement! There, in an arm-chair, with back towards them, lounged the figure of a man. The broad-brimmed hat was pulled rather forward over the eyes, as though its wearer were fast asleep.

“U’ Lamonti!” murmured Jabula; adding, by way of injunction, “He is sleepy with drink. Do not kill him. We will take him alive.”

For a moment the induna and those inside the door stood contemplating the sleeping figure, the fitful glare of the impromptu torch lighting their savage faces and blood-covetous eyes. They felt no further misgiving. The other white man would be asleep too—also drunk. What surpassing fools these Amakiwa were.

“Wake, Lamonti,” said Jabula, advancing to the arm-chair and its occupant. “Lo, we have come to visit thee.”

And those were the last words he ever spoke, for he had tripped and stumbled over a line of taut string stretched across the room, and at the moment he did so there was a concussion that might well have shaken the world, together with a most awful and appalling roar; which, however, those within or around did not even hear, inasmuch as they, together with Lamont’s homestead, had been literally blown from the face of the earth.

When the sun rose the following morning, it rose upon a strange scene. The site of Lamont’s homestead was now represented by a huge pit surrounded by a jumble of stones and fragments of wood and of iron—human remains, also fragmentary, in ghastly profusion, mixed with half-charred shields and fused and twisted metal. And outside the radius of this indescribable ruin, an odd savage here and there was picking himself up, and blinking dazedly as he asked a comrade what had happened, and was surprised that though he could see the latter’s lips moving he could not hear one word of what was said. Indeed it would be long before those who had escaped with life would recover from the shock of that awful concussion, even if they ever did.

Chapter Eighteen.

The Fugitives.

“But—this is surely not the way to Gandela,” whispered Ancram, when they had got over about three miles.

"Quite right. It isn't," answered Peters. "We'll get there kind of roundabout. You see, if by any chance our trap should miss fire, and they come after us, they'd head along the straight road to Gandela. Where'd we be then?"

"But," objected Ancram, looking dubiously at the black line in front, just discernible in its loom against the stars, "isn't this the line of forest where we heard the lions that evening? We are not going into that—at night, too—surely?"

"Right again—as to the first. For the second—wrong. We are."

"But—the lions?"

"We must chance them."

"I told you the great god Chance counted for a lot up-country, eh, Ancram?" cut in Lamont.

The other made no reply. What with those beastly Matabele behind, with their beastly assegai blades, keen and bright and hungering for his vitals, and a ramping and a roaring lion—or perhaps several—ready to spring out on him from those black depths, his heart was in his boots. He would have given something now to have taken Lamont's advice and to have cleared right out of this infernal country. Let them but come through this safely, and then how blithely would he bid good-bye to Matabeleland, and all its abominable conditions of life, for ever.

They seemed to be following a game path as they threaded the black depths of the forest. Peters led the way, and it was a marvel to Ancram how he kept the track. Peters might be a bit too patronising and familiar under ordinary circumstances, but under such as these Peters had his uses—by Jove, he had!

"Look out for snakes, Ancram," said Lamont, who was bringing up the rear. "They often lie out in a path like this at night."

Ancram started, instinctively stopping, with the result that the other cannoned into him. His nerves all unstrung he came near emitting a shout.

"Good Lord! Oh, it's you, Lamont!" he ejaculated, the perspiration pouring from him. "I say, though, how the deuce am I to look out for snakes, or any damned thing else, when I can't see an inch beyond the end of my nose? Eh?"

"Of course. I thought I'd warn you, that's all."

It amused Lamont to play upon his fears. This fellow had thrust himself upon him all unbidden, and had requited his hospitality first of all by trying to blackmail him, and then by disseminating slanders about him; slanders relating to his cowardice. And the fellow himself was an arrant coward. Assuredly he deserved punishment, and now he was getting it. The process of administering it was rather a congenial amusement.

Suddenly there broke forth upon the night a loud booming roar. The very air seemed to vibrate with it.

"Good God! What's that?" gasped Ancram. A smothered chuckle on the part of his companions was the first answer.

"The rats are in the trap," said Lamont. "*Were*, rather, because now they're nowhere; no, nor the trap either."

"Rats? Trap? I don't quite follow, Lamont," said Ancram helplessly, "Don't you remember wondering what sort of booby trap I was setting? Well I was rehearsing then with a dummy. After you two had cleared, I rigged up the real thing, and it consisted of I shouldn't like to say how many pounds of dynamite. It seems to have answered finely. Only, Ancram, I shan't be able to entertain you again under my more or less inhospitable roof for a good long time to come, because my poor old shack has just been blown off the face of the earth, and with it. Heaven knows how many Matabele."

"D'you mean to say you've blown up your own house, Lamont?"

"Not me—but the confiding savage who'd called to cut our three throats while we were asleep—as he thought. We knew he would, and—he did."

"By Jove, what a sell for them! Why, you're a genius, Lamont!" pronounced Ancram admiringly.

"Anyhow," said Peters, "it's been the saving of our lives so far, for otherwise, directly they found we weren't in the place, they'd have started out to look for us. Now they won't, because there'll be few enough left to do it, and those'll be more'n sick of us by this time."

"It'll be the saving of the lives of a good many white men, when the news spreads, as it soon will," appended Lamont. "It'll make 'em think twice before they meddle with houses in future—too much *tagati* about the job—and so our fellows will get a show."

He was thinking, too, of the stories he had filled up old Qubani with, on the Gandela race-course, as to how the ground immediately around the township was extensively mined; and now this last manoeuvre of his would go to confirm it. The savage has a holy horror of unseen danger. He might, indirectly, have been the means of again saving Gandela, at a very perilous and critical time. Then he fell to wondering whether Clare Vidal was already away and safe at Buluwayo.

Day broke upon an expanse of wild, hilly country, moderately bushed. Huge baboons barked at them from their fastnesses among the piles of craggy boulders which heaved up here and there against a drear and lowering sky, and which seemed a perfect rookery of predatory birds—falcons and buzzards and kites—soaring and circling aloft. And now a halt was called.

"About time too," groaned Ancram. "I don't believe I could have gone a step farther."

The other two made no comment upon this, but both were thinking the same thought. A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and that link in this chain spelt Ancram. He was dead tired already, he declared, and his boots were wearing holes in his feet into the bargain. And the situation was serious enough in itself. They had no doubt but that the whole native population was up in arms, and here they were, only three, and afoot at that, in the heart of the hostile

ground. True they were well-armed, and two of them, at any rate, resolute and full of resource; but even that wouldn't count for much with an entire population against them.

"Well, see how you feel after a feed, Ancram," said Lamont. "We can rest here a bit too. In fact, it's none too safe travelling in the daytime at all."

They were out of the forest belt now, and the spot marked out for their halt was on the side of a great granite kopje, with long tambuti grass and acacia growing right up around its base. Hence they could see, and not be seen. Lamont and Peters took turn about to watch, while the other two slept. A friendly squabble took place between them as to who should take first watch, and, as usual in such a case, Peters had to 'obey orders.'

It was a wretched day. The dreary cloudiness had turned to drizzle. Under ordinary circumstances the prospect of rain would have been heart rejoicing. Now, with his homestead blown to bits, and no prospect of returning to his farm, possibly for months, or doing any good with it when he got there, the watcher was wishing the longed-for rain somewhere else. In spite of the night's exertions he felt no desire for sleep, and as he sat there, while the other two snored, gazing forth on the drear wildness of the scene before him, why was it that his thoughts should revert so persistently to Clare Vidal? Yet they did. He recalled that scene on the race-course, and somehow he could remember every word she had said, and how she had said it. Then that last visit he had made at Fullerton's, and entirely at her request—what a strange, witching enchantment had hung around her all the time! She had made much of him, but in such an insidious and tactful way—what did it all mean? He had always been a bit of a misogynist, and had looked upon women and their fascinations with a kind of contemptuous aloofness, only broken through when he knew and became engaged to Violet Courtland. And now at last he could dwell upon that day at Courtland Mere without a stirring of the mind, unless it were a stirring of relief. But—why?

The day wore on, and it was not until late in the afternoon that the sleepers awoke.

"What's this?" said Peters sharply, sitting upright. "Lamont—what the devil's this? Here it's nearly time to start again, and you never turned me out to take my watch. How about your own snooze, eh?"

"Don't want one. You do. So that's all right."

"You needn't kick up such an infernal row, Peters," snapped Ancram, irritable with fatigue and discomfort, as he rolled over on the other side and snored afresh.

"Oh, let the wretched devil snooze," said Lamont. "I don't want to. I couldn't close a peeper if I were paid to."

That night they travelled on again, using extra caution, for they had got into populated country where there were kraals about. One of these they came right upon in the darkness, and the deep-toned voices of its inhabitants came quite clearly to them. Then the furious barking of dogs, who had heard or scented them, made a lively moment; however, thanks to the merciful darkness, they were able to withdraw.

At daybreak the following morning they were even more perilously situated, for the land was flat and sparsely bushed, and it was only by keeping the cover of an overhung and nearly dry river-bed that they could find any concealment at all. Moreover, a smoke here and there at no great distance located a kraal.

"We seem to have got into a beastly dangerous corner," grumbled Ancram. "When are we going to get to Gandela."

"We'd have got there to-day, only we've come out of our way to warn Tewson. We'll strike his place directly."

Then Ancram broke forth. So they had come out of their way, and run their heads into this perilous hobble when by now they might have been safe and sound at Gandela—and all for this! What had they got to do with warning other people! Hadn't they enough to do to save their own lives! Who was this Tewson, when all was said and done? Some beastly cad, he supposed.

"He's a white man," answered Lamont, "and he's got womenkind and children at his place."

But Peters was boiling over.

"You infernal, selfish, cowardly swine," he began. "Let me tell you that we help each other in this country. And if it wasn't that we were in the hobble we are, I'd have pleasure in punching that silly, selfish, rattletrap noddle of yours till your own mother wouldn't know it from a rotten pumpkin."

Let it not be supposed this was all Peters said, but then his remarks were not for publication—*in toto*, whereas the record of the same—*in parte*—is.

The fierce tone and threatening attitude cowed Ancram, and he shrunk back, staring apprehensively.

"Ease off, Peters. Ease off," muttered Lamont. "He doesn't know what he's talking about. He's half off his chump with tire and scare."

This was no more than the truth. Ancram was almost used up. Totally unaccustomed to roughing it or swift emergency, physically in the poorest possible training, his experiences of the last two days—the sight of bloodshed, the forced marches afoot over rough ground, perils real or imaginary dogging every step, had about done for him, and had brought out all the worst that was in him. Peters growled like a savage dog baffled of a bone, and relapsed into sullen silence.

At no great distance now they made out a homestead, right above the high river bank. Still and peaceful it looked in the early morning, too still it seemed to two out of the three, who with a quickening of the pulses wondered if they were too late. No sign of life was there about the place. No smoke rose from the chimney, and the native huts behind the house had a deserted look. Well, the family might have received warning, and escaped.

But, as they reached the house, any such hope quickly died. A horrible object met their gaze—the body of a man, a white man, stripped and frightfully hacked and gashed. Right in front of the door it lay, the position telling its own tale.

The unfortunate man had been attacked by his treacherous murderers, as all unsuspecting he had stepped forth, probably to confer with them.

“That’s Tewson,” pronounced Peters shortly.

A groan drew their attention to Ancram, who was staring at the horrible sight with a kind of fell fascination. His gaze was livid, and his hands were working convulsively. There was a glare almost of mania in his eyes.

“Buck up, Ancram,” said Lamont, not unkindly. “You must pull yourself together, you know. This is the first, but I’m afraid not the last sight of the kind we shall see before we are through with this tangle. Here, have some of this,” producing his flask.

Peters and Lamont were looking at each other, and again the same thought was in both their minds. Here lay the poor remains of Tewson himself, but his household consisted of his wife, her sister, and three or four children. What lay behind that door?

It had to be done. As the door was opened, both men instinctively started back, then, rallying, they entered. In less than a minute they returned to the open air, almost reeling, and from the faces of these two strong, resourceful, resolute men every vestige of colour had faded. They had looked upon bloodshed and death before, as we know, had grown inured to horrible sights; but that of white women and children, literally cut into pieces, had been reserved for them until now.

“No, you’d better not see it, Ancram,” warned Lamont, putting forth a restraining hand. “There’s no necessity for you to. Peters, one of us must go in there again. The time’s important—the time it occurred, you know. We might find some clue.”

Peters nodded, and they entered together. There was a clue. On a side-table was the beginning of a letter, which looked as if one of the wretched women had been interrupted while writing. It was spattered with blood.

“It’s dated the day before yesterday,” said Lamont; “the day we were attacked. Good Lord! I wish when we set our trap then we had put enough stuff to blow every one of those Matabele devils to his own place, instead of a dozen or so.”

“Amen,” said Peters.

It never occurred to either of them that their wish had been very nearly fulfilled.

“Well, we’d better get into Gandela as soon as we can and give the alarm. They won’t laugh this time, unfortunately. After that I, for one, am going where I can shoot as many of these devils as it is possible to shoot.”

“Same here,” said Peters. “No quarter, either.”

These two men, you see, were changed now. Far from cruel or merciless by disposition, they had looked upon a sight which should render them both, as similar sights did many another in the early days of that wholly unprepared-for outbreak.

Chapter Nineteen.

Fullerton’s Move.

A light mule-waggon stood at Fullerton’s door. By the time the process of loading it—now begun—was completed it would no longer be a light waggon.

Before that stage was attained, however, Fullerton was making nasty remarks on the wholly unnecessary quantity of baggage without which lovely woman professes herself unable to move—at least his spouse pronounced them to be nasty, and, of course, she ought to know.

“Do stand up for us, Mr Wyndham,” she appealed.

“Wouldn’t be fair. You’re two to one as it is,” answered Wyndham, tugging at a refractory strap, for he was engaged in harnessing the mules.

“Oh, here—I say, Clare. We haven’t got a traction engine to move this outfit,” grumbled Fullerton, as his sister-in-law appeared, together with another quite exasperating bundle. “No we haven’t. Only mules.”

“It’s all right, Dick. Put that in somewhere,” was the serene answer. “Only, don’t squash it more than you can help, because there are things in it that’ll spoil.”

Fullerton grunted, and the work of packing and stowing went on, the bulkier and heavier articles of baggage having been fastened on behind with reins.

“That’s all right,” said Wyndham, looking up from the last buckle. “Now I think we can all get in.”

It had taken some little while and a great deal of importunity to bring Richard Fullerton round to the Buluwayo scheme, and even then his womenkind had given every reason but the real one for wanting to go there. He was endowed with his full share of obstinacy; however, he came round at last. At last! Just so. A great deal was destined to turn upon those two monosyllables.

“You take the lines first stage, Fullerton, or shall I?” asked Wyndham, the outfit being, in fact, his property. On hearing of the Fullertons’ projected move he had immediately proffered it, and volunteered to drive them himself. Such an opportunity of being in Clare’s society for three whole days was one not to be thrown away, and of showing to advantage before her during the time, for he was a first-rate whip. Fullerton was not.

“Er—you’d better tool us, I think,” said the latter. “I might be able to drive four-in-hand, but I believe I’d be rather out of it with eight.”

“Oh, it’s just as easy. Still—do as you like.” And Wyndham, climbing to his seat, took the reins, and away went the team at a brisk trot. It was a lovely morning, but inclined to be hot, and as they topped the mimosa-studded rise, and in a minute Gandela was shut out of sight behind them, there was a sense of exhilaration permeating the whole party which promised that the trip was likely to prove an enjoyable one.

“Well, Lucy,” said Fullerton, expanding accordingly, “I believe I’m rather glad you two girls persuaded me into this run. A spell at the Buluwayo Club will come in first-rate. You get rather sick of a poky little hole like Gandela.”

“Pity you wouldn’t let yourself be ‘persuaded’ a week ago,” rapped out the conjugal retort. “Or even more. You’d have been in the thick of the Buluwayo Club at this moment.”

“Yes, you took a deal of persuading, Dick,” supported Clare. “It would have been much better if we had started a week earlier.”

There was an unconscious gravity in her tone that did not seem to fit the subject or the occasion. But she was thinking of the grave urgency of Lamont’s warning—that they should remove at once; and of this, of course, the others were in complete ignorance.

“Oh well, a week more or less doesn’t matter a row of pins,” returned Fullerton unconcernedly. “That’s one good point about this jolly country, at any rate. No one need ever be in a hurry.”

“Nor ever is,” appended Wyndham. “Hallo! Here are some police Johnnies coming along.”

Riding single file along a narrow path, which would converge with the high road a little farther on, they made out a small party of Mounted Police—a dozen in all. They gained the main road just at the same time as the mule-waggon crossed the path. The sergeant rode up and saluted.

“Going to Buluwayo?” said Wyndham.

“Yes, sir. And Captain Isard said we’d better keep with you for the way.”

“Sort of escort, eh?”

“That’s it, sir.”

“Escort!” echoed Fullerton. “Why, what the devil do we want with an escort? We haven’t got the Administrator on board.”

“Well, sir,” said the sergeant, “the niggers have been a bit sulky of late, over the wholesale shootin’ of their cattle, and it’s a wide stretch of country, and the captain said that as we were going to Buluwayo in any case, it’d do no harm if we kept with your waggon.”

As a matter of fact the men were not ‘going to Buluwayo in any case,’ but had been specially told off by their commanding officer to escort this outfit thither. It—for all purposes in his eyes—spelt Clare Vidal. In spite of his former rejection he had not got over his weakness for that extremely attractive young person, and here was a right royal chance to ingratiate himself with her; for of course he would contrive to let her know later that it was solely upon her account that the escort had been furnished. Isard had accepted Lamont’s warning with a considerable pinch of salt, still there was no doubt but that there was unrest among the natives, and where Clare was concerned it was as well to be on the safe side. The safe side! Well, Isard was steeped to the crown of his handsome and soldierly head in the British and military tradition of despising your enemy, wherefore, of course, the presence of a dozen of his Mounted Police was sufficient to overawe every squalid nigger in Matabeleland, or the whole lot of them put together.

“There’s something in that, sergeant,” said Wyndham, “and it’s very good of the captain to have thought of it.” Then, as the sergeant having saluted again and dropped behind, he went on—

“By George, that’s very considerate of Isard. He’s not at all the sort of fellow I should have expected a thing of that sort from. Well, Miss Vidal, you’ve got the experience of travelling under an armed escort. Quite romantic, isn’t it?”

“Quite. But, as you say, it’s very kind of Captain Isard all the same,” answered Clare, the only one who was behind the scenes as to the situation. Lamont’s warning to herself had been urgent and definite, yet her brother-in-law’s provoking obstinacy had caused him to put off and put off. The limit of the time named must nearly have been reached, and, remembering this, secretly she hailed the presence of those armed police with a feeling of devout thankfulness.

“But—is there really any danger?” said her sister anxiously. “Because if there is, I, for one, vote we turn back.”

“Danger! Pho!” rapped out Fullerton contemptuously. “I suppose Lamont has been putting about one of his chronic scares, or something of that sort. Turn back? No fear. We’re in for a jolly trip.”

Whereby it is manifest that in a small place like Gandela, things will leak out. Assuredly nothing could look more peaceful than the aspect of things as they pulled up at the mixture of store and wayside inn where they were to outspan after the first stage. The wild veldt, aglow in the shimmering heat, the drowsy hum of native voices, the sleepiness and calm of the place—no suggestion of a cataclysm lay here.

“Hallo, Langrishe!” sang out Wyndham, as a lank, parchment-faced man lounged forward, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. “Any news? We’re bound for Buluwayo. How’s the scare getting on?”

“Scare? I don’t know nuth’n about any bloomin’ scare, and don’t want to.”

“Don’t believe in it, eh?”

The storekeeper fired off a very contemptuous ejaculation, and turned to help Wyndham to unharness the mules. Fullerton also bore a hand, contriving however to be of more hindrance than help.

"What'll you take, sergeant?" said Wyndham, as, the above operation completed, they adjourned to the bar. The sergeant named his—and taking up the usual dice-box Wyndham and Fullerton threw between them.

"Mine," pronounced the former. "By the way, Langrishe, there are a dozen thirsty police outside. Serve them a good tot all round."

In the rough dining-room a small Makalaka boy was spreading a murky cloth on a murkier table. The inhabitants of the room were mostly flies, and, incidentally, Lucy and Clare. But they were used to these little defects of detail, by that time.

"Can't give you anything but tinned stuff, ladies," said Langrishe, gruffly apologetic. "Everything fresh has died of the drought or the rinderpest."

That too, did not afflict them, and they discussed Paysandu tongue in that rough-and-ready veldt shanty with an appetite not always present at the most dainty and glittering of snowy tables. Then after a brief rest the mules were inspanned again. "Going to outspan at Skrine's?" said Langrishe, as, having settled up, they bade him good-bye.

"Don't know," answered Wyndham; "I'd like to get on to the Kezane."

"You can't. It's too far and too hot. You'll bust them mules."

"Oh well, I'll see how they get on. So long, Langrishe, we'll look in on the way back."

Poor Langrishe! he was a rough pioneer in a rough country, but a good fellow enough according to his lights. Little they thought, that gay and light-hearted party, as they bade him good-bye—little he thought himself—that not merely his days, but his hours were numbered—and that not even two figures would be needed to write the number of them; for one of the awful features of that ghastly rising was that it whirled down upon its victims as a veritable bolt from the blue. And its victims were scattered, singly or by twos and threes, throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Craftily Wyndham had manoeuvred that Clare should share the front seat with him. She could see the country better, he declared, and if there was more sun there was more air than in the back seat. Clare herself was nothing loth, and moreover the move met with Fullerton's approval. That sybaritic engineer, feeling genial after a plain but plentiful lunch and two or three long whiskies-and-sodas, felt likewise a little drowsy; and the back seat was more comfortable for the purpose of forty winks. Wyndham was actuated by another motive. He was proud of his driving and he wanted the girl to witness and appreciate it. And she did, and said so, thereby raising Wyndham to the seventh heaven of delighted complacency.

More than once he stole a glance of admiration at the beautiful, animated face beside him. The heat, and a modicum of dust, seemed to affect her not one whit. Poor Lucy Fullerton in the back seat, not less drowsy than her proprietor, was looking a trifle red and puffy from the effects of both, but Clare, in her fresh and cool attire and straw hat, was as fresh and cool and smiling as though heat and dust did not exist. She did not even want to put up a sunshade, that most abominable of nuisances on the part of the sharer of your driving seat, what time your way lies over none too smooth roads, and through an occasional stony and slippery drift. And they chatted and joked merrily and light-heartedly as they sped over the sunlit landscape with its variety of towering granite kopje near by and hazy line of distant ridge far away against the deep blue of heaven's vault, what time both Fullertons snored placidly behind, one discordantly, the other lightly.

"Our good Fullerton is guilty of a snore fit to give a dead man the nightmare, isn't he, Miss Vidal?" said Wyndham presently, turning his head to look at the offender. That estimable engineer lay back in his corner in an uncomfortable attitude, his mouth wide open and emitting sounds that baffle description. "I really think we ought to wake him."

Clare laughed. "No, no. Let him alone. He's quite happy now."

"He reminds me of a man who was one of a shooting party I was with up on the Inyati. There were several of us, and we slept in a *scherm*, very snug and jolly we were too. But the moonlight nights were heavenly, and I was restless and couldn't sleep—so I used to get up and light my pipe, and stroll about outside, and admire the view, and all that sort of thing. Well, after a couple of nights or so the chap who slept next me objected—swore I was an outrageously restless beggar and disturbed him half a dozen times a night, and wouldn't I go and sleep on the other side of the *scherm* in future? I put it to him how the demon could I be anything but restless when I found myself turned in alongside of a saw-mill in full blast—not even a respectable saw-mill either, and one of regular habits, but one that started on a hard-grained slab and buzzed through that, then struck a hard knot and bucked and kicked and returned to the charge, and finally screamed through it, and no sooner had it resumed the even tenor of its way than a nail had to be negotiated. Well, as for the cutting through of that nail, I give it up. I suppose the infernal regions alone could produce such sounds of soul-splitting stridency as those evolved by my next-door neighbour's blowpipes when it got to that."

Clare was convulsed.

"How did you settle it?" she said.

"Why, he went and turned in alongside of a man who was stone deaf in one ear, and half in the other, so it didn't matter. Fullerton is a terror to snore, too, and with a little more practice he'll be as good as the other man. Just listen to him."

"Eh? What's that about me?" ejaculated the object of this remark, starting up spasmodically, and rubbing his eyes. "Why, I believe I've been asleep."

"I don't know about that, old chap," laughed Wyndham. "What we do know is that you must have worked off a biggish contract in the plank sawing line, since we last heard the sound of your manly voice. Don't we, Miss Vidal?"

"Well, this scooting through the air—hot air too—makes one snoozy," explained Fullerton, uttering a cavernous yawn. "Hallo! I must have been asleep a good time, we're at Skrine's already."

They had topped a rise, and now on the slope beneath, and in front, stood two or three buildings, with the usual native huts and goat kraal behind. But about the place no sign of life showed.

"Great Scott! I believe there isn't a soul on the place," said Wyndham anxiously. "No, I thought not," as they rattled up to the door, and saw that it was securely shut, and that of the stable padlocked. Then, putting his head round the tent of the waggon, "Sergeant!"

"Sir?" answered the non-com. trotting up.

"Fall back just out of earshot with your men, and do a little language for us, will you? We can't, we've got ladies with us. Skrine's store's no good. Skrine's away and his idiotic stable's locked up. No use outspanning here."

The police sergeant spluttered—and those in the waggon laughed. Yet not very light-heartedly. It was really a nuisance, for it meant that they must push on another stage to the Kezane Store—the original plan, but one which Wyndham had already recognised that Langrishe was right in advising him to abandon; for the heat and the pace had already told on the mules.

They would have laughed less light-heartedly, or rather they would not have laughed at all, had they known that about a mile back, and only a few hundred yards from the road, the bodies of Skrine and three other men, who had fled thus far for their lives, were lying among the bushes, their skulls smashed, and their poor faces hacked and gory beyond recognition, stamped with the ghastly imprint of their awful death-agony, staring upward to the serene and cloudless blue of heaven.

Chapter Twenty.

Too Late.

"Not even a bucket, to give the poor devils of mules a drink, Fullerton," said Wyndham, who had been investigating around. "Really, Skrine's beastly inconsiderate."

"Oh, mules are like donkeys," was the impatient answer. "They can get along on a thistle and a half. The only thing to do is to make 'em."

"Oh, can they! Well, in this case I'm afraid they've got to. Come up!"

He shook up the reins and cracked his whip. The long-suffering beasts tautened to their collars, and pulled out again. They were rather fine animals, with a strong Spanish cross in them, and attaining somewhat to the Spanish dimensions. Still, by the time another three miles had been covered, it was evident that they had lost heart. Their spirits and their pace alike began to flag. It was a hot day, and Matabeleland is a thirsty country, to beast no less than to man.

Somehow, too, the spirits of the party seemed to suffer in proportion. Nothing is more depressing than driving a flagging team, and Wyndham accordingly was less given to mirth and anecdote, even with the stimulus of Clare Vidal at his side, than he had been up till now. Fullerton, characteristically, became snappish and ironical, and roundly cursed Skrine—poor Skrine—for leaving his place shut up and useless. What business had a man to keep a roadside store—and, of course, canteen—unless it were for the benefit of travellers? They ought to object to the renewal of such a fellow's licence, by Jove they ought! Thus Fullerton.

"I don't believe we'll get to the Kezane before dark at this rate," he growled, "even if we get there at all. We shall probably have to outspan in the veldt. What do you think, Wyndham?"

"Oh, we'll get there all right."

"Er? And what if it's shut up too?"

"Then we'll have to make a camp, that's all. See now, Fullerton, the point of my loading up emergency supplies. You were inclined rather to poke fun at the idea this morning."

"By Jove, you're right after all," conceded Fullerton.

"I've been that way before, and experience, if a hard teacher, is a jolly effective one," said Wyndham. "We shall have to spare the mules a bit though. They're not going at all well."

Then Lucy Fullerton announced she had a headache. She had been looking forward to a cup of tea at Skrine's, and missing this, combined with the heat of the day, had given her a headache. But Clare was as fresh as when they started.

The road had become very rough here, and they were going at a walking pace. Fullerton had dropped off to sleep again, and, as Wyndham put it, had taken on his timber sawing job once more. Suddenly a shot—and then another, rang out some little way behind.

"The police seem to have started a buck," said Wyndham, looking backward round the tilt of the trap. Then, as he withdrew his head, and gathering the reins whipped up the mules to a smart trot, there was a something in the expression of his face that Clare noticed, and instinctively guessed at the reason—and the expression was one of eager anxiety. She, too, put out her head and looked back.

Half the police were dismounted, and, even as she looked, were in the act of delivering a volley among the bushes on the left side of the road. And creeping, and running, and dodging among the said bushes, she made out dark forms, the forms of armed savages; and the line these were taking would bring them straight upon the mule-waggon.

Somehow her predominating instinct was not fear but interest. She had never seen natives in their war-trappings before, and now she looked upon the shields and assegais and cow-hair adornments with vivid interest as something novel and picturesque. The fire of the police had checked them, or rather caused them to swerve, but they continued to

run through the bush parallel with the waggon, though giving it a wide berth. But, as the police cantered forward so as to protect the waggon, they closed in nearer.

“What’s the row?” testily cried Fullerton, whom the sound of the volley had started wide awake.

“We can keep them back for the present, sir,” said the sergeant, riding alongside. “Luckily they don’t seem to have any guns. But there’s no harm in pushing on to the Kezane as quick as possible.”

This Wyndham had already begun to do. But the ground was rough and bad, and the mules were anything but fresh. The fleet-footed natives could easily keep pace with them, if not outstrip them. These could be seen from time to time, flitting through the bushes, their obvious intent being to get ahead if possible and rush the whole outfit at some point in the road where the conditions would be more favourable to themselves.

Lucy Fullerton had uttered a little cry of alarm and then went deadly pale. Her sister, on the other hand, was absolutely cool, and watched every movement of the foe with a deepening interest. Wyndham, his face now stern and set, was giving all his attention to his driving. Fullerton was cursing his own idiocy at having left his revolver behind.

“It was foolish of you, Dick,” said Clare tranquilly. “But—I brought it for you.”

“You? You brought it?”

“Yes,” and diving down among some bundles under the seat, as calmly as though she were looking for a mere pocket-handkerchief, she pulled up a small travelling-bag, producing thence two revolvers and two boxes of cartridges.

“Clare, you’re a jewel of a girl,” pronounced the astonished Fullerton, as he took the weapon she handed him. “But what’s the other? Wyndham’s?”

“No. It’s mine,” calmly loading it.

“Yours? That’s no lady’s toy anyhow. Why where on earth did you get it?”

“Mr Lamont gave it me—when he came to see us to say good-bye.”

“Lamont gave it you! Good Lord! But—why?”

“He knew there was going to be a rising, and said it might come in useful.”

“He knew— Well, I think he might have given some of us the benefit of his knowledge.”

“He did. He gave it to some, who hardly believed him, and to me—who did. I passed on the benefit of it to you, but you wouldn’t profit by it until too late. So here we are.”

“Do you mean to tell me, Clare, that the real reason you wanted me to take you into Buluwayo was because Lamont told you there was going to be a rising?”

Clare nodded.

“That’s right, Dick. If I had told you the real reason you’d only have pronounced it one of ‘Lamont’s scares’—just as the others did—and refused to move. As it is you’ve put off the said move too long.”

“Good Lord! You take my breath away!”

“I’ll take it away still more directly,” she said tranquilly. “What do you think of Mr Lamont having saved the whole of Gandela from being massacred on the day of the race meeting?”

“Oh come, now, that’s a little too fat!” answered Fullerton, yet not so incredulously as he would have answered, say that morning.

“Well, he did.” And then she told the whole story.

“I’m hanged if it doesn’t sound probable,” said Wyndham. “Heavens! if only they’d rushed us that day. Oh, it won’t bear thinking about.”

“Sounds probable,” repeated Clare. “It’s more than probable—it’s true. I fell in with Mr Lamont up on Ehlatini the next morning, and he showed me all the tracks made by the impi. I picked up a couple of cow-tail armlets—or leglets—which they’d dropped, just like the ones these are wearing.”

“By Jove!”

There was silence after that Wyndham was anxious to get his team through a narrowing sort of point ahead, where the ground rose abruptly to an overhanging portal on either side, and where rocks and stones, shadowed by wild fig-trees, would afford dangerous cover to the enemy were he to arrive there first, even though apparently without firearms. Under the double incentive of whip and voice the mules seemed to have forgotten their fatigue and were pulling out manfully. But to her brother-in-law’s suggestion, that she should give up the front seat to him and come in at the back, Clare returned a flat refusal.

“I want to see this,” she said, “and see it well. You can put up the side sail and see it from there.”

“But that’ll expose Lucy,” he fumed.

“No, it won’t. You’ll be in front of her. And they haven’t got guns.”

There was no help for it. Wyndham pleaded, but to him too she returned a deaf ear. She sat there—calm, cool, collected, fingering her weapon, and a determined and dangerous look of battle in her eyes.

But pull the mules never so heartily the fleet-footed savages kept the pace, and kept it well. Half the police would gallop forward to check their advance with a volley, but as soon as ever they reined in their horses—lo, there was nobody in sight to fire a volley at. And then it became evident that the foe had divided, and that these human wolves were hunting their prey on both sides of the road.

"*I—ji—jji! Ijji—jji! Ha! Ha*!"

The vibrating, humming hiss—it must be remembered that the vowel is sounded as in every other language under the sun but the English—the deep-chested, ferocious gasp, split the air as the panting mules galloped furiously between the overhanging rocks and trees—which were now alive with swarming savages. Wyndham, cool and brave, kept all his attention centred on his team, for did that fail him—why then, good-night! Clare, with set lips, covered a huge savage who had sprung up hardly ten yards distant to launch an assegai, and pressed the trigger. The brown, bedizened body sprang heavily forward, throwing shield and weapons different ways, and sank, but the pallor of her face at the sight only served to heighten the brightness of her eyes. Fullerton, leaning out, pumped a couple of shots in a lucky moment into where three or four assailants rose together, likewise with fortunate result. Then an assegai whizzed through the upper part of the waggon tilt, while another struck one of the mules in the hinder quarters, and started the poor brute kicking and squealing in such wise as nearly to stampede the whole team and get it completely out of hand. Added to which some of the police horses were prancing and shying, and rendering it all that their riders could do to stick on, let alone use their weapons. Quick to perceive their advantage, the Matabele warriors swarmed down the rocks, or leapt upward from among the bushes, redoubling the volume of their vibrating, ferocious war-hiss—dancing, leaping, clashing their axes and shields together; in short, raising a most demoniacal and indescribable din.

Fullerton, watching his side of the vehicle, was cool enough and had his full share of pluck, but he was a lamentable revolver shot, and, after three bad misses, the assailants became alive to the fact, and began to run in closer with more confidence.

"Damn this thing!" he yelled, in his excitement and mortification. "It has a pull off you'd require a steam crane to move. Clare, give me yours."

"No," she answered shortly. And at the same moment two warriors sprang up behind a rock and quick as lightning hurled their casting assegais—not at their human enemies, but at the mule team. Struck in the shoulder, one poor mule stumbled and plunged wildly, and only the fact that Wyndham was a first-rate whip performed the miracle that prevented it from falling entirely. Then taking advantage of the confusion, several warriors, their shields covering them, the broad stabbing spear uplifted, charged forward to stab the leaders, and thus have the whole outfit at their mercy. But they reckoned without Clare Vidal.

Small wonder that they did. Small wonder that these unsparing savage warriors, trained all their lives in battle and bloodshed and deeds of pitiless ferocity, should have overlooked the fact that in this beautiful and winsome girl there lurked a reserve of splendid Irish courage and readiness and heroism. Cool, steady-handed as a rock, she poured in succession three of her remaining four shots into the leaders of the rush, and as those behind their falling bodies halted—checked, dismayed—no less coolly and steady-handed did she reload the chambers of her pistol. And she had saved the situation—so for.

Wyndham glanced up, and dismay was in his heart. He had hoped to find easier country beyond this point, but the road continued rough, and, moreover, for some distance on, the broken, rocky, bush-grown slopes continued, so that their pitiless foes were able to keep above them and under cover. Poor Lucy Fullerton, made of far softer stuff than her younger sister, was cowering in her corner, white as death and almost fainting, and now the savages began to laugh and shout exultantly to each other. The ground seemed to grow them. From every bush and rock they sprang forth by the score. It was for them a mere waiting game. Already the police had been cut off from the waggon, and were fighting like lions in the thick of their swarming foes; none braver than their sergeant, whose voice was everywhere, directing, encouraging—whose pistol had sent more than one of the ferocious assailants to their long home. Three of these brave fellows had already been overcome; knocked from their horses by hurled clubs, gasping out their lives, through a score of assegai stabs, on the reeking road. And now the mules, utterly blown, and only saved hitherto by Clare Vidal's magnificent courage, dropped into a sullen and tired walk, out of which no effort, either of whip or voice, on the part of their driver could lift them. And at the sight, louder and more ferocious swelled the hideous Matabele death-hiss. The prey was theirs at last.

Chapter Twenty One.

The Relief Levy.

Not until noon of the day after their ghastly discovery did Lamont and his fellow refugees reach Gandela.

It was only at night they could travel with any degree of safety. The appearance of some armed Matabele had driven them into hiding almost within sight of poor Tewson's homestead, and for long the fall bitterness of death was on those three. For it was difficult to believe that the savages had not seen them and had gone to collect reinforcements, that they might hunt down the fugitives at their leisure. To make matters worse, their place of concealment was a deep donga leading to the river-bed, and overhung by a thicket of *haak-doorn*, so that, in the event of discovery, the enemy being right above would be able to destroy them with a minimum of risk to himself. An ignominious end, like rats in a hole, not even the consolation of being able to fight to the last and sell their lives dearly. Yet it had been a case of 'needs must,' for there was no other hiding-place available.

The heat, too, was stifling, and their quarters horribly cramped. Their food supply had nearly run out, and, worse still, their drink. All day they had heard natives moving around them, and the barking of dogs. All day had kept continuously recurring the certainty that they were being hunted, that discovery was but a matter of minutes; and when at length night came—blessed night with its coolness and sheltering darkness—why then these three had gone through a day they were not likely to forget for the remainder of their lives.

But with morning light their peril returned, and they were reminded of this when shortly after daybreak they sighted an impi on the march. They had barely time to flatten themselves among the clefts and boulders of a stony kopje when

this force appeared in sight, and as it passed right beneath their hiding-place they were able roughly to count its strength. The warriors were marching in open order, to the number of about two hundred, and the watchers could make out that though bristling with assegais and axes, none of them appeared to carry firearms.

Here again prudence had counselled that they should lie low, and starting after dark reach Gandela the middle of that night; but by this time a strange impatience had taken hold of them, engendering recklessness. Even Ancram—starving, footsore, and utterly out of training for this sort of thing—shared in the feeling, and accordingly they resolved to chance it. This time fortune favoured them, and, having encountered no further adventures, three weary, haggard, and hungry men entered Gandela and went straight to Foster's hotel.

Though in actual point of fact the distance accomplished was nothing wonderful to a brace of hardened pioneers like Peters and Lamont, yet the constant and recurring strain, combined with the hideous and pitiful sight they had witnessed, had told even upon them. As for Ancram, he was in a state of utter collapse.

"Now, Foster, turn us on some skoff right away," said Lamont; "and we don't want to wait for it, either, at least not any longer than it takes to have a tub. Meanwhile, a bottle of your Perrier-Jouet. Here you are, Ancram," when this had been opened. "Dip your beak into this. It'll buck you up, and, by the Lord, you want it!"

"Any news of the scare—anything fresh, that is?" asked the hotel-keeper, eyeing them curiously. These men had been through no ordinary experience, he could see that, but as yet they had told nothing.

"Well, rather. I'll tell you presently. Have you a boy handy, Foster? I want to send a note quick to Orwell."

On a half-sheet of notepaper he wrote hurriedly—laconically—

> "Farm attacked by Matabele, and blown up. Peters, Ancram, and self escaped—have just come in. Went to warn Tewson, found whole family massacred. Saw impi this morning, heading as though towards Kezane Store. Warn Isard, and take precautions.
>
> "Lamont."

This he folded and addressed to the Resident Magistrate, and the boy was started off at once.

"I've a bit of good news for you, Mr Lamont," said Foster, as the latter returned—tubbed, and to that extent refreshed—to begin upon the much needed food. "That *rooi-schimmel* horse you left with Greene the day you were in for the race meeting—well, he's all right again now. Greene brought him in couple of days back, and there isn't an atom of lameness about him."

"That's good news indeed, for it strikes me there's plenty of work sticking out for him."

They had just finished breakfast, and were enjoying the luxury of an excellent cigar when Orwell arrived. He was in a great state of excitement, and glanced meaningly in the direction of Foster, but this the hotel-keeper pretended not to see. He was all on thorns to hear the news himself, for that news there was—great and grave—he felt sure.

"Is this a fact, Lamont?" began Orwell, producing the slip of paper. "Good Lord, man, but the whole country must be in a blaze!"

"So it must. By the way, Orwell, of course you've got that laager all fixed up by this time."

"Er, well—no—the fact is we have been planning it out, and—er—"

"You haven't got it up yet? Well, if you'll take my advice you'll set about it at once. It isn't a case of 'another of Lamont's scares' this time," he added, with somewhat excusable bitterness. "By the way, Foster, you might bring us another bottle of the same. Oh, and you'll join us again."

"Thanks. But, Mr Lamont, for God's sake, say what *has* happened. We are a trifle interested too, as well as our officials, and I, for one, have got a wife and family into the bargain."

The hotel-keeper was a very good fellow, and he and Lamont liked each other. Said the latter—

"Quite right, Foster. Fetch the liquid first and then you shall hear all about it. It's time everyone knew, but I don't want to create a panic. One of 'Lamont's scares.'"

Orwell looked rather foolish.

"Oh, don't keep harping on that, old chap," he said. "We are all liable to make mistakes, and I, for one, am the first to own it. And now the first thing to do is to organise a defence committee, and set to work with a will."

Then, as the hotel-keeper returned, Lamont started to narrate all that had befallen, the attack on Peters, then on the homestead, and how they had stood off the savages until night.

"They must have found dynamite while looting," he said, "for soon after we'd left we heard the devil of an explosion."

He continued his narrative shortly and succinctly. When he got to the massacre of the Tewsons, his listeners grew white with horror.

"Yes. We saw what we don't want to see again, and would like to forget we ever had seen. And now we'd better get hold of the best men here, Orwell, and fix up a plan. Jennings and Fullerton, and some of the others."

"Fullerton's not here," said Orwell. "He started for Buluwayo only this morning with his wife and sister. Wyndham's driving them—"

"WHAT?"

It was Lamont who had spoken—shouted, rather. And in truth the interruption was startling. He who made it was leaning forward over the table, his dark face without a vestige of colour, his eyes staring as though already they beheld a reproduction of the grim horror upon which they had so recently gazed, only, in this case—

"Yes. But they had an escort," explained Orwell wonderingly. "Isard sent some police with them."

"Some police! How many?" in a dry staccato tone.

"Oh, a dozen, he told me. Some of his best men—"

"Come on, Peters," shouted Lamont, springing to his feet and not waiting to hear any more. "We've got our work cut out for us, and we'll get at it at once. An escort—a dozen police—and the whole country up in a blaze! Foster, let me have the best horse you've got in your stables for Peters—you shall name your own price. Now then, who'll volunteer?" going out into the bar, where several men had already collected. It had got about somehow that something was in the wind, and more and more were rolling up at Foster's to see what they could find out. "Who'll volunteer? Fullerton's been idiot enough to start his womenkind off for Buluwayo this morning. They'll be at the Kezane Store by the time we catch them up, and we saw with our own eyes an impi, a couple of hundred strong, heading straight for that very point this morning. The whole country's in a blaze. My farm's been blown up, and Tewson and his family are all murdered."

"That's quite true," said Peters.

"Well, Peters and I, and as many of you as will volunteer, are going to start off down the road now at once to the rescue of Fullerton's outfit—if no one'll join, the two of us will go alone. You see we've just seen white women and children who'd been cut up into pieces. Fullerton has women with him. Who'll volunteer?"

Several men stepped forward without hesitation. Others would have, but one had no horse, another no rifle, and so forth. All these objections were met by Lamont without a moment's hesitation.

"Get them then," he said, "and that at once. I'll be responsible for those who are too out of luck to get them for themselves. Get them, and roll up here as soon as ever you can. Not a minute to lose."

To describe the state of excitement that prevailed is rather beyond our strength. Most of the men were wiry, hard-bitten prospectors, some of them, as the speaker had put it, 'out of luck,' a euphemism for out of funds, others were doing a spell of taking it easy, but all were enthusiastic to join. But all stared at Lamont with wonder. He whom they had never known other than the soul of coolness, and reticence, and caution, was now on fire. His eyes seemed to blaze from his colourless face, his voice trembled with its earnestness as he drove home his appeal to them by drawing a picture of these two helpless women, refined and daintily raised, at the mercy of—in the power of—these black fiends; of whose 'mercy' in such cases, he and those with him had, with their own eyes, just beheld a sample.

"I say, Lamont," began Orwell, most of the men having gone away to effect their preparations, "don't you think you're rather over-estimating the risk. You know you're tired and excited, and all that."

"No, I don't. I know what I'm about, and I know what I've seen. I tell you, Orwell, if you'd listened to me a fortnight ago instead of loftily pooh-poohing everything I told you, it might have made a lot of difference."

"What's all this scare-mongering about," began another man who had just entered. "Here they are telling me, Lamont, that you're organising an expedition to go to the relief of the Fullertons. Why, man, they've got a dozen of our police with them."

The speaker was Isard's subaltern. Isard himself was out on a patrol just then.

"All serene, Blackmore. If they had a hundred of your police they might not have one too many. At any rate I've served against the wily Matabele. I don't know whether you have."

"Er—perhaps not. Still you can't want so many men. We've none too many left for the defence of the town."

"Oh, damn the defence of the town! These two helpless women are in the heart of the country. They ought never to have been allowed to move from here. Fullerton's a bigger fool than even I took him for."

"How about Ancram?" struck in Peters, anxious to avert a breeze. "Shall we take him?"

Ancram the while had dropped on a couch the moment he had done breakfast, and had gone fast asleep, thoroughly worn out with exhaustion. He was there still.

"No. He's no use. Leave him to help in 'the defence of the town,'" sneered Lamont. "Hallo, Jim Steele. We haven't had that scrap yet, but it'll keep a little longer. I want you now to come and help fight someone else. The whole country's in a blaze! Fullerton's outfit's along the Buluwayo road, and Peters and I saw a big impi making straight in that direction this morning."

"I'll go, Lamont," said the big fellow, who had just come in to see what all the row was about. "Oh, this is nuts! We'll make those black swine spit. How many cartridges shall I take?"

"Just as many as ever you can carry. The same applies to all hands."

There was a trampling of horses outside. Already the men were beginning to roll up, and soon Lamont found himself at the head of some two dozen, well-armed and fairly well mounted, all alert and willing, and chock-full of eagerness for a fight.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A Grim Running Fight.

Once clear of Gandela, Lamont had subsided into moody silence. Only the eager glow in his eyes, as he sent his horse along at a brisk pace at the head of his troop, told how his thoughts were working. At present they held but two considerations—a vivid picture of the horror he had witnessed and the torturing fear lest he should be too late to prevent a repetition of it. No, that contingency would not bear contemplation, and all unconsciously he urged his horse on to greater speed, till at last something of a murmur arose from one or two of his followers.

“We shall bust our horses if we stretch them out like this at the start.”

He looked round.

“Oh no, we shan’t. And every moment may make all the difference.”

What was it that rendered his every thought a keen torture? Had it been a case of rescuing from horrible danger any other two women in the township, would he have been so eager? Yes, he would. He could safely say that. But he would not have suffered from this overweighting, distracting apprehension begotten of the knowledge that one of these two was Clare Vidal.

But if his chief for the time being was silent, the same could not be said of Peters. For Peters was giving a graphic account of all that had befallen, and especially was he graphic on the barbarous massacre of the Tewson family. His object was to inflame the minds of these men, to work them up to a very fever-heat of desire for revenge; thus would each man feel endowed with the strength and bravery of six, and they would need it too, for after all their force was a puny one—yes, a very puny one, considering the overwhelming odds they would almost certainly have to encounter.

They made Langrishe’s Store in fine time, but—where was Langrishe? No answer was returned to their loud, impatient hail. He could not be away, for the door was half open. Some opined that he was probably drunk, but to two there, at any rate, that silence bore an ominous similarity to that which had signalled their approach to another homestead only yesterday morning. The solution was somewhat startling. From the partly open door half a dozen armed savages shot forth, and darted for the nearest bush with inconceivable swiftness.

But not one of them was destined to reach it. A perfect howl of rage went up from the spectators, and waiting for no word of command a dozen horsemen were on the heels of the fugitives, who were shot down to a man. It was all over in a moment.

“Loosen girths everyone and water the horses while we investigate,” ordered Lamont. “No time to off-saddle.”

It was even as they had dreaded. Lying behind the counter of his store was the body of poor Langrishe, the skull battered in, the clothing riddled with assegai cuts, but the body was still quite warm. Bales and cases, and goods of every description, were piled and heaped about in the last degree of confusion. The murderers had obviously been too busy looting to hear the approach of the party and so secure their own safety in time. The wrath of the latter found vent in bitter curses, and blood-curdling promises of vengeance upon the whole Matabele race.

But the ride had been a forced and a hot one, eke a dusty one and a dry. One of the men came forward.

“Captain,” he said, with a glance at the bar shelves, “some of us are thinking that while the horses are resting a tot all round wouldn’t hurt us any. Might buck us up a bit, and it’s mortal dry.”

“Yes; that’s right,” said Lamont. “But—only one, mind. We mustn’t overdo it, for we shall have all our work cut out for us.”

The said tot having been served out to all hands, and the party having requisitioned some of poor Langrishe’s biscuit in case of accidents—for they had set forth none too well provisioned—the body of the unfortunate storekeeper was left locked up within his own house. Girths were tightened, and the road was resumed.

The fresh spoor of the mule-waggon and the police horses was plain enough in the dry, powdery road, but the rapidity of their pace underwent no diminution. But, like those they followed, they were disgusted to find Skrine’s Store shut up and deserted. Equally, with those they followed, they did not discover the remains of the luckless Skrine and his unknown companions, lying murdered in the bush.

Again girths were loosened for a bare five minutes, and again they cantered forward. And now hopes began to rise. They had covered about half the stage to the Kezane Store. It was late in the afternoon, and Fullerton’s party would be sure to sleep there. They might have to stand a siege there, but that was safety itself compared with being attacked in the open. Then, just as this hope had become almost a certainty, there occurred that which brought a quick exclamation to every mouth. Right ahead on the smooth still air, distant and muffled came the dull rattle of a volley.

“Great Jupiter! they’re attacked,” cried Lamont, putting his horse to a gallop. “Come on, Peters. Come on everybody. For God’s sake, put your best foot forward!”

No need was there for this exhortation. Tingling with excitement every man was sending his steed along for all he knew how—those who were the most indifferently mounted slashing and spurring and cursing. And if any additional stimulant were needed the sound of further firing in front went far to supply it.

“It won’t be far beyond here,” yelled Peters, as they tore through the entrance to the bushy valley, where the fight at close quarters had first commenced. And, even as he spoke, more shots rang out, this time very near indeed, and with them mingled the roars and hisses of the attacking Matabele. Only a bend in the road hid from them the scene of action.

“Come on, boys!” shouted Lamont, half turning in his saddle. “You’ll know what to do when you see what’s going on.”

A minute later, and they did see, and what they saw was this. The waggon was at a standstill. The two leading mules were down—one motionless, the other struggling and kicking frantically. Of the police escort half had been killed, and the remnant, now dismounted, were standing, back to the waggon on either side, with revolver pointed, facing a swarm of dark leaping figures, closing in more and more, uttering their vibrating war-hiss, yet still not quite liking to face those deadly revolvers.

“Charge!” shouted Lamont. “Divide. Half of us each side.”

With a wild, roaring cheer the men spurred forward. The assailants did not wait. Uttering loud cries of warning and dismay they fled helter-skelter for more secure cover, and not all reached it, for the irresistible impetus of their charge had carried the rescuers right in among the discomfited Matabele, whom they shot down right and left, well-nigh at point-blank.

“Quick, some of you cut loose those mules,” ordered Lamont. “Steele, you’re a good man at that sort of thing. Three, all told, will be enough.”

In a trice the two wounded leaders were cut loose, the one still kicking being given its quietus. Wyndham, the while, kept to his business as driver with an unswerving attention that no temptation to bear a hand in the fight caused him to lose sight of for a moment, and in an incredibly short space of time the reduced team was on the move again.

Lamont’s glance took in Clare Vidal’s pale, set face with a glow of indescribable relief. She was uninjured, and he noted further that she gripped the revolver he had given her as though she had been using it. She, for her part, was fully appraising this man, whom last she had seen cool, indifferent, rather cynical. Now—grimy, unshaven, fierce-eyed—he was all fire and energy, and she noted further that he seemed in every way as one born to command. The alacrity with which the others sprang to execute his orders did not escape her either—even Jim Steele, whose ambition the other day had been to punch his head.

“Get your mules along as quick as you can, Wyndham,” he said. “We must be a good hour from the Kezane, and when these devils discover we are not the advance guard of a bigger force they’ll make it lively for us again.”

One more quick look, and that was all, then his attention was turned solely and entirely to the matter in hand. Clare Vidal read that look, and was perchance satisfied; anyhow she regarded him—grimy, unshaven, fierce-eyed—with an admiration she had never felt for any living man. The ‘coward’! she said to herself—the man whom her brother-in-law and others had described as a funkstick.

“See here, Lamont,” now sung out Fullerton. “I’m going to get on one of those police horses and help in this racket. I’m dead sick of sitting here.”

For two of the horses of the fallen troopers had been brought on and were being led by the survivors.

“All right. There’ll be no harm in that. Miss Vidal, you’d better get into the back of the waggon and let down the sail. We haven’t done with the enemy yet—and you won’t be such a conspicuous mark when he comes on again.”

For a moment Clare was about to object. But she said—

“Do you really wish me to?”

“Certainly I do.”

Then she complied without another word.

“Cheer up, Lucy, we are safe now,” she said to her sister. “Mr Lamont has come up just in the nick of time.”

“The nick of time indeed,” was the shuddering answer. “If he hadn’t we should have been dead by now.” And she shivered again.

“A miss is as good as a mile, Mrs Fullerton,” said Wyndham cheerily. “That was a near thing, but our time hasn’t come yet. Gee-yup!”

He had managed to knock a sort of jaded amble out of the dispirited mules. The relieving force, divided into two, was advancing through the bush and long grass on either side of the waggon—in open skirmishing order: Peters, by tacit consent, being in virtual command of one. Every man was keenly on the alert, and the faintest movement in the grass or bush would bring rifle or pistol to the ready.

“Lamont,” said Fullerton gravely, as they thus moved forward, “I don’t want to go through such another experience. That’s the very closest thing I’ve ever been in or ever expect to be. It’d have been bad enough, but the consciousness that the wife and Clare were in for it too—eugh! it was awful! And *you* got us out.”

Lamont frowned.

“You’ll excuse my saying so, Fullerton, but how you could be such a bedevilled idiot as to start across country at this time of day, with two helpless women and a handful of police, bangs me I own.”

“Helpless women!” echoed Fullerton. “Not much of the ‘helpless’ woman about Clare, I can tell you. Why, she accounted for more niggers than I did, with that pistol you gave her. But why didn’t you warn us if you were in the know?”

“I did, and nobody more than half believed me—some not even that.”

“I know now what you did on the day of the race meeting, Lamont,” said Fullerton gravely. “I consider we all owe our lives to you, and I, for one, want to apologise sincerely for having misunderstood you—”

But his words were cut short. Lamont had risen in his stirrups and, swift as thought, discharged his revolver. Fullerton had a quick glancing vision of the head and shoulders of a savage twenty yards distant above the tall grass, and of the flinging aloft of black hands, and the upturned roll of white eyeballs, as, struck full and fair in the chest, the warrior fell backward with a crash. At the same time the hum of missiles overhead, and the report of firearms—but—not those of the force.

“This is a fresh crowd,” he cried. “Those who tackled us first hadn’t a gun among them.”

Then, from among the grass and bushes, dark forms arose, and the spurt of smoke and the ‘whigge’ of great clumsy

missiles accompanied the appearance of each. But there were cool heads and fine shots among those white men, and the dusky barbarian found in a surprisingly short space of time that even momentary exposure meant almost certain death. Moreover, from the hurry and flurry of it, all untrained to quick shooting as he was, he could take no aim, and sent his bullet humming away harmlessly to high heaven. Fortunately, too, the outfit had got beyond the valley, and here in the open ground there was no elevated point of vantage whence it could be raked.

Yet the situation was becoming serious. Heartened by their reinforcement, and the moral effect of knowing that they, too, were returning the fire of the Amakiwa, though as yet harmlessly, the original attacking force was pressing forward under cover of the firing and confusion, swarming up stealthily in the bush and long grass, preparing for a final and decisive rush. But somehow that rush never quite came off. The fire of those cool, experienced whites was too determined, too hot, too deadly. Moving with judgment and rapidity, the mounted men would dart right up to any massing of the dark crowd, and pouring their fire literally into their faces would break up any attempt at an organised charge. But they did not come off unscathed. Three were wounded at close quarters, two had their horses stabbed right under them, but with unfailing cool-headedness and magnificent valour these were kept from falling into the hands of the savages.

For half an hour this continued, and indeed it seemed as though some supernatural power was aiding that mere handful of men against swarming odds, as with brain dizzy and the whole world seeming to grow glistening leaping bodies and gleaming blades and great waving shields, the air to buzz with the vibrating war-hiss—that handful fought its way step by step.

The red sun had just touched the far skyline when the assailants slackened, then drew off, and there—not half a mile distant—rose the substantial stockade of the Kezane Store. A ringing cheer went up, and even the played-out mules snuffed the air and pricked up their ears, and pulled forward with a will.

The long, hard, running fight—valiantly fought—was over, and there in front lay rest and safety—for a time.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Kezane Store.

The Kezane Store—shop, inn, farm, posting-stables rolled into one—was almost a small fort, in that its buildings were enclosed within a stout stockade of mopani poles. This is exactly as its owner intended it should be; and now the said owner—an elderly German who had served in the Franco-Prussian war—came forth, together with three other white men, to welcome the party.

“*Ach*! dot was very exciting,” he said. “We was hearing the fight—for the last hour—coming nearer and nearer. We was not able to help outside, only four of us, but we was ready to shoot from here if the Matabele had come near enough.”

The excitement of the men was now fairly let loose, and everybody seemed to be talking at once; fighting the battle over again in bulk, or recounting individual experiences. The surviving half of the handful of police were more subdued—the recollection of five dead comrades left behind on the road having something to do with it.

“Good old Grunberger,” sang out Jim Steele. “You ought to have been with us, a jolly old soldier like you. You’d have been a tiger.”

“*Ach*! I do not know,” replied the old German quite flattered. “Now, chentlemen, you will all come and haf some drinks wit me. Wit me, you understand.”

“Good for you, Grunberger,” said Peters. “But we can’t leave everything entirely without a guard. Why, they might come on again at any moment. Who’ll volunteer for first guard?”

There was perforce no actual discipline among this scratch corps, and the speaker, or even Lamont himself, had no power to enforce obedience to any single order they might issue. But these men had gone through a splendid experience together. Quite half of them had never before seen a life taken, or a shot fired in anger, in their lives; yet when put to it they had made a gallant running fight, against tremendous odds, with judgment and pluck such as no similar number of trained soldiers could have excelled them in. They had succeeded in their object, and had succeeded brilliantly, and the glow of satisfaction which this inspired was heightened by the absolute certainty that had they overtaken the mule-waggon ten minutes later their arrival would have been too late. All this had implanted in them an instinctive soldierly spirit, and not a man there would have dreamed of questioning an order issued by Lamont, or even Peters. Yet the latter now invited some of them to ‘volunteer.’ The whole corps responded.

“Half a dozen ’ll do,” was the answer, and those who seemed the most willing were duly told off. The while the ladies were being looked after by the storekeeper’s wife.

Lamont was helping to look after the wounded. Fortunately, among the three men who found themselves at Kezane when they arrived was a young doctor from Buluwayo; and his services being readily and skilfully given, there was no cause whatever for anxiety on the part of these less lucky ones.

“Where’s the captain?” sang out Jim Steele, as the residue of the corps were doing full and jovial justice to the hospitable German’s invitation. “We must have the captain. We want to drink his jolly good health. Here it is. Here’s to Captain Lamont, and ripping good luck to him.”

The toast was drunk with a roar of cheering.

“He’s helping look after the wounded,” said Peters. “There’s a doctor here luckily, and he’s having them seen to all right.”

A sort of compunctious silence fell upon the others at this announcement. Here they were, refreshing and making merry and enjoying themselves, while the man who had led them, and taken a tiger’s share in the fight, had gone straight away to care for their wounded comrades.

“Chaps,” said Jim Steele shortly, “we are sweeps. D’you hear? Sweeps.”

“It’s all right, Jim,” said Peters. “Lamont told me to look after you all, even apart from Grunberger’s jolly hospitable invitation. Don’t you bother about him.”

“Bother about him?” echoed Jim Steele. “But that’s just what we’re going to do. We must have him here and drink his jolly good health. This time it’ll be my round, boys, and we’re going to do it with musical honours. So, Peters, cut away and rout him out, like the good chap you are.”

Peters, nothing loth, went out. He found Lamont just coming out of the house, having seen the wounded men made as snug and comfortable as they could be under the circumstances. Indeed, he had been giving the doctor actual aid with his own hands, in one case where an amputation had been necessary.

“Certainly I’ll come, Peters,” he said. “I want to thank these fellows for coming with me when I asked them. Heavens! to think what would have happened if they’d hung back, for you and I would have been nowhere against such odds. But—it won’t bear thinking about.”

A huge cheer greeted his entrance. All hands were awaiting him, glasses ready. A gigantic tumbler of whisky-and-soda was thrust into his hand by Jim Steele.

“Toss that down first, captain,” said that worthy. “You’ve had nothing yet.”

Lamont, entering into the fun of the thing, complied. Then Jim Steele went on—

“Boys, I’m going to give you the health of our captain, the biggest tiger in a fight any fellow could wish to find himself alongside of—”

The vociferous chorus of ‘Hear—hear!’ having subsided, he went on—

“But before doing that, I want to apologise to him—yes, to apologise, and I don’t know how to do it quite low enough. The day of the race meeting I insulted you, captain. I called you a coward. A coward I think of that, boys, after what we’ve seen to-day. Well, now I want to say you may kick me—now, in front of everyone here, and I won’t move. So, go ahead.”

“Oh, stow that, Jim Steele,” interrupted Lamont, “and don’t make a silly ass of yourself. You were a little bit screwed, you know, and didn’t know what the devil you were saying.” Here the listeners roared. “Don’t you imagine I’ve given that another thought, because I haven’t. And calling a man anything doesn’t make him so. We’ll rub out that little disagreement right here.”

He put out his hand, and the next moment almost wished he hadn’t, when Jim Steele was doing his best to wring it off. The cheering was wildly renewed.

“Boys,” went on the latter, raising his glass. “Here’s Captain Lamont, and his jolly good health. And if he’ll raise a corps to take the veldt and help straighten out this racket, I’m going to be the first man to join. I don’t suppose there’s a man jack in this room that won’t join. Is there?”

“No—no.”

The answer was an enthusiastic roar. And as they drank his health they struck up the usual chorus under the circumstances—‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’—until the room rang again. And if the watchful savage was crawling about the dark veldt outside, in a scouting capacity—and who shall say he was not—he must have decided that Makiwa was singing war-songs with extraordinary go and zest—not to say indulging in a *Tyay’igama* dance (see note), by way of celebrating his victory.

Then Lamont made a little speech. He thanked them for responding so readily to his call for volunteers, but he knew that they would thank themselves for the rest of their lives that it had been given to them to be the means of averting the horrible tragedy they *had* been the means of averting. The whole country now was up in arms. These savages spared neither age nor sex, he had already seen enough—and Peters would bear him out there—to prove that. Probably they would hear of more and similar massacres elsewhere before long, but at any rate he, for one, was going to help the country in which he had lived since its opening up—to help it to the best of his ability; and whether they served with him or not he hoped and believed every man jack in that room was going to do the same.

As for himself, Jim Steele had been good enough to emphasise anything he might have done, but exactly the same and more might be said of every man who had fought that day in defence of their two fellow-countrywomen, and of none more than of Wyndham, who although he had had no opportunity of firing a shot at the would-be woman-slayers, had none the less by his coolness and skill contributed to the safety of the party as thoroughly as though he had shot a score of Matabele with his own hand.

Wyndham had just come in, and a shout of cheering greeted his appearance at these words. When this had abated Lamont went on.

They were not out of the wood yet, he said. They had either got to wait here until relieved or take the ladies back to Gandela themselves, and he himself favoured the first plan. Were they alone they would reckon it part of the day’s work to fight their way, if necessary, to whatever point at which their services were most required. But the events of the afternoon had shown they were an inadequate force for escort purposes, though providentially they had been brought through that time. Again, he repeated, he could not claim to have done more than any other man who was with him, where all did so well; and to the end of his days, be they many or few, one of the proudest recollections of his life would be that of the couple of dozen or so of men who fought side by side with him, against tremendous odds, to save their fellow-countrywomen from falling into the barbarous hands of murderous and treacherous savages.

Roars of cheers greeted the closing of this speech; and then they fell to the discussion of Jim Steele’s notion. For the idea had caught on. It was determined that those who had fought that day should form the nucleus of a corps to take the field under Lamont and Peters, and that the said corps should be known as Lamont’s Tigers.

“Dat is a goot name,” said Grunberger, nodding his head approvingly. “We will now drink de health of Lamont’s

Tigers. Chentlemen, name your drinks."

This announcement was received with great applause. Then, paper and pen having been requisitioned, every man there put down his name, pledging himself to serve in the corps and also to do all he could to induce desirable men to join it too.

Lamont had left them after his address, and was now examining the defences of the place. As he stood in the gathering darkness it was with a strange tingle of the pulses that he reflected upon the scene he had just left. This popularity to which he had thus suddenly sprung was not a little strange, in fact it was a little aweing. In what light would Clare Vidal view it? And then, at the thought of Clare, he felt more than devoutly grateful that he had been the means of saving her from a horrible death—and with it there intruded for the first time another thought. Had he thus saved her for himself?

Yes. The frozen horror with which he had received the announcement that morning, that she was advancing deeper and deeper into certain peril, and causing him to lose sight of his own fatigue and recent hardships, to start off then and there to her aid, had opened his eyes; but—was it for good or for ill?

"There you are at last, Mr Lamont," said Clare, as he entered the living-room of the place. "We have been wondering what had become of you."

She was alone. There was a something in her tone, even in her look, which he had not noticed before—a sort of gravity, as though the old fun and brightness had taken to itself wings.

"I've been going around seeing to things. Where's Mrs Fullerton?"

"Gone to bed. She's got a splitting headache, and seems to have got a kind of frightened shock. Dick is with her now, but I'm going directly."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It has been a trying enough day for any woman, Heaven knows. But you, Miss Vidal. There isn't a man in the whole outfit that isn't talking of your splendid pluck."

She smiled, rather wanly he thought, and shook her head.

"I wish they'd forget it then. I wish I could. Oh, Mr Lamont—I have killed—men."

She uttered the words slowly, and in a tone of mingled horror and sadness. This, then, accounted for the changed expression of her face.

"Strictly and in absolute self-defence. Not only in *self*-defence but in defence of your helpless sister too. There is no room for one atom of self-reproach in that," he went on, speaking rapidly, vehemently. "Not only that, but your courage and readiness were important factors in saving the situation until we arrived. Wyndham has been telling me all about it."

She smiled, but it was a hollow sort of smile, and shook her head.

"It is good of you to try and comfort me. But do you mean it really?"

"Every word, really and entirely. 'Men' you said just now. Beasts in the shape of men you ought to have said, and would have if you had seen what Peters and I saw only yesterday morning, only I don't want to shock you any further. Yes, on second thoughts I will though, if only to set those qualms of a too-sensitive conscience at rest. Well, we found the mutilated remains of poor Tewson, and his womenkind and children—little children, mind—whom these devils had murdered in their own home. I could tell you even more that would bring it home to you, but I won't. Now, have you any further scruples of conscience?"

"No, I haven't," she answered, both face and tone hardening as she realised the atrocity in its full horror. "Thank you for telling me. It has made a difference already. And now, Mr Lamont, I must go to my sister. You have saved us from a horrible death, and I don't know how to find words to thank you."

"Oh, as to that, you can incidentally count in about three dozen other men. Not a man jack of them but did just as much as I did—some even more."

She looked at him with such a sweet light glowing in her eyes, as well-nigh to unsteady him.

"I'll believe that," she said, "when you've answered one question."

"And it—?"

"Who got together these men the moment he knew we were in danger? Who, forgetting his own fatigue, started at a moment's notice, and, inspiring the others with the same energy and bravery, rescued us from a ghastly death? Who was it?"

"It was only what any man would have done. Oh, Clare, you can never realise what that moment meant to me when I heard that that blighting idiot Fullerton had started this morning—literally to hurl you on to the assegais of these devils. You!"

In his vehemence he hardly noticed that he had used her Christian name. She did, however, and smiled, and the smile was very soft and sweet.

"Me!" she echoed. "Didn't you think of poor Lucy too? Why only me?"

"Because I love you."

It was out now. His secret had been surprised from him. What would she say? They stood facing each other, in that rough room with its cheap oleographs of the Queen, the Kaiser, and Cecil Rhodes staring down upon them from the walls

in the dingy light of an unfragrant oil-lamp, any moment liable to interruption. The smile upon her face became a shade sweeter.

"Say that again," she said.

"I love you."

She was now in his embrace, but she sought not to release herself from it. Bending down his head she put her lips to his ear and whispered, "Consider the compliment returned."

They said more than that, these two, who had thus so unpremeditatedly come together, but we do not feel under the necessity of divulging what they said. Perchance also they—*did*.

"I must really go now," she said at last, as footsteps were heard approaching. "Good-night—my darling."

And she disappeared with a happy laugh, leaving the other standing there in a condition little short of dazed, and sticking a pin into himself to make sure that he was actually awake and not merely dreaming.

Note. Literally 'flogging the name.' When a Zulu regiment returned from battle, those who had specially distinguished themselves were pointed at by the commanding induna and *named* to the King. Each thus named came forward separately and danced before the King, recapitulating his deeds. The while his comrades in arms signalled his distinction by striking their shields with their knob-sticks and roaring out his name.

Chapter Twenty Four.

As an Oasis.

Day dawned, cloudless and golden, in its full African splendour. The night had passed without any alarm, but, to make sure, the force had divided the night between it to mount guard, that section of it off duty sleeping in the open—arms ready to hand.

Their leader appeared to be made of iron. Stirring events, peril, fatigue, had been crowded into his experience since his last night's sleep, four nights ago, but all seemed to go for nothing. He was here, there, everywhere, the night through, seeming to need no sleep. And with the first sign of a glimmer of dawn, the whole force was up and under arms, waiting and ready, for that is the hour—when sleep is heaviest, and vigilance in consequence relaxed—that the untiring savage favours for making his attack. But no such attack was made, and the night passed quietly and without alarm, as we have said.

"Dash it all, Lamont! Why don't you turn in, man? You're overdoing it, you know. You haven't had forty winks for about four nights. You'll bust up all of a sudden, and at the wrong time, if you don't watch it. How's that?"

Thus Peters, what time the tired and worn-out men were simply subsiding on the bare ground, and dropping off into log-like slumber the moment they touched it; and that under the glorious blue of the heavens and the sweeping gold of the newly risen sun.

"I couldn't sleep, Peters—no, not if I were paid to," was the answer. "But I'm going to see if I can scare up a tub and a razor. At present I must be looking the most desperate ruffian you could *not* wish to meet in a lonely lane."

Peters looked after him and shook his head, slowly and mournfully.

"He's got it," he said to himself. "By the Lord, he's got it. I could see that when, like the blithering ass I am, I interrupted them that evening. No, it isn't sheer aptitude for tough campaigning that keeps his peepers open when nobody else can keep theirs."

Peters was absolutely right. His friend and comrade was in a state of mental exaltation that reacted physically. He could hardly believe in his happiness, even yet. How had it come about? In his pride and cynicism it might have been months before he would have brought matters to the testing point—it is even conceivable it might have been never. Yet, all unpremeditated and on the spur of the moment, he had done so—and now, and now—

Good Heavens! life was too golden henceforward, and as the flaming wheel of the sun rose higher and higher in the unflecked blue, the glory of the newborn day seemed to Lamont to attune itself to the glow of happiness and peace which had settled down upon his whole being. The bloodshed and strife and massacre! of which he had been a witness, was as a thing outside, a thing put completely behind.

It was decided that no move should be made that day. A bare suggestion that they should attempt the return to Gandela revived all poor Lucy Fullerton's terrors. She would sooner die at once, she declared, than go through the horrors of yesterday all over again.

"Yes, you seemed to have got the funks to some considerable purpose," grumbled Fullerton. "Hang it, Lucy, I thought you had more pluck. Look at Clare, now. She was positively enjoying it."

"Oh no, she wasn't," corrected that young person, who had just entered. "No, not in the very least. But I suppose different people take on different forms of scare. Mine took that of a sort of desperate excitement."

"Yours? Form of scare! By jingo! that's a 'form of scare' we could do with plenty of during these jolly lively days," returned Fullerton.

"Oh, and look here, Dick," went on the girl. "I must ask you not to talk about it—I mean not to go bragging around to everybody that your sister-in-law shot twenty or forty or sixty Matabele—or whatever you are going to make it—in the fight at the Kezane Store."

"Why in thunder not? Why shouldn't you have your share of the kudos as well as anyone else in the same racket?"

"Because I don't want it. Because I want to forget my share in it. The consciousness of having taken life, even in the very extremity of self-defence, can never be a subject of self-congratulation, especially to a woman. I, for one, don't want ever to hear it referred to."

"Well, you are squeamish, Clare. Let me tell you that the rest of us don't share your opinions. There isn't a man jack, from Lamont downwards, who hasn't been blowing your trumpet loud enough to wake the dead."

A softer look came into her face at the name. Perhaps her brother-in-law partially read it, perhaps he didn't.

"By the way, Dick," she went on, "I suppose by this time you have found reason for somewhat altering your opinion of Mr Lamont's courage, have you? It used to be rather unfavourable, if I remember right."

"Rather, I should think I had. I told him so too, during a lull in the scrimmage."

"Oh, you told him so. And what did he answer?"

"Nothing. He sloshed a pistol-bullet into a big buck nigger who'd romped up in the long grass to blaze into us. By George, here he is."

"Who? The 'nigger'?"

"Morning, Lamont. Come to have breakfast, of course?" for they had just sat down. "We were just talking about you."

"I'll change the subject to a more interesting one then," was the answer. "How are you, Mrs Fullerton, and did you have a restful night, for I'm sure you deserved one?"

"Not very. I'm a shocking coward, but I'm afraid it's constitutional," answered poor Lucy. But he laughingly reassured her, and talked about the fineness of the day, and the extent of the view around Kezane, and soon got away from yesterday's battle entirely.

Lamont's morning greeting, as far as Clare was concerned, was a fine piece of acting, for they had arranged not to make public their understanding until safe back at Gandela. Yet the swift flash as glance met glance, and a subtle hand-pressure, were as eloquent as words to those most concerned.

Watching him, though not appearing to, Clare's heart was aglow with illimitable pride and love. The emergency had brought out the man beyond even her estimate of him, and that had been not small. She had read him from the very first, had seen what was in him, and her instinct had been justified to the full. She was proud to remember how she had always believed in him, and that the more detraction reached her ears the more did it strengthen rather than sap that belief. And now—and now—he was hers and she was his.

Others dropped in—Peters, and Jim Steele, and Strange the doctor, and two or three more, and soon the talk became general. At a hint from Lamont the subject of the fight of yesterday was left out, and they got on to others, just as if nothing had occurred to disturb the peace in the midst of which, a short twenty-four hours back, they had imagined themselves to dwell. But it seemed to Lamont that Grunberger's wife, a pleasant-looking Englishwoman who was taking care of their wants, was eyeing him with a mingling of covert amusement and interest. "Shall we stroll about outside, Miss Vidal?" he said, a little later, when they were out in the air again. "What do you think, Mrs Fullerton? A constitutional won't hurt us."

But Lucy protested that no consideration on earth would induce her to set foot outside the gates—as they knew she would. No, no. These horrible savages had a knack of springing up out of nowhere. Clare seemed to know how to take care of herself, but she, assuredly, did not. It was in vain for Lamont to impress upon her that the ground around the place was quite open, and that there were pickets posted at intervals where the not very thick bush began. She was obdurate—as he knew she would be.

The question of making some sort of patrol had been discussed, but it had been decided that it was not worth the risk. Their force was none too strong to defend the place if attacked by numbers, which was very likely to happen, for the Kezane was one of the largest and most important stores along the line of coaches, and was always well supplied with everything likely to tempt the cupidity of the savages. A patrol might venture too far and in the wrong direction, and get cut off; then what a serious weakening of their forces that would mean. So pickets were posted instead.

"Then you haven't awoke to the conclusion you were rather hasty last night, Clare?"

"Have you?" she answered sweetly.

"Good God! Need you ask? But it is a fitting reply to an idiotic question."

"Don't be profane, and don't call yourself undeserved names, dearest. But you don't look as if you had had any sleep. Have you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I couldn't have slept if I'd tried," he said, the soft caressing solicitude of the remark stirring through his whole being. "But that'll all come right. I'm hard as nails, remember."

"I should think you were," flashing up at him another admiring glance. "Oh, darling, I loved to see you yesterday. The sight of you went far to neutralise all the horrors of the situation."

"Don't, don't," he said, rather unsteadily, positively intoxicated with the sweetness of her tones, her looks. "Don't quite try to give me 'swelled head' as those good chaps were trying to do last night. Because *you* might succeed, you know."

"You could never get that. But—I have something to say to you, and I don't believe you're going to grant me the very first thing I've ever asked you."

"And that—?"

"I want you not to run into danger any more. You belong to me now—we belong to each other. If this is going to be a regular war—perhaps a long one—there can be no necessity for you to take part in it—I mean, to join expeditions, and all that. You will be helping quite enough by staying to defend Gandela, and taking care of me."

He looked troubled.

"Oh, Clare, my darling one, what shall I say? Do you know, last night all these good fellows formed themselves into the nucleus of a corps on condition that I should lead them. And I promised. How can I climb down now?"

She looked at him, for a moment, full in the eyes, and her own kindled.

"You can't. No, of course you can't. I am not such a selfish idiot as to dream of expecting such a thing. Why, it is a distinct call to usefulness, to distinction. I would not try to hold you back from it now, no, not even if I could."

"But, understand this," he went on. "I will not move in the matter until I have seen you in safety—in entire and complete safety. Then—it is a duty. What would you think of me if I shirked that sort of duty? Would it not be to put a stamp of truth on the lies some of my kind friends have been spreading about me?"

"I won't say I would think nothing of you, for I can't imagine, let alone contemplate, such a contingency. But—now we are on the subject—I would like to hear your side of—of—all these stories. Don't think that I doubt you—never think that, dearest—but I would like to be able to fling the lie in their faces."

He was silent for a few moments as they paced up and down. They were out of earshot of the stockade but in full view of all within it. To all intents and purposes they were only two people walking up and down in ordinary converse, as a couple of ship-board acquaintances might walk up and down the deck of a passenger ship.

"Some years ago," he resumed, "I had a quarrel with a man—a man who had been my friend. He had played me a dirty trick—a very dirty trick—the nature of it doesn't matter, any more than his identity, now. I am not an angel, and have my share of original sin, which includes a temper, though since then I have tried my level best to keep it within bounds. Well, from words we got to blows, and I was a fair boxer—" here Clare half smiled, in the midst of her vivid interest, as she remembered the tribute her brother-in-law had paid to his powers in that line, even while decrying his courage.

"In the course of the scrimmage I struck him a blow that felled him. He lay motionless, and I and others thought he was dead. We brought him round though, but he had a bad concussion of the brain, and for weeks hovered between life and death. Moreover, he has never been the same man since. If I lived for a thousand years I could never forget what I went through during that time. Well, in the result I made a vow, a most solemn vow, that never again, even under the extremest of provocation, would I lift hand in anger against anybody, except under the most absolute necessity of self-defence—or in defence of others. And I never have."

Clare's colour heightened and her eyes shone. Instinctively she put forth her hand to take his, and withdrew it instantly as she remembered that they were in full view of everybody.

"Once, not long ago, up here, I put on the gloves with another man, a first-rate performer, for a friendly spar. But even with gloves on you can do a good deal of grim slogging. Somehow it came upon me—I believe I was getting the best of it, I'm not sure—that the thing was getting too real, and a vivid recollection of that other affair seemed to rise up like a ghost, and then and there I chucked up the sponge. Again they said I had funked."

"Yes, I heard about that," she said. "But it didn't make any difference to me. I knew better all along, and told them so."

"You told them so?"

"Of course I did. You see, I knew you better than that—even though we hadn't done very much talking together, had we? And so that was your reason. Well you have adhered to your resolve—yes, grandly."

"Do you remember that morning up on Ehlatini, you were warning me about Ancram? Well, that story was nearly all true. I did think my life was too good to put in pawn for the sake of that of a peculiarly abominable specimen of the *genus* gutter-brat—a specimen which was bound to be hung sooner or later—probably sooner. I think so still."

She shook her head, trying to look solemn.

"All life is sacred," she began.

"Is it? Mine wasn't—not much. But I'm pretty sure that the immersed gutter-snipe's was less so."

No, there was no keeping up the solemnity line. Clare went off into a rippling peal of laughter.

"I can't help it," she exclaimed. "But don't imagine I approve. It was very wrong indeed to let slip an opportunity of saving life."

"Oh, for the matter of that, if the wretched little beast had been quite alone the case would have been different. As it was, there were plenty of others to haul him out if they chose, so I let them. Then I was insulted and abused by the last person in the world who should have done so, and that in front of a gang of gaping clodhoppers. I hope Ancram didn't leave that part of the story out, because then you will know I have been engaged before."

"Yes, I knew that," answered Clare, who was secretly admiring the straightforward, unhesitating manner in which he told his tale. No stuttering or beating about the bush. He had something to say, and he said it in the most natural and concise manner possible. And she liked that.

"I'm glad. That makes it easier," he returned.

"But," she went on, "are you sure you have no lingering regrets on that score? Not even a little one deep down in your heart?"

"Not the very ghost of one. I am a vindictive animal, I suppose, but that sort of treatment leaves no room for lingering regrets, though it does for lingering resentment. But even of that there is none left now. You will never turn against me, darling?"

"Never," she answered decisively and without hesitation, although startled by the sudden directness of the question.

"No matter what I did? Even to a repetition of the incident I have been telling you?"

"Not even then. No—nothing could ever make me turn from you," she repeated, with a sudden burst of passion.

It was a strange contrast, these two walking there, talking, thinking of love. Down by a stagnant water-hole in the nearly dry river-bed, the horses and mules were grazing, under an armed guard, and yonder the gleam of rifles where vedettes were posted. Outside and within the stockade men lounged and chatted, all ready to fly to arms at the first alarm.

So to these two it was as an oasis—this peace of a great happiness. They had found it between the lurid storms of war, and good—very good—was it for them that they had.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The Impi.

The vedettes had signalled. Away over the veldt to the westward a pillar of dust was visible; and it was moving, drawing nearer. A group, outside the stockade, was watching it intently.

"What d'you make of it, Grunberger?" said Fullerton impatiently.

"I think dot was someone coming," answered the storekeeper, who was looking through a pair of field-glasses. This instructive utterance evolved a laugh.

"That's what we all think, old chap," said Jim Steele. "What we want to *know* is who it's likely to be. White or black, or blue or green, or what?"

"Dot was one white man and one Matabele," said the storekeeper, still intently scanning the approaching dust. "*Ach*! und they ride like de devil."

"Here, let's have a look in, Grunberger," cried Fullerton. "I may know who it is."

The other resigned the glasses, and after a long look, during which the two mounted figures drew rapidly nearer, Fullerton exclaimed—

"By Jove, I do! It's Driffield—Driffield and a boy."

The excitement became intense. Nobody would push his horses at that pace on a hot day unless he were a born fool—which Driffield was not. Clearly there must be somebody behind him, from whom he had a strong interest in getting away.

"How about telling the captain?" suggested someone.

"Not yet," cut in Peters, who had just joined the group. "Lamont's sound asleep, and he needs it too, for to my knowledge he hasn't shut his eyes for four nights. Time enough when we hear what's in the wind."

And that was not to be long. Driffield rolled from his horse panting with excitement and hard riding, and his tale was very soon told, and his experience was closely akin to that of Peters. He had been set upon in his camp that morning by three of his boys, but at the same time he had discovered a number of natives making for his camp at no great distance. He killed two assailants with his shot-gun, and the third took to his heels. Meanwhile, with great presence of mind, the other boy, who had remained faithful, had quickly saddled up the ponies, and the two had got away, but only just in time, for the crowd was beginning to fire at them. But on the road they were forced to make a sudden *détour* to avoid a big impi, which was heading straight in this direction.

"That's news!" said Peters. "They're likely coming for this place, expecting only to find Grunberger, all childlike and confiding. Ah!"

Again the vedette was signalling, and all eyes turned instinctively in the same direction as before. There, sure enough, where the first dust column had been sighted, arose another; no narrow thread this time but a very volume.

"That's them, right enough," said Driffield, while refreshing. "Let my boy have some skoff, will you, Grunberger. He's jolly well earned it."

If the news brought by the Native Commissioner was a source of vivid excitement to all present, no less was theirs to him. He had calculated on warning Grunberger, and if needful giving him a hand in moving his family to Gandela, which he would have had time to do while the Matabele were looting his possessions; instead of which he found the place quite strongly garrisoned, and indeed, considering its defensive facilities, it might be held against very considerable odds. And thus to hold it was the resolve of all there.

"By Jove, but you fellows were in luck," he said regretfully. "I wish I had been there. And Miss Vidal—why, she's splendid."

"I can tell you she saved the whole outfit, by preventing the niggers getting at the mules before we came up," went on his informant. "I had it from Fullerton she shot three with her own hand."

"Three mules?"

"No—niggers—don't be a silly ass, Driffield. Only don't make any allusion to it when you see her. She wants to forget it."

"Of course. Any nice girl would. And she—by Jove, she's splendid!"

"You're not alone in that opinion," said the other so significantly as to draw the obvious query—

"Why?"

"Well," lowering his voice, "Lamont seems to be making powerful running in that quarter. In fact he pretty well gave the show away in his wild eagerness to start after them the moment he heard Fullerton's crowd was on the road at all."

Whereby it is manifest that Lamont's secret was not quite such a secret as he—and the sharer of it—imagined.

He, the while, together with others, was watching the approaching dust-cloud, and a council of war was held. Most were in favour of allowing the raiders to approach quite close, and then surprise them with a raking volley. This followed up quickly by another and another could not fail to demoralise them utterly. Meanwhile the pickets came riding rapidly in.

"Large force of Matabele coming up the road, sir," reported the first.

"Right. Every man to his post," ordered Lamont. His expression of countenance grew anxious, as soon the impi swung into view, marching in close formation, and divided into three companies—the largest and central of which kept the road, hence the dust-cloud. For he estimated that it could not be less than a thousand strong, and how was his small force going to hold its own against a determined rush on the part of such overwhelming odds?

The impi, as it drew near, presented an imposing spectacle. The warriors were in their national fighting gear. Quite half of them had been herders or mine boys for the settlers and prospectors—some perchance store-hands in the townships, but all had discarded the tattered shirt and trousers, or ragged hat, and their bronze bodies were bedecked with feather and bead adornments, and cow-tails, and monkey skins, and jackal-teeth necklaces—all of which, from a spectacular point of view, constituted an immense improvement. Then, too, the forest of great tufted shields, white or black, red or variegated, the quivering rattle of assegai hafts, making weird accompaniment to the gong-like roar of the deep voices as they marched, singing—assuredly the sight was a martial and inspiring one; but of those who beheld it their leader was not the only one to think that he might have appreciated it more fully if this enclosure contained not less than a hundred good white men instead of a bare three dozen.

The latter were watching through the chinks in the stockade—these in many places formed natural loopholes, where they did not they were made to. How long would it be before the word was given to fire? was the one thought in possession of each tense, strained mind. Then, suddenly, the advancing host came to a halt.

Clearly the Matabele were not quite satisfied as to the place being so innocent-looking and deserted as they had expected. For one thing, there were no horses or cattle grazing about anywhere within sight, these, of course, having been brought within at the earliest alarm. This looked suspicious.

They were obviously holding a consultation, but had lowered their voices so as not to be heard by whoever might be inside. Then about a score of them, leaving the others, came a little nearer.

"Ho, Gumbega," called out one, hailing the storekeeper by the nearest approach to his name that the native tongue could roll itself round. "Are you from home that your gate is all barred up and made extra strong?"

"No, I am here," replied Grunberger, in obedience to a whisper from Lamont. "But that was done by the captain's orders."

"The captain! What captain?"

"The captain of about a hundred men who arrived here yesterday. Look at all the rifles."

There was no mistake as to this. Rifle barrels protruded through the chinks so that the whole of that side of the stockade seemed to glisten with them. The savages were obviously nonplussed. A strongly defended place containing a hundred well-armed whites—or even half that number—constituted a nut which, large as their own force was, they did not care to crack—at any rate not just then. So without a word those who had come forward returned to the main body, and the whole impi resumed its way, taking care to let them see, however, that it had no intention of drawing any nearer to the place.

"Come out and look, Lucy," said Clare, who had been dividing her attention between watching what was going on and trying to reassure her terrified sister. "It's a splendid sight, and we don't get an opportunity of seeing a big Matabele regiment on the march every day, and in full war-paint too."

"A splendid sight! Ugh, the horrible wretches! I never want to set eyes on them again."

And the speaker shuddered, and stopped her ears as though to shut out the receding thunder of the marching song.

"But, Mrs Fullerton, there's nothing to be frightened of," urged the storekeeper's wife. "They're going right away."

An idea struck Clare. Going outside, the first person she ran against was Lamont.

"Piers," she said in a low tone, "where are they going?"

"I suspect they are making straight for Gandela."

“Will they—take it?”

“No reason why they should, if only Orwell and Isard have condescended to act on my repeated warning, and put the place into a state of defence.”

“And if not—?”

He looked at her for a moment without answering. Then he said—

“In that case these will have things all their own way.”

“How awful!”

“Well, we must hope for the best.”

“What if we had started to return there to-day?” she said suddenly, “We should have had to reckon with these. The mules are in no condition to travel out properly, and they could soon have overhauled us.”

“Ah!”

Then she subsided into silence. Even her courageous spirit had fallen upon a kind of reaction. The morning had been so bright and happy, and now a shadow of horror and gloom seemed to have darkened upon the land. Bloodshed, massacre everywhere, would it never pass? The other seemed to read her thoughts.

“Do not give way to depression, my Clare,” he said. “Keep up your own brave heart. We are quite safe here, with ordinary precaution, and you may be sure that nothing of that will be wanting. This cloud will pass, and all will be brighter than ever.”

“I seem to have a presentiment. Oh, it is horrible! And there is bloodshed on my hands too.”

“There is none,” he replied emphatically. “No, none. What you were forced to do to defend the life of your helpless sister does not count for one single moment. Darling, did we not settle all that last evening?”

“Yes, we did. You are a born comforter, dearest. But I believe it is my love for you that is making a coward of me. What if—if I lost you before this horrible war is over?”

“Now—now—now!” adopting a rallying tone, although thrilled to the heart by her words. “You must not indulge in these fancies or my bright and winsome Clare will be quite somebody else. I shall have to call Peters to cheer you up. See how he is keeping those jokers in a roar over there.”

This was a fact, but not an accident. Peters, ever watchful where his idolised friend was concerned, had gathered together quite a crowd, a little way apart, and was clearly regaling it with abundant humour—which he possessed—and this with the sole intent that these two should have a little time together uninterrupted.

“Yes, he can be very entertaining,” said Clare. “And I like him so much. Do you know, darling, he simply adores you.”

“I know he does his level best to make me beastly conceited.”

“He told me how you risked your life to save his during the retreat on the Shangani.”

“Did he, confound him! Then it was a distinct act of mutiny, for he’s under strict orders to let that well-worn chestnut be forgotten. I’ll have him put under arrest for disobedience to orders, since by popular vote I seem to have been put in command here.”

“But you weren’t in command here when he told me, so you can’t come down upon him. How’s that?” and she laughed brightly.

“In that case I suppose I can’t,” he allowed, rejoicing greatly that she had shaken off her vein of depression. “But you know, dearest, that sort of thing was done over and over again during that very Shangani business, for one, by other men, and nobody thought of making a fuss about it. It was taken quite as a matter of course, and naturally it genuinely annoys me when Peters tries to make a sort of scissors and paste-pot hero of me.”

“I shall claim the right to reserve my own opinion, all the same,” she declared with mock loftiness. “By the way, who is Mr Peters? He seems something of a mystery.”

“Yes. He delights in humbugging the curious. Nobody is ever an atom the wiser concerning him.”

“But—you know.”

“Yes, I know all about him.”

“And—you won’t tell me?”

“No.”

It came out quite naturally but quite decisively.

“Then you will have secrets from me?”

“Other people’s secrets—certainly.”

“And—your own?”

“I haven’t got any.”

During this apparent skirmish they had been looking each other straight in the eyes. But the skirmish was only apparent. “Oh, I do love a man who knows his own mind,” said the girl delightedly. “Why, I was not even trying you, for I knew beforehand what your answer would be.”

“I know you were not. Well, if you really want to know anything about Peters, the only possible way of doing so is to—ask Peters.”

Then they both laughed—laughed long and heartily.

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Attack at Dawn.

Over the slumbering land the dawn has not yet broken, though but for the chill mist lying upon bush and earth the first faint streaks might be lining the eastern sky. Nor are the voices of the night stilled as yet, and the weird laughter of the faraway jackals, and the crying of invisible plover circling above, blend with ghostly mysterious rustlings among the bush and damp grass-bents. For, like dark ghosts, innumerable figures are flitting, well-nigh shoulder to shoulder in the mist, moving rapidly in noiseless, springy advance.

Now these halt, and listen intently. Not a sound is audible on the stillness; rather, would not be save to such as they. But to them, well-nigh inaudible in the distance, comes the steady ‘crunch crunch’ of ruminating cattle, and the occasional snort and stamp of a horse.

They move forward again, and although not one can see more than a dozen yards on either side, the crescent-moon formation advances unbroken. They move forward, but now no longer erect. In bent, crouching attitude, head turned on one side, intently listening, yet none the less swiftly, none the less noiselessly, do they move; so noiselessly indeed that not even the faintest rattle of assegai haft against shield stick is heard throughout the whole length of that terrible battle line, and of voices not even the faintest breath of a whisper. No need for such at this stage. The tactics are simplicity itself, the plan already laid.

Out of the misty gloom in front—though this is now growing perceptibly less—the chewing of the ruminating cattle sounds nearer, but of any sound betokening the proximity of human beings there is none. Soon, of human beings other than these there will be none; none left in life, that is; and the eyeballs of these human wolves roll, in the delirious transport of the awaiting blood-feast; and weapons of destruction are gripped and ready. Of a truth this mist is not there by accident. It has been invoked by Umlimo that his children might steal upon these hated Amakiwa, and rid the land of so many more of them, according to his bidding.

And yet, the concealing mist is thinning somewhat. Well, it has served its purpose, and having done so they will be better without it, to make their work the surer and the more complete. And now, through its lifting folds, rises in dark loom the jagged silhouette of the mopani stockade. Then the crescent line seems to tighten itself as for a spring, and, still in dead silence, the swarming dark figures hurl themselves forward. They have barely a couple of hundred yards to cover, and they will be pouring over the fence in their numbers, and overwhelming those within by their sheer weight. Half the distance is already covered, and in each savage ruthless heart is the anticipating delight of a demon—when, lo—

It is as though the earth itself were splitting in the detonnade which rends the stillness, crashing forth from that dark silent barrier. Aimed low, hardly a single bullet misses its mark, in many cases doing double, even treble, execution at that short range. Those thus stricken leap in the air or fall heavily forward, in any case staggering, and upsetting those immediately behind or around; and still with unflagging rapidity and unerring accuracy that deadly fire plays upon the whole advancing line. Advancing? No! Now no longer; for like the roll of a vast billow, met by a cliff face, this dark wave staggers, hurling itself on high, then falls back; and ever that pitiless hail adds to the destruction, at the rate of so many lives per second. The confusion is awful, absolute, complete.

Howls and yells, roars and shrieks from those stricken down, and those in their immediate vicinity, mingle with the wild hissing of those behind, pressing forward in fierce eagerness to pour over the defences before those within shall have time to reload. But those within seem not under the necessity of doing anything of the kind, for somehow that terrific fire never slackens, and the crashing detonnade is marked by the same deadly execution upon those without. Human intrepidity has its limits, and these fall back, gliding, wriggling like snakes so as to render themselves as inconspicuous a mark as possible. And aided by the—to them—friendly mist, many escape who would otherwise have shrilled their last battle-hiss.

“Time!” called Peters, with a grim laugh, and then a smothered cuss word, as the hot barrel of his magazine rifle which he was reloading came in contact with a knuckle. “Time! That’s the first round, and I guess we’ve knocked our friend the enemy some.”

“First round!” echoed Jim Steele. “Why, we’ve knocked him out.”

“Not yet—by any means. And when it gets quite light, and he realises how few we are, it’ll take us all our time to do it.”

The excitement of the men was something indescribable, and intensified the more by their anxiety to keep cool. It found vent in the restless gleaming of their eyes, and a few muttered explosions of profanity. There had been a little discontentment the evening before when Lamont and Peters had decided that all should not only remain under arms, but that each man should spend the night at his post; in short, that the whole garrison should, as it were, stand on sentry-go. Surely a double guard would be sufficient, they had argued. But the two leaders, backed up by others equally well versed in the ways of the wily savage, had decided otherwise. Not for nothing had that formidable impi left them so quietly and peacefully the day before, they had pointed out. Just such a move as this would have been intended. Now those who had been the least contented were the first to recognise the wisdom of the plan.

But, as Peters has said, it was only the first round, for now a swarming crowd of savages, advancing at a lightning run, hurled themselves upon the stockade at the other side, with intent to effect an entrance in overwhelming force before the defenders should have time to create sufficient havoc to turn them. It was a weak point too, for the back wall of a long, low stable constituted a break in the line of mopani poles, and once under cover of this a considerable number of them would be sheltered from the effects of any cross-fire, and could even set alight the thatched roof. And as if to second their efforts an extra dense cloud of mist, borne down by the wind, rolled right up to the stable wall.

Here, too, the crackling volleys mowed them down, but doing nothing like the execution that had been at first effected.

"Good Lord! here's a go," muttered the police sergeant, who with his men formed a section of the defenders on this side. "There's quite a lot of the cusses under here, and we can't get at 'em. Stop. I'll have a try."

He hoisted himself up to the top of the palisade, and, reaching over, pumped his revolver into the concentrated mass. An awful roar of rage and dismay arose from below, raked thus at close quarters; then one agile warrior, taking in the situation, leaped upward, and drove his assegai clean through the throat of the unfortunate policeman, who fell back stone dead, his vertebrae completely severed by the impact of the stroke.

But hardly time had those around to take in this than a diversion occurred. Grunberger appeared from within his store bearing a strange unwieldy object, followed by Driffield's Makalaka boy armed with a crowbar. Both entered the stable, and but for the crackle of firing and hissing and yells of the Matabele, a sound might have been heard like that of drilling a hole in a mud wall. A moment later a sound was heard; a roar from within the stable like that of a discharge of cannon, together with the squealing and stamping of mules. A crowd of savages who had been lurking there under secure cover, as they thought, awaiting their chance, rushed helter-skelter forth to regain the main rank—and not all reached it. Soon after, the German reappeared, choking with laughter.

"Dot is one goot old shspring-gun," he explained. "I fill him up mit black powder und loopers, den I make one leetle hole, und shtick him through, ja so, mit de muzzle pointing upwards. *Herr Gott*! but de Matabele think dot a cannon haf gone off."

"Well done, Grunberger, well done!" cried Lamont. "You're a man of resource. They ought to have made you a colonel in your own army before they'd done with you."

"*Ach, so*," said the old soldier, greatly pleased. "Well, I load him up again. Dot place behind the stable they find no longer safe."

"What's the row, Driffield? Not hit?" cried Lamont sharply. For a sudden fusillade had opened on that side, and the chips were flying wildly from the mopani poles.

"Oh, I don't know," answered the Native Commissioner dazedly, staggering back from one of the improvised loopholes. "At least—no—I think not."

A bullet had struck the barrel of his rifle, and the shock had produced a numbing sensation, causing him to drop the weapon.

"N-no. I'm all right. It's only hit the shooter, blazes take it! It's all right, too."

"What's this?" growled Peters. "They weren't firing before. I believe they've been reinforced; like yesterday."

And as if to bear out his words, at that moment a furious rush was made on the palisades from all sides, to the accompaniment of a perfect hail of missiles, all fired high, and obviously with intent to confuse the defenders, and cover the advance of a strong storming party. At the same time the crashing of axes was heard against the poles on the side where stood the store and dwelling-house—the side, to wit, where the women and wounded were sheltered.

"Half of you here!" ordered Lamont in clear ringing tones. "Those are no mere flimsy native choppers, but good imported axes."

They were only just in time. Demon figures, swarming out of the mist by dozens and scores, were on the heels of those who had been told off to cut a way in. The hissing and yells rose hideously above the terrific roar of the volleys. And now upon the farther side the savages were dropping down within the stockade, while the larger section of the defenders were engaged in repelling this more serious menace.

It was of no use. At that point the defenders were helpless. The place was divided into two enclosures, and the one in which the Matabele had secured a footing was the cattle kraal. In less than no time they were blazing away from the inner fence, and all on that side must perforce take cover in the houses.

Not without loss. Several men lay dead or grievously disabled, and the horrible death-hiss of the savages shrilled forth more demoniacally loud as they poured their fire again and again into these.

And now, taken thus in the rear, the situation of the whites seems hopeless. Clearly they are doomed. Those within the houses find it all they can do to keep the assailants already within the cattle kraal from pouring over, and rushing the position. Those on the front side are straining every effort to hold in check the attempt to break down the stockade; for the wily enemy had chosen a spot where the logs stand thick, and there is scarcely a chink to fire through. And above—around—the mist, which had lifted somewhat, descends darker than ever in its dank, thick folds.

Every man there is a desperate and dangerous animal, for every man there is fighting for his life, and not only for his life, for of that he has given up all hope, but maddened by the thought of those helpless women. What of them, when there are no more left to fight for them?

To one we may be sure this aspect of affairs is borne in upon with searing, maddening force. Outwardly deadly calm, Lamont is superintending, directing everything, yet when the head of a savage shows itself above the palings it drops back, drilled by a soft-nosed bullet from the unerring magazine rifle. His back is against the dwelling-house of the store, as he watches and directs operations.

"What chance have we?"

The voice, firm and without a tremor, is from the window just at his back. He cannot resist one quick turn of the head for one last look at the pale, set, beautiful face—ah! and the anguish of that moment renders him a hundredfold more desperate.

"My Clare! Do you want to live after capture?" and he hardly knows his own voice.

"No."

"Quite sure?"

"Need you ask?"

"Then—when I say, 'Now!' say the '*Commendo spiritum meum*' and turn your back to me. Understand?"

"I understand."

There is no time for words. In the shadow of this grim, sudden, violent death, the same thought is in both their minds. Would the next few moments, the fleeting agony of one swift pang over, unite them together for evermore, or—

Three sharp detonating explosions, one after another, staggered them, with their vibrating shock upon the air. With howls of dismay the swarming savages had scattered, rushing helter-skelter in all directions. Not all, though—no not all. Many would never rush anywhere again. The first glimmer of explanation came in the shape of Grunberger, who stood, chuckling and choking and shaking with laughter. The sight sobered those who beheld it, all inured as they were to ghastly sights. Had the man's brain suddenly given way?

"*Ach, so*!" he chuckled. "*Ach, so*! De tam niggers haf got one leetle shock this time. Here goes for another."

And with the words, he raised his arm, and seemed to hurl something he held in his hand far out beyond the stockade. In an instant the same vibrating roar seemed to stun the air. Then the explanation stood revealed. The ingenious German had been turning time to account by doing a little stroke of business on his own. He had got out some dynamite cartridges, and, having set them with a cleverly contrived fuse, had hurled them into the thick of the enemy where he judged they would do most execution. His calculation was rewarded, for now, imagining that they were being attacked in the rear, and utterly demoralised by the havoc and concussion, the Matabele warriors stampeded in a wild frenzy of terror, leaving the whole of that side open. "You've saved us, Grunberger," cried Lamont. "By God! you've saved us, man."

"*Ach, so*! Well, I think I made de tam niggers feel sick."

What is this? There is a rumbling noise, then the sharp cracking of shots away there in the mist. It becomes a regular roll—and with it the sound of yells and the scurry of flying feet. The frenzied bellowing and moaning of the cattle in the kraal, rushing hither and thither, and struck down by the assegais of the savages, blends, too, with the roar and din and confusion. Yet—what is this? Nearer and nearer comes that volleying roll, nearer and nearer the rumble of unmistakable horse-hoofs, and, as with incredible swiftness the last remaining savages flit away into the mist, such a ringing cheer goes up from all within the stockade that hardly the hell of the recent battle rout can have surpassed it for volume.

It is answered, and now out of the smother, other forms appear—the forms of armed horsemen; and still the darkling mist is rent ever and anon by a spurt of flame, as these descry a belated body of fleeing warriors not sufficiently quick to take themselves out of sight and range.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

"Where is he?"

Clare Vidal's beautiful eyes are strained upon the farthest limits of vision in a certain direction, and, not for the first time, the thought rather than the utterance, expressed by these three words, passes through her mind—

"Where is he?"

The day is one of cloudless beauty. With the arrival—the timely arrival—of the relieving force an hour or so ago, the mist had suddenly rolled back; retreating as though still to curtain their flight, simultaneously with the demoralised Matabele. The said relieving force—which was made up of a company of Green's Scouts, and a number of mounted men who had volunteered to patrol the Buluwayo road, and warn and assist all who should be in danger—had forthwith started in hot pursuit. They were going to keep that impi on the run, they declared, even if it had to run to—well, a certain place that shall be nameless, but which is popularly understood to lie within the torrid zone. With them had gone Lamont. Clare was a little sore at heart, a little reproachful, as she stood there outside the stockade, gazing wistfully out over the roll of the veldt. Why had he left her just then? There was no necessity for it. Had he not borne himself as a very hero in that awful fight which seemed to have lasted a year, though in point of actual time it lasted considerably less than an hour; what necessity then could there be for him to give further evidence of his prowess? They two had but been snatched back from the portal of Death, had even felt his cold blast together—why then, could he not have remained by her at such a moment? For the life of her she could not but feel conscious of a certain soreness.

Since the relief Clare had been by no means idle; for, conquering her natural repulsion towards wounds and death, she had been rendering the surgeon very practical assistance, and incidentally, but all unconsciously, had gone far towards implanting in poor Strange's system a wound which only time might avail to heal. Her quick aptitude, however, atoned for her lack of experience, to a quite astonishing degree, and Strange expressed considerable scepticism as to her never having undergone any training. Lucy Fullerton, utterly worn out with the exhaustion of terror, had fallen sound asleep through the sheer reaction of relief; which was as well, for it may be imagined that the relics of such a struggle as this had been consisted largely of ghastly and horrifying sights meeting the eye at every turn. These, however, had been minimised, and the enemy's dead had been dragged off to a sufficient distance as to be invisible.

Their own dead had been cared for, and the wounded made as comfortable as the circumstances of the place would admit; this it turned out was beyond what might have been expected, for the Kezane Store was exceedingly well supplied with most necessaries; and fortunate indeed that it was so, for there had been grave danger of ammunition giving out during the battle. It must not be supposed, either, that the place was left to take its chance, practically undefended, for over and above its original defenders quite a number of the relieving force, whose horses were not up to further calls upon speed and endurance, had remained behind.

"You must have had the very devil of a scrap, Peters," one of these was saying. "We could hear you banging away from the time you began, and pushed our gees for all they'd carry; for we reckoned all that shooting meant a big thing and no bally skirmish. The cream of the fun was when we got in among the niggers in the mist. They didn't know we were there till we got cracking away right in their faces, or mostly backs. *Magtig*! didn't they skip. But—I say though—what old powder magazine was it that you blew up just before we got here? Man! it nearly knocked us all down."

The explanation of Grunberger's ingenious device raised a great laugh, and many were the felicitations showered upon that estimable Teuton.

"I say, Wyndham," another was saying. "What on earth could have possessed you and Fullerton to start tooling your team off into the very teeth of hell let loose, in the confiding, childlike way you seem to have done?"

"We didn't know hell *was* let loose, that's the explanation. But Lamont went for us on exactly the same terms."

"Lamont? Is he with you then?"

"I should say so. Why, he's been bossing up the whole show. If it hadn't been for him we'd have gone under long before we got here."

"So? Then you've got a right good man, that's all. I was out with him in '93. He's a tiger in a fight."

"Seems to be," said Wyndham drily. "You'd think he'd had enough of that sort of thing day before yesterday, and this morning, to last him at any rate for a day or two, and now instead of having a quiet smoke and a cool drink, like a rational Christian, he must race off along with your crowd to contract for some more knocks. Silly ass!"

"There's something in it when you put things that way. But—I say. Who's the lady?"

"Where?" following his glance. "Oh, that's Miss Vidal, Fullerton's sister-in-law."

"So! By Jove! what a fine-looking girl. Oh! oh!—Wyndham, you deep-down dog! So that's where the little venture in charioteering came in, eh? I see."

"Shut up, Selby, and don't be a silly ass," answered Wyndham shortly. "I hate that sort of chaff, you know."

"Oh, all right, old man. Keep your shirt in," was the good-humoured rejoinder.

"I think I'll go and talk to Miss Vidal now," said Wyndham, just a trifle self-consciously. "By Jove! she has been plucky throughout all this."

"So? Well, good luck, old man."

Clare had returned to her post of observation outside, but there was still no sign of the returning pursuit: and now a dire heart-sinking began to take the place of her former resentment. She looked at her watch. They had been away an hour nearly. Surely the work of completing the rout should have been over by that time. They should be returning, and there was one whom she would scold—scold gently—for having gone with them. No. She believed she would not scold him at all. It would be all too sufficing to behold him once more safe and sound.

"Taking a morning constitutional, Miss Vidal? Well, it has turned out a lovely day, hasn't it?" And Wyndham, conscious of the banality of the remark, felt rather foolish.

She turned, but she was hardly listening to him. Why did they not come back? ran her thoughts. Had they, rendered reckless by success, pursued the fleeing enemy too far? The force which had attacked them was a strong one—strong and daring. What if it had recovered from its first wild panic? What if it had rallied, and shown a sudden change of front to its pursuers? What if the latter had straggled and been cut off in detail by the vengeful savages; all of which reduced to detail meant: What if one of them had?

"What do you think, Mr Wyndham?" she said suddenly. "Why are they so long away?"

Wyndham was no fool, and apart from what he had heard hinted at—albeit always in a kindly and good-natured way—would have had no difficulty in putting two and two together.

"Don't you be anxious, Miss Vidal," he said. "Those men are a hard-bitten lot, and not in the least likely to be led into any booby trap."

"You think so?" she queried, speaking quickly.

"I'm sure of it. Ah— Look there. See? I was right. Here they come."

Her face lighted up in a way that cost poor Wyndham something of a pang. It was even as he had said. Away over the nearly flat landscape figures were moving—horsemen. As they drew nearer it could be seen that they were split up in irregular groups, and were riding leisurely.

"Mr Wyndham, will you do me a very great favour?" she went on, speaking quickly. "Do get me those binoculars some of you were looking through yesterday."

"Certainly I will. Grunberger has a good pair."

He was back at her side in a minute. What horrible presentiment or instinct was it that caused Clare's hands to tremble as she put the glasses to her eyes, so that she could scarcely see anything through them? With an effort she controlled her excitement. The horsemen were much nearer now, and she could make out they were quite unconcerned, and seemed to be chatting and laughing together. Clearly, then, nothing had gone wrong, and there had been no casualties.

To that extent relieved she brought the glasses to bear upon group after group, but still they failed to reveal—one.

"Where is he?" she repeated, speaking unconsciously half aloud.

"Let me look, Miss Vidal," said Wyndham, tactfully facing the situation. Then, as she surrendered the glasses to him, a rapid, but careful scrutiny convinced him that among those now approaching Lamont was not.

"Don't be anxious, Miss Vidal," he said. "There may be others coming on behind. In fact, there are sure to be."

But as the mounted men drew near, the veldt between them and the farthest line of vision spread undisturbed by other mounted figures—no—nor did the widest scrutiny in any direction reveal any sight of such. What did it mean?

"Keep yourself in hand, Miss Vidal, whatever you do," said Wyndham concernedly, as he noted how ashy pale the beautiful face had grown. "I'll find out about this."

In a very short time the whole troop had mustered. The men were in high spirits. They had driven the enemy before them for miles, they reported, and had made still greater holes in their numbers. They had broken up that impi most effectually, and taught the rebels a lesson they wouldn't forget for a long day to come. Lamont? Oh, he had last been seen away on the right flank with about a dozen men riding down the enemy for all they were worth. The mist was rather thick up where they were, which was at the foot of a range of low hills. He'd turn up directly, they held. Turn up! Rather! Of course he would, and report a record bag, too. Lamont was an old campaigner and a knowing one. There need be no anxiety about him. And then all hands, having attended to their horses, turned to and assailed their well-earned refreshment with a whole-heartedness that left nothing to be desired.

"There need be no anxiety about him." Thus the cheerful dictum! Need there not? But to one there, at any rate, 'anxiety about him' turned to something like anguish, as the morning wore on, and still he did not appear. It needed all of Clare Vidal's splendid pluck and self-command to conceal her terrible anxiety. To those nearest to her, she could no longer keep her secret by reason of it; no longer, indeed, did she care to.

"Oh, it'll be all right, Clare," said Fullerton, cheerfully and good-naturedly, when appealed to. "You've seen what Lamont's made of, and you bet he won't enjoy being fussed after by women when he's got a bit of sharpish work in hand." In despair she turned to Wyndham.

"Do help me," she pleaded. "If you won't I'll go alone. Get some of the men who last saw him—them—and make a thorough search. Who knows what may have happened. I will go with you. I can borrow Mrs Grunberger's side-saddle."

"I'll do what I can, Miss Vidal, but only on condition that you remain here."

"But—I can't. I can't."

"But you must," he answered firmly. "Just think. You'd be far more of a hindrance than a help. And we can't do with hindrances."

She gave way, and Wyndham set to work to organise a search or a relief, as the case might be. There was no lack of volunteers. The troop was mustered, and it was found that besides Lamont there were seven men missing. And now for the first time something like a feeling of blank uneasiness spread through the whole force.

Was there ground for it? We shall see. Some three hours earlier Lamont and a mere handful of men were pursuing a disorganised mass of the fleeing Matabele. The latter were thoroughly demoralised; panic-stricken beyond all thought—and seemingly, all power—of resistance. They would allow themselves to be shot down as they ran, sullenly, doggedly, not even begging for quarter; and little mercy had the avengers on the murderers and mutilators of women and children. The horses were getting blown, and then it occurred to Lamont that he was allowing his excitement to outstrip his prudential instincts. Quietly he conveyed the recommendation to retire—he could not give an order, for none of these were his own men.

Some of them acted upon it, and some did not. And then as the former reined in their panting steeds, an unpleasant discovery was made. In the eagerness of the pursuit they had wandered afield. They made out, as well as the mist would allow, that they had got among hills, and assuredly, judging by the entire absence of sound, they had got right away from the main body. In short they did not know where they were, and until the mist should lift did not know whether to bear to the right or the left. The situation was growing awkward.

And to render it more awkward still, they could hear the savages calling to one another on either side of and rather above them. This looked as though the weakness of the party had been discovered. And just then, a curtain of mist rolled backward and upward, revealing granite-strewn slopes, and along them, resting after their wild and headlong flight, crouched masses of armed warriors. These, seeing the mere handful of whites, sprang up immediately and came for them, uttering wild yells.

But not at once did they close. This might be but the advance party of the force which had meted out to them such terrible punishment, and might again whirl down upon them in the mist as it had done before. So they kept a parallel course, as they ran in pursuit, loth to quit the welcome refuge of rock and boulder in the event of surprise.

The party now realised that it was in a tight place. The horses were far from fresh, and the fleet-footed savages could keep pace with them on the upper slopes. Even then all might have turned out well, but the mist, which had befriended them by concealing their weakness, now lifted entirely, dispelled by a brilliant flash of sunlight. In a few moments the whole situation stood revealed. They were in a sort of labyrinth between low stony kopjes, and not one of the main body was in sight. With a very roar of hate and exultation, the whole mass of savages, realising their helplessness, swept down upon them from both sides.

"Spur up, boys. No time for shooting," cried Lamont, instinctively the commander. "Spur up! It's our only chance."

They know this, and they do spur up. If the horses had got *anything* left in them they have to travel now. Again, instinctively, Lamont holds back to cover the rear, though he could easily have been among the foremost.

For some minutes this terrible race continues—its prizes dear life; and now as the ground becomes more level, the horsemen are gaining. Through the fierce hissing and the thunder of the shouts of the pursuers nothing else can be heard, and it is literally every man for himself.

In the wild din, we repeat, nothing can be heard, consequently the residue of the refugees are totally unaware that one among their number is down, lying pinned to the ground by his horse but otherwise uninjured, awaiting the spears of hundreds of savages aroused to the last degree of vengeful exasperation. But such is sadly the case—and that man is Piers Lamont.

This is "where he is."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

No Hope!

The township of Gandela was practically in a state of siege. Taught tardy wisdom—providentially not too tardy—by recent happenings, its authorities had caused a strong laager to be formed, and within this its inhabitants gathered at night. To those of them who owned stands in outlying parts of the township this was a considerable disadvantage, for in the event of attack their property would inevitably be looted and their houses burnt. Moreover, the accommodation within the laager was of necessity cramped and comfortless, and involved a considerable amount of promiscuous 'herding,' But in those lurid days, when tale succeeded tale of treacherous massacre and mutilation throughout the length and breadth of the land,—unhappily, for the most part true,—when refugees, singly or in groups, would come panting in with hair-breadth escapes to narrate, unspeakably glad to have escaped with their bare lives,—when, at any moment, the Matabele impis might swoop down upon them in such force as to tax their uttermost resources—why, then, people were not particular as to a little discomfort more or less.

And of this, in the Gandela laager at any rate, there was plenty. Transport had been scanty and dear enough, in all conscience, before, when it was not uncommon for a whole span of oxen to succumb on the road to the fell rinderpest. Now, since the outbreak, when anything like regular communication had been cut off—the roads only being kept open by strong and well-armed patrols and then at the cost of fierce fighting—the situation at outlying posts such as Gandela became more than serious. The food supplies threatened to run short. There was not much fear of any attack in the daytime, or at all events without ample warning, for the surrounding country was carefully scouted on every side; and such being the case those who dwelt on the outlying stands occupied their houses until sundown, when they collected within the laager. Among such were the Fullertons.

The worthy Dick grumbled terribly; not at the prevailing discomfort, but that having womenkind to look after he was debarred from joining any field force—at all events for the present—for the plan which we heard formulated for the raising of such a force under the command of Lamont was of necessity in abeyance by reason of the disappearance of the latter.

Disappearance, indeed, was the word. The men who were with him when flying for their lives had been utterly unable to tell when or where they had lost sight of him. They had, however, been able to guide the relief party under Peters and Wyndham to the place within the hills where they had been first attacked. But—no trace of him whom they sought. Farther on, they came upon the bodies of two others of the stragglers—as usual, hacked and mutilated—those of their horses, similarly treated, lying hard by. But of Lamont there was absolutely no trace. He seemed to have disappeared, horse and man.

The situation contained one hopeful feature. If there was no trace of him in life, equally was there no trace of his death; no blood marks, such as would probably have been the case. The innumerable footprints of the pursuing Matabele might have obliterated such, yet it was improbable that to experienced spoor-readers—and there were several here—some trace, however faint, should not be discernible; and herein lay room for hope.

The missing man might be in close hiding among the kopjes. To this end, Peters and his force spent a long time searching the wild and broken ground, and, incidentally, shooting an odd Matabele or two engaged in outlying scouting. But the search proved futile; moreover, a large impi—far too large for them to engage unless they desired to court disaster—appeared on their front, effectually barring further advance. Sorrowfully they returned to the Kezane to report their failure.

That was a day destined to remain engraved in lurid letters on Clare Vidal's memory as long as she should live. She would not have believed the human mind to be capable of bearing so acute a stage of anguish as that which filled hers when the party returned, without—him. But with her it took no form of tears or hysteria. Pale, stony-eyed, she asked her questions calmly, and with coolness and acumen. Had they really searched exhaustively. Was it likely he had been taken prisoner? In a word—was there any hope?

"There's life, you must remember, Miss Vidal," had answered the officer in command of the Scouts. "The very fact of finding no trace of him shows that he was not killed there, at any rate. If he has been captured—well, prisoners have been known to escape. There have been instances of such."

"But—not many?"

The other's heart smote him. He had known of cases wherein men had blown their own brains out rather than accept the chances of life on such odds. He could only repeat—

"Well, there have been such instances. Natives very rarely take prisoners at all. The fact that they had not killed Lamont there and then, and it is certain they had not, seems to show some powerful motive for sparing his life for the present. And, while there is life—"

"—There is hope. Yes, I know. And now, what is going to be done to try and save him?"

The other felt troubled, and looked it. His orders were to keep the road open, and afford escort to such outlying whites as desired to reach a place of safety. He did not see how he could take his troop off this duty, to engage in an indefinite search for one man, who would almost certainly have been murdered long before they should so much as hear of him—even if they ever did.

"This is one thing that's going to be done, Miss Vidal," cut in Peters. "I'm going to try and find him,—I for one. Wyndham I know will make another, and it'll be strange if we don't find a good few more who'll volunteer."

"I'll go with you," said Clare.

"Excuse me—no. That can't be done, Miss Vidal. It's quite impossible. Not a man would volunteer on those terms."

She thought a moment. "You are right, Mr Peters. Yes. I see that. For me there is nothing for it but to—wait. To wait!" she repeated bitterly.

"And—hope," supplemented Peters. "If any man is going to find out what's become of Lamont, I'm that man. He almost threw away his life once to save mine, and now I'll either return with him if he's above ground or I won't return at all."

This conversation had taken place within the living-room of Grunberger's house, and now Clare's self-possession utterly gave way. She sank into a chair, and sobbed.

"Cheer up, Miss Vidal, cheer up," said Peters briskly. "If it's in the power of mortal man to find Lamont, I'm going to be that man. There's more'n one could tell you I'm not easy put off a job I once make up my mind to bring through. I'm not saying it to brag. Now I'm going to collect as many as I can, and we'll start at dark."

"God will bless you," was all she could say, as she wrung the hard, gnarled hand of the honest pioneer.

"This is a devilish sad, romantic sort of business," said the officer of Scouts; for the circumstances of the engagement, thus tragically broken, were pretty well known now all over the camp. "Lovely girl, too, by Jove!" Peters nodded. "Good, too," he said. "Good and plucky. She's the only girl I've ever clapped eyes on good enough for Lamont."

The other smiled half-heartedly. This was a piece of hero worship that he, naturally, could not enthuse over.

Peters was as good as his word—and that night he, with over twenty men, well-armed and rationed, started on their quest. The following morning the Fullertons and Clare Vidal, and the men who had been wounded in the fight, started in the other direction, that of Gandela to wit, under a strong escort of Scouts. With them, too, went the storekeeper's family. Grunberger himself refused to budge, and as it was decided that the Kezane Store would form a very good base for supplies, and something of a garrison was left there for the present, there was no need for him to do so.

"*Ach! so*. We shall haf Zeederberg's coaches outspanning here again before de month is out," he declared, as he bade them a hearty good-bye.

No obstacles met them on the return trek, but to one at least the scenes of the former terror and strife were as holy ground as they passed slowly over them. More than one ghastly trace of that grim running fight met the eye, but to Clare's mind and to Clare's gaze, there was only one sight—that of him who had hurried to their rescue, of him whom she had watched with admiration, yes and love, she knew it now—so skilfully and intrepidly handling his gallant little force. The horrors of that day were all merged in this. And in those three short days she had loved, and lost! No, it would not bear dwelling upon.

How the subsequent days were lived through Clare was never quite sure. Over and above the poignancy of bereavement an awful depression would come upon her, and in her dreams she would again see the horrors and bloodshed she had witnessed—ay, and taken part in; and the savage faces of those she herself had slain would rise to confront her, glaring hideously with distorted features and threatening snarl. What was she expiating, she would wonder, that no peace should be hers either by night or by day?

If she suffered, it was in silence. Hers was far the stronger mind of the two, and even to her sister she shrank from laying it entirely open. Yet her reticence was seen through, and everybody was considerate and sympathetic. Every scrap of news relating to what was going on in the field was promptly conveyed to her, all but what she thirsted to hear, and that was still lacking. Day followed upon day, and the whereabouts of Peters and his following remained shrouded in a mystery as impenetrable as that of him whom they sought.

Among those who strove to cheer her up was Driffield the Native Commissioner, and he in a measure succeeded.

"Don't give up, yet, Miss Vidal," he said, "no, not by any means. I wish I could bring you round to my belief, and that is that Lamont will turn up again."

"I wish you could," she answered. "But—time goes on and we hear—nothing."

"I'm not sure that's against it," returned Driffield. "Lamont was a peculiar chap—in fact, a very peculiar sort of chap. He was friendly with Zwabeka's people and with Zwabeka himself. Well, then, it's just possible some of them may be hiding him away until it's safe to turn him loose."

"Why do you think that, Mr Driffield?"

"I don't know. It occurs to me as quite within the possibilities. The great thing is—we know he wasn't killed there, and we know that two others were. Lamont understands natives thoroughly—I could see that—and I fancy I know a little about them myself. Look, too, how he engineered the old witch-doctor the day of the race meeting. That was a great piece of nerve and gumption combined. By Jove! I shouldn't wonder in the least if he were to make it worth their while to let him skip. Somehow I'm almost certain he'll turn up again quite jolly."

“If only I could think so!” she would reply sadly.

Every day she would visit the wounded men, who were lying in a temporary hospital within the precincts of the laager, and this she never missed. They had been wounded in her defence, she declared, and anything she could do to brighten the weariness and pain of their enforced detention should be done. And brighten it she did, and her daily visit was looked forward to with such eagerness that more than one poor fellow declared that it almost made it worth while being knocked out. But Jim Steele growled mightily.

“To think I should be logged up here, when Peters and the rest are looking for the captain. These infernal sawboneses are no damn good at all. Eh, Strange?”

“No? Only to save you by a miracle from having to part with your hoof, Jim,” answered the Buluwayo surgeon tranquilly. “That no good, eh?”

For the other had been shot in the ankle, and had just escaped the necessity of amputation by something like a miracle, as the doctor had said.

“Well, get it all right again sharp, that’s what I want,” growled the big fellow, who was terribly hipped and impatient under his enforced rest. “Get me out of this in ten days, Strange, and I’ll double your blooming fees—Dawson’s too.”

“If you were to multiply them by twenty or twenty hundred, Jim, it couldn’t be done,” answered the surgeon tranquilly. “Moreover, not with my consent, nor Dawson’s either,”—the latter was the Gandela medico,—“do you put that foot to the ground under six weeks. No, it’s no use cussing, none at all. Besides, here’s Miss Vidal just coming in, and she might hear you.”

There was one who was variously affected by the disappearance of Lamont—one of whom we have lost sight of for a little, and that one was Ancram. When he awoke from his slumber of exhaustion to find the relief party gone, at first he had affected great concern. Why had not someone awakened him? Of course he would have joined it. As a matter of fact, he was overjoyed that no one had, for he had no stomach for fighting, and had spent the last three days heartily wishing he had taken Lamont’s advice and cleared out of the country in time. More than ever did he congratulate himself on his escape, when the experiences of the relief party became known, but it was with dismay that he learned the disappearance of its leader. For Ancram was getting desperately hard up, and would soon not know which way to turn. He was not much liked among those into whose midst he had come. Lamont might have helped him—probably would—not by reason of what he could tell—the prowess of the missing man was too much in the air for that—but for old acquaintance’ sake; and now Lamont had disappeared.

The days of that disappearance had just grown into weeks. News would filter through from outside—of battles fought, of rescues effected; of losses inflicted upon the savage enemy: but of the missing man, and those who sought him, came no word, and Clare Vidal, abandoning hope, could only storm high Heaven with supplication for him, whether in life or in death.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

“Where he was.”

Even with the first slip and stumble of his horse Lamont realised that his last moment had come; and, as he lay pinned there and unable to move, he restrained a natural instinct to call for assistance. His fleeing comrades could not render him such, and the attempt would result in the certain sacrifice of their own lives. His time had come.

He was powerless for resistance. His magazine rifle was lying on the ground beyond his reach, and his revolver was crushed beneath him in such manner that he could not get at it. Helpless he awaited his end, agonising and bitter as such must be.

He saw the swarming savage faces, scowling beneath their war adornments, the tossing shields and uplifted assegais, as that dark crowd surged forward, eyeballs glaring and blades lifted, eager to redden the latter in the blood of a hated and now helpless enemy. He heard the guttural death-hiss vibrate upon the air—and then—and then—he saw and heard no more. His horse, rendered frantic with terror, had made a wild effort to rise, and in so doing had so crushed its rider’s leg that the latter had fainted through sheer acute agony.

“*Wou*! This has gone on too long. He has said that none should be spared.”

“Yet, this one is.”

“Ill will befall us, brothers; ill because of it.” And Gingamanzi, the highest in rank of the group of Abantwana Mlimo there deliberating, clicked deprecatorily, and spat.

This Gingamanzi was a small, crafty-looking Makalaka, very black, and with a nose almost aquiline, giving a predatory and hawklike aspect to his forbidding countenance. His status in the hierarchy of the Abstraction was hardly second to that of Qubani, indeed there were those who reckoned his gifts the greater.

The group was seated in the open—a huge, riven granite pillar towering up behind them. Above, around, everywhere, vast granite blocks were piled, shutting in the place on all sides. It had been raining heavily for several hours, though by now it was sullenly clearing, and on the wet earth, stamped flat and muddy by hundreds of feet, fires were springing up in the dusk, and the hum of many voices rose and fell upon the damp heavy air.

Hundreds were collected here; all fighting men, no women and dogs. Weapons of war lay behind each group, just as they had been put down: shields, assegais, guns of all sorts and sizes, axes, knob-sticks. It was evident that this was an important stronghold and rallying point for the Matabele impis in the field.

“Zwabeka will bring destruction upon us, brothers,” went on Gingamanzi. “He it is that spared this Makiwa. He laughs at Umlimo.”

“Perhaps he is but keeping him as a sacrifice to Umlimo,” said another. “A man half dead already would make a poor sacrifice.”

“Zwabeka is chief here now,” went on Gingamanzi meaningly. “By the time the sun has risen twice, he will not be. We will go and look at this Makiwa, and see how soon he will be ready for Umlimo. Zwabeka will not give him to us now, but when he is dead, he will be glad to.”

“*Au*!” grunted another, “I am but a child beside the chief of the Abantwana Mlimo. Still I would ask—Of what use is one who is already dead, as a sacrifice to Umlimo?”

Gingamanzi put his head on one side.

“Thou art but a child! Ah! ah! that is true, Kekelwa. For the man will not really be dead but will only seem to be. If I can but touch him with this; one touch, even one little touch that he will hardly feel; why then he will be as one dead to the beholders, and yet he will know all that goes on. He will even be able to feel.”

“Then he will move,” was an objection raised. “How then will they think him dead?”

“He will not move. The *múti* here is such that he will not move, although he will know and feel.” And the black little demon contemplated lovingly a sort of lancet that he had drawn from a wooden sheath. The keen point was encrusted with something. Grim heads craned eagerly forward to examine the thing. *Whau*! the *múti* of Gingamanzi was wonderful, wonderful, declared his satellites sycophantically.

“Then, when they think him dead, we will take him away to the right place, and revive him again. *Whau*! Umlimo will laugh, spending days and nights listening to his shrieks and groans. This big strong Makiwa, this leader of impis, he shall weep and whine like a woman or a dog under that which we shall make him suffer, and that for days. Come, we will go and see him, and it may be now I shall touch him with the *múti* point.”

With a hum of ferocious anticipation the group arose. These undersized, lean Makalaka, who led the superstitions of the superior race, made up for their lack of physical prowess in the field by a love of cruelty at home, and woe betide him who should be handed over to their tender mercies. That one they reckoned ought so to be, and hoped would be, we have gleaned from the above conversation—and this one a white man.

They made their way to a great block of boulders, the piling of which formed a spacious natural cave. In this several Matabele warriors were lounging, some cooking food at a fire near the entrance. By the fitful red light of the flickering flames another recumbent form could be made out at the far extremity of the place. As the sorcerers would have entered, several of the warriors sprang to their feet, and barred passage.

“Give way; give way,” ordered Gingamanzi curtly. “We would see the Makiwa.”

“That may not be, Umtwana Mlimo,” came the ready reply. “He has said it—our father—that none may approach the Makiwa.”

“But another *he*—who is greater still—has said that *his* servants may. How is that, Umfane?”

“*Whau! ‘Umfane*!’ I *Umfane—I*, who wear the ring!” And the tall warrior scowled down upon the puny representative of an inferior race.

“*Umfane* or not, thou art going into battle again soon,” returned Gingamanzi. “But it will be thy last. Not through death—that were easy—but a warrior who has lost the use of his legs, and has to walk on his hands like a dog—why, he had better be dead. But dead or not he has fought in his last battle. How sayest thou?”

“*Eh! hé*! How sayest thou?” echoed the sorcerers.

“How say I? This is how I say,” answered the warrior, noting that some of his comrades seemed to be wavering. “For what happens in battle I will take my chance. For what happens here I have to answer to my father, and chief. His word was: let none enter, and—on the head ring of Umzilikazi—none *shall* enter—no, not even were it Umlimo himself.”

The speaker’s voice had risen to a roar, to which was added a shrill cry of menace and resentment from the group of sorcerers at this blasphemous utterance. Even the bold one’s comrades looked somewhat aghast. Would they ultimately yield? And yet—and yet—far away in Gandela one broken-hearted woman was wearying high Heaven day and night on behalf of him now threatened with this new and ghastly peril.

“Thy next battle will be thy last,” said Gingamanzi slowly, pointing a menacing finger at the obdurate sentinel.

“That we shall see. *Hau*! I seem to remember the chief of these Abantwana Mlimo, when we were doctored, promising us that Makiwa’s bullets should turn to water. Yet, at Kezane, Makiwa’s bullets were made of very hard lead. And he who told us this was Gingamanzi.”

This was a facer, and partly accounted for the secret contempt in which the sorcerers were held by many in the nation. Moreover, since the rising had begun, the fighting men had been brought into daily contact with them, to the detriment of their *prestige*. Then, too, they always skulked in a place of safety when fighting was to the fore—all save one, and that one Qubani. But Qubani was not present in this camp.

Now Gingamanzi was an uncommonly difficult person to put down, and lacked not readiness or assurance, else had he not filled the position he did.

“Hard lead,” he repeated when the sneering laughter of the warriors had abated. “Hard lead! Ha! Those who found them so were those who were wanting in faith. They suffered doubt as to our powers to linger in their hearts while we were doctoring them. So the *múti* failed in its effect.”

“*Eh! Hé*!” assented the residue of the sorcerers.

“Thou scoffing dog!” shrilled Gingamanzi. “Wilt thou now give passage lest worse befall thee?”

For answer the other had picked up a gun.

“I will give thee ‘dog,’” he said, bringing it up. But the sorcerers were thoroughly scared, and scattered yelling. Their *múti* was not proof against this, anyhow.

“*Hambani-gahle, Abantwana Mlimo*!” With which contemptuous dismissal Ujojo turned his back on the irate sorcerers, and, going to the end of the cave, bent over the recumbent form of his late master.

The latter moved restlessly, not recognising him. The fact was that the shock of capture and the pain of his bruised leg, coming upon the strain of the few days preceding, had told upon even Lamonts iron constitution—added to which several days of wet weather and exposure had brought about a bad attack of up-country fever. Now he lay covered with several blankets, yet shivering as though he were lying in contact with an iceberg.

His escape from death at the assegais of his captors was hardly short of miraculous; and was partly due to the wave of wonder that went through those who beheld him, reckoning as they did that he had been blown to atoms in his own dwelling, partly to the intervention of Zwabeka; about half of the impi which had reinforced the assailants of the Kezane Store being composed of that chief’s own followers. Now Zwabeka was not acting out of sheer good-nature when thus intervening, although, as a matter of fact, he liked Lamont, and would rather see him alive than dead. He had a motive underlying, and the motive was this. Zwabeka did not believe in the rising or in its ultimate success. He had been more or less drawn into it, but he was far too shrewd a man to believe that the whites would ever be driven out of the country, or that, even if they were, they would not return in tenfold force. Then where would he, and others, come in? Therefore, he was for ‘hedging,’ in pursuance of which line he was for saving Lamont’s life—if possible.

If possible! But these were times when it hardly seemed possible—when more than once a furious clamour was raised for the prisoner’s life. It had been discovered that he had been in command of the force which had offered such a staunch and stout resistance at the Kezane, and before. This was no man to let go, they represented, to do them incalculable damage in the future. Besides, think of their own people who had been slain—was no vengeance due to them? And the agitators were backed up by at least one chief of equal standing with himself, together with Gingamanzi and his band of Abantwana Mlimo.

But Zwabeka, albeit a morose savage, and given to pessimism, was a man of character; and having made up his mind to the line he had chosen to adopt, had no idea of wavering a hair’s-breadth therefrom. Wherefore, when such tumults were at their height, he would ask the clamourers what satisfaction there could possibly be in killing a man who was nearly dead already—pointing to the prisoner, who was so weak and ill he could hardly sit on his horse. That would be poor revenge for anyone. Give him time to get well again, anyhow.

This told—to a certain extent—but what told still more was a declaration, on the part of Zwabeka, that those who wanted to kill the prisoner could fight for the privilege. This Makiwa was his prisoner, and he intended to dispose of him as he chose.

By the time they gained their resting-place, the remote hollow in which we have seen them, Lamont found himself most piteously ill; indeed it seemed to matter but little to him whether the constant clamourings for his death should be acceded to or not. He had almost ceased to care whether he lived or died.

Seeing him sink lower and lower Zwabeka shook his head and muttered. Over and above the advantage it would be when the rising had failed, to be able to say to the Government, “Look now—here is one of your commanders, who led against us. I have taken care of him, when the people would have slain him. Have I not? Ask him.” Over and above this, we say, he had expected substantial reward at the hands of the man himself. And now the man would not get well, seeming to prefer to die. The native doctors—not necessarily despicable in cases known to them—had been able to do nothing. Zwabeka was puzzled.

Just then, however, his luck seemed to turn. Some of his people who had been out, partly on a scout, partly maraud, brought him some news. In the result he went straight to the bedside—or rather blanket side—of his prisoner.

“Hearken, Lamonti,” he began, when the guard had got outside with alacrity and a respectful salute. “You are not yet tired of life?”

“Almost,” was the wan reply. “But why?”

“I can get you one of your own doctors. Will you send him word to come?”

Lamont stared, half raising himself. “But—it is war time, or—has peace been made?”

“Not so. But he shall come and go in safety.” The other thought for a moment. Then he said—“I dare not do it, Zwabeka. You are chief of many, but not of the whole nation. If the man should come to harm at the hands of others, would not I have lured him to his death? Who is he?”

“*Au*! He cannot come to harm—Qubani says so,” said the chief impatiently. “It is the doctor who came with you, and slept at my kraal.”

Lamont started. Father Mathias! But then he was not a doctor, not in the sense the chief had meant. Well, no matter. It would be good to see once more a friendly face, to press a friendly hand.

“Where is he?” he asked eagerly.

“Will you send for him?” returned the chief. “*Au*! he will be in no danger. He is a good doctor and has cured several of Madula’s people. He is there now.”

That settled Lamont. If the priest was right among the hostile natives already, why then he would be just as safe here as there, if not safer. It seemed too from Zwabeka’s words that he possessed some knowledge of medicine.

The chief now saw he had gained his point. Calling up two of the men who were on guard, he ordered them to listen carefully to Lamont's words and remember them, and to aid them in this Lamont managed to find an old scrap of tattered envelope, and scratch two or three words on it. "You are a true friend, Zwabeka," he said, when they were alone together again. "*Au*! we have been friends, but men forget friendship when there is war. But—not you."

"That is so, Lamonti, and it may be that we shall sit down side by side once more. Yet for the present, be not slow to get well, for, as you did now say, I am not chief over the whole nation, and others may come in here at any moment. Then the way out will be hard. Now, rest."

Rest! After the chief's departure it seemed to Lamont that restfulness had fled from him for ever. He was aroused indeed. It was evident that Zwabeka meant to contrive his escape. Happiness again—which spelt Clare. During his long, weary march into this captivity the thought of her had simply maddened him, until the fever had reached its more prostrating stage; deadening, perhaps mercifully, the more acute mental throes. He was being led to his death, he had told himself, and she in the years to come would forget him, and find happiness with somebody else. Not even in the next world would they belong to each other. And then the effect of the fever had rendered him careless whether he lived or died.

Chapter Thirty.

Out of the Whirl.

"Ujojo!"

"*Nkose*?"

And the chief of the guard went over to where lay his former master.

"You did well to keep those Abantwana Mlimo off me last night. They might have pricked me with a poisoned blade, or have done anything." The speaker little guessed he had hit the actual mark. "And now, Ujojo—why are you fighting?"

The man laughed, turning aside his head.

"*Nkose*, I have been taking care of your cattle for you," he said. "I have them, all but three, and those the people took, wanting meat. Afterwards I will return them."

"But—if you thought I was blown up with the house?"

"I could not think that, *Nkose*. Anyone else yes—but—well, the cattle are there."

"You will not be the loser, Ujojo, no, nor Zwabeka. Now, when am I to be allowed to depart?"

"*Nkose* is sick."

"No; I am well now."

It seemed like it. Hope once more rekindled—powerfully rekindled—seemed to have infused the sufferer with new life. His bruised leg was still terribly stiff and painful, but the fever had almost left him. That is a peculiarity of this up-country malaria. A man may be shivering under eight blankets in the evening and the next morning be standing about in his shirt loading up his waggons or donkeys. Lamont, chatting thus with his guard on the morning after his visit from Zwabeka, felt almost as if he had never had anything the matter with him in his life.

"There is the doctor, *Nkose*," said Ujojo, with a sweep of the hand beneath.

Zwabeka's runners had been swift. Crossing the stony hollow was a horseman, and in a minute or two further Lamont and Father Mathias were shaking hands cordially.

"Why we never expected to meet like this again, did we?" said the latter. "Now show me where you have hurt your leg—you have hurt it, I am told. You know, I have a medical diploma in my own country."

"Then you have a double-barrelled sphere of usefulness, Father. But—how on earth did you get up among Madula's people? Why, the whole country is in a blaze."

"I was called to see a poor white man who was dying. He was a sort of a trader among them, and they were friendly with him, and protected him when the rising began. He sent for me, assuring me that I should be safeguarded until I was back in any township or post I should elect."

"And you put your head into a hornet's nest on that slender assurance?"

The other smiled.

"Why, yes; it is part of my commission. Would you shrink from going to the rescue of someone, Mr Lamont, because the odds were largely against you?"

It was Lamont's turn to smile now, and that grimly, remembering the odds that had been against him in 'going to the rescue of someone.'

"The poor man died, but I was just in time," went on the priest. "Then I stayed on and doctored some of the people who were suffering from ordinary ailments, and indeed from wounds. As for danger, they would not have harmed me."

"No, not if you made yourself useful in that line. I recollect at Zwabeka's that memorable time, I boomed you sky high

as a tremendous *isanusi*, but they wouldn't more than half believe it then."

Father Mathias laughed, then, going outside to where he had left his horse, he detached the saddlebag, and returned.

"I have not so much luggage as the last time we met—but I have a useful medicine chest here. I shall give you something to reduce that fever, then I shall attend to the leg. You have let it fall into a very sore state. The wonder is, it is not one great veldt sore."

While being thus tended with deft surgical skill, Lamont proceeded to narrate all that had befallen within his own experience of the rising. He kept the plum of his news until the last.

"Why, then, I congratulate you heartily, Mr Lamont," said the priest. "You are indeed fortunate."

"I quite agree, and now I am wondering when old Zwabeka is going to keep his word, and turn us loose out of this. You can imagine how I am chafing over it."

Father Mathias smiled to himself, as he contrasted the tense feverish earnestness of his friend now, with the cool, impassive, utterly indifferent demeanour that had characterised him on the last occasion of their meeting. Suddenly a dismal, long-drawn, nasal sound beneath, interrupted them. A number of dark figures were crossing the hollow in a kind of dance, wailing forth their abominable chant.

"It's those infernal Abantwana Mlimo," said Lamont angrily. "The brutes have been agitating to get me into their hands to cut my throat, or worse, all the time. Stirring up the crowd too. If we don't get away from here soon, they may carry things their own way."

There was worse to come. Following upon the heels of the contorting sorcerers, came a number of warriors—from the interest with which those already on the ground jumped up to stare at them, obviously new arrivals. On they came, pouring forward in an open column, their number seemed to be unending; and now these too, clashing their sticks upon their shields, began to take up the song of the Abantwana Mlimo. Lamont listened eagerly as it swelled higher and louder, then turned to his companion, his face dark with bitterness.

"Just as I said, too late now. They are clamouring for our lives, egged on of course by those infernal sorcerers; and they'll get what they want, too, for Zwabeka is nothing like strong enough to defy a number like that."

The situation from one of relief and hope had become appalling. Below, these human beasts, hundreds and hundreds of them, stamping their feet, roaring, waving their tufted shields, flashing their blades, as they bellowed forth, in a kind of improvised rhythm, their bloodthirsty petition. Others, too, were joining them; but above all the shrill, yelling voices of the sorcerers rose high and unflagging. Any moment the wild rout might break out of hand, and then—

"Well, Father, I have sunk your ship with mine," said Lamont bitterly. "If you hadn't come here to look after me you'd have been safe at Madula's now."

"Yes? But where safety and duty take different paths, we must follow the latter," was the tranquil reply.

Lamont looked at him with admiration. Here was a man of the pattern of the old-time saint and martyr, if ever there was one, he thought.

"I am done for, but it is possible they may not harm you," he said. "If you see—her—again, tell her you saw the last of me."

The frightful racket of the blood-song had become deafening now. A glance forth served to show that many of the clamouring rout had faced round, and were flourishing shields and weapons in the direction of their retreat.

"It may be any minute now," he went on. Then, vehemently, "Father, I would like to die in Clare's faith."

"And if you live, would you *live* in it?"

"To the end of my days. I have been thinking a good deal about things since I have been lying here."

The two were looking each other straight in the face. That of the priest had brightened as though by a semi-supernatural irradiation.

"It may not be too late now," he said.

It was not. Something was done—not much, but sufficient. Something was said—not much, but sufficient under the circumstances, as sufficient indeed as though that pile of boulders had been a cathedral. And no sooner was that so than the whole roaring, stamping rout came surging up to the opening.

But, barring the said opening, stood ten men with levelled guns, foremost among them the faithful Ujojo.

"Back!" cried the latter in stentorian tones. "You only enter here over us dead ones. But you will enter over even more of your own dead ones first."

The crowd halted, so fierce and resolute was the aspect of Zwabeka's guards. Some vociferated one thing, some another. Some cried that they would not harm the white doctor, but the man who had done such terrible execution against them. U' Lamonti—him they must and would put to death; while others shouted that no difference should be made between either, that all whites should be stamped from the land, for had not Umlimo said it. And the abominable sorcerers, hanging on the outskirts of the crowd, took up this cue and worked it for all it was worth.

"Hear now!" cried Ujojo. "Zwabeka is my father and chief. He placed me here saying, 'Suffer none to enter.' If you can find the chief and induce him to say to me, 'Let those men enter'—then ye enter—not otherwise."

For a moment the rout looked staggered, then the uproar redoubled. As a matter of fact Zwabeka was at that

moment about four miles away across the mountains, and, of course, in complete ignorance of the demonstration which was going on at his camp.

"I have an idea, but a desperate one," said Lamont. "It may be worth something if only to gain a little time. *Ho, amadoda*!" he called out, advancing near the entrance, though not showing himself. "Remember what happened to those who would have plundered my house. Well, the white doctor and I have enough of the same evil *múti* to blow half this mountain away ten times over. Where will ye be then? But we, and these few men who are obeying their chief, will come to no harm. We and they will come through it safe, even as I did before, and those that were with me."

The effect of this statement was greater than its propounder had dared to hope. The awful effects of the explosion at Lamont's farm had been sounded throughout the length and breadth of the nation. The clamour, which had been deafening, was suddenly hushed, only finding vent in a buzzing murmur. The bloodthirsty fervour of the crowd seemed to have sizzled.

"May I use anything I find in your medicine chest, Father," said Lamont hurriedly. "Thanks. Ah, this will do. It may be advisable to set up a preliminary scare."

He selected nothing more formidable than an ordinary medicine measure, a ball of cotton wool, and a strand of magnesium wire. Then he advanced to the entrance and for the first time showed himself.

"Fear nothing, Ujojo. You and your men are safe," he murmured. Then, aloud: "Now! Will ye all go? You weary us."

The uncanny looking glass, inverted, caught the light. Upon the upturned bottom of the glass he had placed the ball of wool. Now, as in full view of them all he ignited the magnesium wire, flashing it within the inverted glass, the whole crowd, with the fear of the former explosion before its eyes, could stand it no longer. It backed, stumbled—then half turned.

"We withdraw, Lamonti, we withdraw," cried a voice.

"Withdraw then. This fire is nearly burnt out. Then follows the rending of the earth."

Swiftly, almost at a run, the badly frightened crowd, which a moment since had been bellowing for his blood, moved away, not halting to look back until it had reached a very respectable distance indeed. With difficulty Lamont restrained a hysterical roar of laughter.

"A near thing, Father," he said to his companion. "But for that idea of mine they would have rushed the place. We are not out of the wood yet though. Hallo—what new excitement can be in the wind now?"

For among those who had just been giving trouble a new hubbub had arisen, but this time their retreat was not its object, for glances were turned in the opposite direction, and now among the varying vociferations could be descried the word 'Amakiwa.' And then, away beyond the stony ridge, rose the muffled, dropping roar of firearms. One of these two white men the sound thrilled like the thrill of harp-strings.

Beneath, in the hollow, excitement became intense on every hand. Groups of warriors springing from nowhere, armed, were moving off in the direction of the sound; the large body by which they had just been threatened had already gone. Again and again that dropping volley—somewhat nearer—and now from a new direction—and this time quite near, a renewed roar.

"D'you hear that?" cried Lamont, eager with repressed excitement. "We could almost join these, only we don't know how many Matabele there may be between us and them."

Ujojo and the other guards were no more impervious to the prevailing excitement. They were pointing eagerly, this way and that way, and taking in all the different points at which warriors were posted among the rocks to give the invaders a warm reception. That a large force of whites was advancing was manifest by the heaviness of the fire, which was now heard on the three open sides of the place.

A little more of this, and still nearer and nearer drew the three lines of fire, the nearest of all being that on their own side; and now, warriors, by twos and threes, rifle in hand, were seen flitting by, clearly in full retreat or to take up some new position. And, around these, spits of dust from the invaders' bullets were already beginning to rise.

"*Nkose*! It is time for us to leave now," called out Ujojo. "Your people will be here directly."

"Good, Ujojo. After the war, all those who have guarded me shall have five cows apiece for to-day's work. Now go!"

"*Nkose! Baba*!" they shouted with hand uplifted. Then they went.

"I'm thinking out our best plan, Father," said Lamont. "If we show ourselves too soon we might get shot in mistake for Matabele. The only thing is to—"

"Give it the schepsels, give it 'em! Give 'em hell!" sung out a voice just beneath. And renewed firing broke forth, presumably on the rear of the retreating guards.

"That's Peters," pronounced Lamont. "Ahoy, there! Peters!" he bellowed.

Peters stood stock-still for a moment—stared—listened. "It's him!" he roared. "It's him! Wyndham. Here! we've found him! We came out to do it—and—we've done it. How are you, my dear old chap," as the quondam prisoner and invalid emerged from his late prison and hospital, walking with surprising vigour. "Oh, but this is too good, too darn good for anything!"

"Let go, Peters. Dash it, man, you hurt," cried Lamont, ruefully contemplating his half-crushed knuckles. "Or turn some of it on to Father Mathias here. His doctoring skill has pulled me round, I can tell you."

"How are you, sir. Delighted to see you again," went on Peters. "We came out to find Lamont. Swore we wouldn't go

back till we had. Isn't that so, boys?"

"Rather," answered the others, who had come up. "How are you, captain," and "Glad to see you safe and sound," and a dozen other hearty greetings were showered upon him.

"Peters," he said in a low tone, drawing him apart. "What news?—You know."

"I can't give you any, Lamont, beyond the day you disappeared. You see we came straight away from Kezane. Miss Vidal was marvellously plucky, but not a man jack of us but could see she was half broken-hearted. She wanted to come with us."

"Did she?" said the other huskily.

"Didn't she! Well, of course that wouldn't do. She went back to Gandela."

"And I'm going to do ditto—to-night. You can raise me a horse, Peters?"

"No, I can't; and I wouldn't if I could. By the way, have you any idea where you are?"

"Now I think of it, I haven't."

"Eastern end of the Matopo. So you see the sort of country—and the extent of it—between this and Gandela. And it just swarms with rebels."

Lamont admitted the sense of this, but it was hard to be patient. Meanwhile the battle, or skirmish,—in which they had ceased to take any further interest,—had rolled farther and farther away, and was slackening off altogether.

When the force went into camp for the night, great was the dissatisfaction expressed over Peters' proposed defection. The latter was adamant.

"I've come out with one object now," he said, "and I've attained it. We must get back to Gandela at once, where Lamont has some very pressing business. Then we're going to start a corps of our own. In fact, that's all cut and dried. Eh, Wyndham?"

Wyndham agreed, and it was arranged they should start at dawn. Father Mathias elected to remain with the expedition. His knowledge of surgery might be useful, he urged, and indeed subsequent events proved it to be very useful indeed, and the intrepidity of the doctor-priest, and his unflagging care for the wounded and the dying, even under the hottest of fire, won for him the admiration of all, not only on that expedition but throughout the entire campaign.

Peters' party duly reached Gandela—not without incident, for on one occasion it had to fight its way through. And then there were great rejoicings, and a reunion which was too sacred for us to meddle with. Then, too, came about the formation of that hard-bitten corps, 'Lamont Tigers,' and tigers indeed the savage enemy was destined to find them, until eventually he sullenly laid down his arms at the Matopo Peace. And with their departure, pain and black anxiety deepened down once more—but—such was the common lot.

Epilogue.

"Heard the latest, Violet?" said Squire Courtland, as they got up from lunch.

"There are so many latests," was the reply, somewhat acidly made.

"So there are. But this is a local 'latest,' and touches a nearish neighbour. What do you think of Lamont?"

"I never do think of him," she answered, even more acidly.

"Well, he's coming home. His place is being done up, and they've got people working at it night and day. He's not only made a big name for himself as a fighter, but he appears to have struck a gold mine into the bargain, and now he's cleared off all the encumbrances and is having the place put into tip-top order. What do you think of that?"

"I don't think anything of it either way. In fact the matter has no earthly interest for me whatever," snapped Violet, with her nose in the air.

"Not? That's lucky. You did make a mess of your chances there, Violet, and no mistake."

"Did I? I don't know that I agree, and at any rate it's all ancient history, and like most ancient history rather flat and stale and humdrum. Anyway the whole subject has lost all interest for me."

Squire Courtland looked at his daughter, with a mischievous pucker round his eyes.

"What instinctive liars all women are," he was saying to himself.

Violet made some excuse, and took herself out of his presence. She had to, or her temper would have got the upper hand: result—a stormy scene, recrimination on her part; cold, withering sarcasm on that of her father; then rancour and bitterness for days. She knew he had never forgiven her for breaking off her engagement with Lamont; less, that she had done so than her manner of doing it. And the worst of it was, he seemed determined never to allow her to forget it; and now the man was coming back—coming to settle down at his ancestral home, almost, so to say, next door to them. And—he was bringing with him a bride.

He had been quick to console himself, she reflected, her lips curling with bitterness—oh yes, quite quick. Only two years. Two years to this very day. But two years mean a great deal to a man of action; and following his career in the newspapers, as she had done, this one, whom she had thrown over, was very much a man of action indeed. For herself—

well, her intimates had noticed a very considerable change in Violet Courtland. She had gone through her seasons and social functions, but somehow she had done so listlessly. All her adorers, whom formerly she had patted and made sit up and fetch and carry, she now snubbed ruthlessly, including more than one eligible; and what had formerly afforded her keen enjoyment she now went through perfunctorily.

During the war in Matabeleland she had developed a feverish thirst for reading newspapers, and about them she had found Lamont's name pretty frequently strewn in connection with that disastrous rising and a certain dare-devil corps known as Lamont's Tigers, from the fight at the Kezane Store onwards. But ever he seemed to be the leader of this or that desperate venture, wherein the rescue of some outlying, half-armed band, comprising women and children, was the object, and that against large odds. And this saviour of his countrymen—and women—from the horrors of savage massacre, was the man whom she, Violet Courtland, had denounced that very day two years ago, had denounced in public, with every expression of aversion and disgust, as a coward.

She had not been able to escape from the sound of his name. At the dinner-table, in the ballroom—everywhere—his deeds came under discussion and comment; and that in one key—admiration. Moreover, certain newspaper men began to rake up two or three of his doings during the former war in the same wild country, causing Violet Courtland's eyes to open very wide as she recalled the scene by the mere, and how she had driven this very man from her as a coward.

Two years ago that very day! Strange that exactly the same conditions should prevail: the same hard frost; the same silver sparkle on the bare trees; even the same Christmas Eve bells practising their carillon at intervals. A wave of association it might have been that moved Violet to take her skates, and start for the frozen mere. She was alone now, but she would be sure to find somebody there—the rector's girls perhaps, and a few others.

She has judged correctly. The surface of Courtland Mere is covered with a smooth and glassy sheet. The ring of the skates is melodious upon the air, and gliding forms dart hither and thither: but these are few—only four, in fact—for the mere is not yet thrown open, and the ice, undulating freely, here and there with an ominous crack, is none too safe even for these four.

"Come back, Violet," cries a girl's clear voice. "You're too far out. It's awfully thin there. Do you hear?"—as a couple of warning cracks dart along the heaving surface.

"Yes, do come back, Miss Courtland," echoes the only man in the party. "You're near the spring hole. Do come back. It's beastly dangerous."

Violet Courtland throws back her head and laughs defiantly, circling ever nearer to the fatal spot. One, seeing but unseen, amid the undergrowth beneath the black pines, takes in the picture—the warm kiss of the frosty air upon the flower-like face, framed so seductively in its winter furs; the curve of the red lips, laughing mischievously; the sparkle in the large clear eyes, as the answer is shrilled back—

"Not for me. I'm light enough to go over even the spring hole itself. Oh—h—!"

For, with these words, the ice wave beneath her gliding feet rises and falls like a sheet in the breeze. A crack, and then another—then a horrid shattering sound as of shivered glass. The water, forced through the cracks, spurts upward in blade-like lines, and, with hardly time to utter a shriek, Violet disappears, feet downwards, beneath the surface. A great slab of blue ice, momentarily dislodged, heaves endways upward, then settles down above the head of the girl. The grim mere has literally swallowed its prey.

Those who behold are petrified with horror. Full a hundred yards are they from the disaster, but the man skims straight for the spot. He can do nothing, for he is heavy of build, and the ice will give way beneath his weight long before he reaches her. It will only mean one more victim. But almost instantaneously with the catastrophe a startling thing happens.

A man dashes from beneath the pines, and with a loud warning shout to the others to keep away, he flings himself upon the ice, and, lying flat, propels himself straight for the deadly spring hole, which is here but a score of yards from the bank. Now he is fighting his way through the heaving, crackling ice—now he disappears as if gives way beneath him. Now he is up again; then once more, with a hiss and a splash and the splintering of glass-like ice, he is beneath the surface again. Those on the bank are turned to stone. Will he—will they—never come up? Ah—h!

A head shoots above the surface—two heads! Panting, nearly winded with his terrible exertion and the deadly cold numbing his veins, Piers Lamont is treading water, supporting Violet in a state of semi-unconsciousness; but powerful and wiry as he is, it is all he can do to keep her head above the surface.

"Soames!" he shouts, recognising the man, "there are some chopped poles lying there just inside the trees. Run, man, and throw some out. You girls run for help—keeper's lodge the nearest. And yell—yell for all you know how," he pants gaspingly, for the exertion of speech has frightfully sapped his remaining strength.

"God—will they be all day!" he groans through his blue and shaking lips. He can hear Soames tearing through the wood—then things become mixed. The familiar landscape is whirling round. Now he is beheaded—no, it is only the cold ice-edge against his neck. Now he is charging an enemy, using Violet, held in front of him, as a shield. Oh yes, of course he is a coward, for did not she say so—here—on this very spot? And— Something comes whizzing at him. A spear—and he is unarmed. Well, he will grasp it. No, it eludes him. Another! He has it—grasped hard and fast. "Hold tight, old man! Now, are you ready?" yells a voice from the bank.

"Ready? Yes—shoot away!"

And Lamont, with his half-unconscious charge, is hauled to the bank, he gripping with death-like force the end of the fir-pole, under the impression that he is warding off a hostile spear from his heart. Once on firm ground though, and relieved of the strain, he soon recovers himself.

"Put her between the sheets and give her something hot," he enjoins. "Quick, not a moment to lose. I'm off to try the same prescription myself. So long—but it was a near thing."

Those who came up had been present on that other occasion that day two years ago, and remembered it vividly—remembered this man's answer, "I daresay I can risk my life for an adequate motive." Here, then, he had literally fulfilled

his words. And—now he was married.

Clare—no longer Vidal—about to start for a drive, looking lovelier than ever in the sharp English winter air, and the dainty furs which set off the beautiful face, was mightily astonished to behold her proprietor sprinting up the avenue, looking, as he asserted he felt, like a half-drowned rat.

"Had an adventure?" he panted. "Must first get dry, then tell you all about it."

"Oh, I'm dying to hear. The carriage can go back now. I shall not go out this afternoon."

Half an hour later she was hearing about the accident at the spring hole.

"You ran a great risk," she said. "Piers, did you never think of me when you took your life in your hands?"

"Very much so. But I couldn't stand by and leave her to drown, could I?"

"Of course not I was only trying you. But—tell me. Did it bring back just a little of the old feeling? Not a wee tiny echo of it?"

He took her hands in his.

"Not the faintest shadow, darling. You believed in me from the very first—that other one did not. And besides—"

"And besides—what?"

"You are infinitely the more beautiful of the two."

"I shan't be that long if you go on giving me what you men call 'swelled head'," she answered brightly. "Look. There's the post African mail day too."

"So it is," taking up the letters which were brought in. "Here's a great screed from Peters. Full of the mine, I suppose."

We heard Squire Courtland refer to Lamont having struck a gold mine. As an actual fact he had, and it had come about in rather a peculiar way. After peace was restored he and Peters had made their way out to the farm, to see how things were looking; but the enormous hole blown out of the ground where the house had stood astonished even them. It was while fossicking in this that the keen eye of the professional prospector was at once attracted. A few more quick strokes with the pick, and the yellow treasures of the earth lay revealed. Up went Peters' hat high in the air, and from his throat a roaring hooray.

"We can put on our jackets now," he said. "We're rich men for life."

"It may be only a 'pocket,'" was the more cautious comment of the other.

"Pocket or not—there's enough stuff there to get us a fat offer from any syndicate. But there's more. Well, didn't I tell you we'd make our fortunes here."

"Yes, but who'd have thought we should have to blow up the old shack to do it?"

They had realised on it well—uncommonly well—declared those who knew; and at once Lamont had set to work to clear off the encumbrances on his ancestral home.

"Peters threatens to run across to see us, if we promise not to make him wear a top-hat and a long-tailed coat. I've often told him he can wear anything he likes. Hallo, here's a yarn from Ancram. Christmas cards too—um—um. 'Kind regards to Mrs Lamont.'"

"It was good of you to get him that berth, Piers. He behaved very meanly to you at first, I thought."

"He couldn't help it. He's built that way. And even then—if the poor devil got so desperately 'stony'—when you see a chance of putting him on his legs again, you naturally take it."

"*You* do. You are always setting somebody on his legs again."

"Ah! ah!"—holding up a warning finger. "Who is likely to suffer from 'swelled head' now?"

"Well, it seems to me you are going to get no rest on earth. You spent about six months pulling everybody out of holes, and now no sooner do we get here for good than you start in the same line again," said Clare softly.

"It's different, dearest. On that side one got them out of hot water; on this side one gets them out of cold—oh, very!" with a shiver at the recollection of his recent ice-bath.

Pearly and grey the Christmas gloaming deepens, a few stars peep frostily out, and in the gloom of the fir-woods an owl is hooting melodiously. And the stillness, with the peace of the hour, is sweet to these two, as it rests upon them.

The End.

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