Title: The White Hand and the Black: A Story of the Natal Rising

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"The White Hand and the Black"

Prologue.

A weight had fallen from him—the weight of a lifetime; the galling, hopeless, demoralising weight which had paralysed his energies, sterilised his brain, and, in the case of a subject less clear-sighted, would have brought him down to drink or suicide, possibly both. And now it had fallen from him.

The man on the mountain top looked around, and as he did so, something of buoyancy that he had not known for years, came over his mind. He was free—free. His life was now his own. He could have sung aloud in the stillness of the night. And yet the said night was not one calculated to effect excessive exaltation in any mind. It was oppressive and boding; and even its usual voices, of bird and beast and insect life, seemed hushed as in awe of something impending. The broad moon glared drearily down, ghastly athwart a filmy haze; and ever and anon a heavy boom seemed to shake the earth, while huge, plume-like masses of cloud rising higher and higher above the cliffs and ridges, gleamed beautiful in golden depths with every intermittent flash. When the storm broke it would be an appalling one, but to the man on the mountain top this brought no misgiving whatever, yet he knew that it would overtake him long before he had time to reach home.

He knew something else, knew that it was vital to him to choose his steps carefully. For the summit was flat and to all appearance smooth and unbroken, yet it was seamed with crevices; crevices partly or entirely hidden by the coarse, sour herbage; crevices of no great width but some of them awful rifts, into which should a man fall, he would he entombed by that lonely mountain height until the crack of doom. But this man had no intention of undergoing any such fate. He knew his ground well, and, knowing it well, moved with especial care.

All of a sudden he was conscious of a quick tingling of the blood, but he had sufficient control neither to stop nor look round. He only *listened*; listened with an acute, almost painful intensity. He had seen nobody, had heard nothing, yet that strange sixth sense of realisation had told him that he was no longer alone on the mountain top.

For a moment a quiver or qualm of superstition shook even his mind. What consideration on earth could have brought any being other than himself—any *human* being—up here to-night? Yet even the misgiving of superstition was a relief. The thing to be feared was the presence of such human being.

He whirled round quickly and suddenly. Just as he had thought. In the flash, lighting up the whole plateau, something dropped; disappeared behind a flat boulder not fifty yards away, and in that flash the man on the mountain top realised that he had to do with a human being. In which case every instinct of self-preservation cried out loudly that the other must not leave the mountain top alive.

There was something cat-like in his movement as with incredible speed and agility he made straight for the spot. Something sang past his head. It was not the breeze—now sweeping the tableland in fitful puffs. It was something which he heard strike the stones behind him with a steely ring. Then he had grappled with the figure behind the rock.

It rose, to fully his own height. Something else that was steely gleamed in his eyes—a broad, formidable blade. But the wrist of its wielder was grasped with a grip as of iron.

The huge white mountainous cloud, lit up by un-intermittent lightning flashes, now illuminated this life and death struggle with weird, lamp-like effect. For it was a life and death struggle. The white man could not, by every known law of self-preservation, let any witness get away from this place a *living* witness. The dark man, by the same intuition realised that fact, and such being the case realised also that he was in the position of a "cornered" animal. He must fight—hard and desperately—for his life. And he came of a race of hard and desperate fighters.

Neither spoke. Both were equally matched, the white man, tough, powerful, and in the pink of training; the dark man lithe, cat-like, but accustomed to depend more on quick sinuosity of movement than on sheer muscular power. Moreover he was armed, and his opponent was not.

Armed. One quick deft stroke of that broad-headed short-handled stabbing spear, and where was the other? Yet he could not deliver it. His adversary had bent back his arm. In his iron strength he had forced it out to its full length behind, well nigh dislocating it at the shoulder. The dark man could not even change the weapon into his left hand. And, so

sudden had been the onslaught, that his great knobbed stick lay on the ground, yards away.

Wait. The white man could have made an end of the struggle at any moment. He was armed—though to all intents and purposes not—and this is how such a paradox unravels. He had a fully loaded five chambered revolver upon him, but it was a matter of vital importance to refrain from firing a shot on this silent, lonely mountain top at such a moment. So for all practical purposes he was an unarmed man.

Yet his plan of campaign was clear—clear, fell, and remorseless. He had seen what his opponent had not; and now by every effort of his straining, powerful muscles he was forcing that opponent steadily backward. For in the weird light of Heaven's fires above and around he had detected a certain line in the waving grass bents, which labelled its own character. His adversary should perform his own funeral.

His said adversary was giving way. In fact he was gathering himself for a final spring. Still no word between the two men. Only the deep heave of laboured, but carefully husbanded breathing. Now and then something like a cracking sound, as joints and muscles tightened. Then the dark man suddenly and with a mighty effort, wrenched himself free, and—disappeared.

Disappeared. For a fraction of a second the great white fiery cloud shed its gleam upon an appalled face and rolling eyeballs, and a convulsive clutching of two sinewy hands at the grass tufts; and then upon the white man standing once more on the mountain top—alone.

He stood for a few moments panting after the struggle. Then, having recovered breath, he took a couple of steps forward and peered down into the narrow black rift. No sound came up. He found a stone, and dropped it in. A rattle or two against the rocky sides, and then silence. Only the thunder boom, now growing fainter, relieved it from time to time: but still the immensity of the white fiery cloud shed its lamp-like light, upon him and the scene of this silent tragedy. Then he made a careful search around. The weapon that had been flung at him he picked up, also the great knobstick, and dropped them over into the rift; and as he smoothed back the trampled grass into position as best he could, for the first time he spoke.

"*Hlala gahle*! A fighter's weapons should be buried with him, and this is a right fitting tomb for such."

Again he glanced around. The flat, table-like mountain top was silent once more. It was time to descend, and having thus decided, a new and louder thunder roll from a dark curtain swiftly moving up from another direction caused him no anxiety but rather the reverse. The witness of one tragedy had furnished material for another, and the storm now coming up would thoroughly and effectually eliminate any possible remaining trace of either.

Chapter One.

Of an Unwonted Peril.

The girl was drawing.

From where she sat a great mountain head, turreted with bronze-faced krantzes, rose up against the unclouded blue, set off by a V-shaped foreground of tossing, tumbling foliage—in a word, virgin forest. The grass was long in the little open space, and in and among the trailers hanging like network from the trees, birds were making the warm air merry with many a varied call and pipe. Now and then a grey monkey, reassured by the repose of the human occupant of the spot, would climb partly down, almost above her head, and hang, perking his black face in a knowing attitude, as though quite competent to criticise the water-colour sketch now rapidly taking shape: to skip aloft, chattering, as some sudden movement on the part of the artist appealed strongly to his instinct of self preservation. And then the dark shadowy depths of the surrounding trees would be alive with responsive mutterings and cackles, where the less venturesome of the troop lurked, awaiting further developments.

She, of such sights and sounds took no notice, for had she not been born and bred among them, and did they not constitute the ordinary surroundings of everyday life? Seated on a low flat rock, her colour box and water tin beside her, she worked on serenely in the warmth of the windless air, in nowise feeling the latter oppressive, for she was used to it.

She made a pretty picture as she sat there—a very pretty picture had there been any spectator to appreciate it. A large-brimmed hat of coarse straw lay on the ground beside her, and an aureole of golden hair, brought low down on the forehead, framed a very uncommon and striking face. If the smooth skin was a trifle sun-browned why that only served to enhance the clearness of the thoughtful blue eyes. These, lifting every now and then, in the process of her work—beneath well defined brows—were wide, straight and fearless, and the delicate, oval contour of the face, and the set of the full, expressive mouth, left nothing to be desired.

The piping of the bird voices, and the hum and drone of winged insects kept up unceasing chorus on the sunlit air, and then breaking in upon them all came another sound. It was the grating chatter of the honey bird—the *nomtyeketye* of the natives. Clucking to and fro the insignificant little brown bird kept up his ceaseless chatter, and the girl looked up. She likewise looked round for something to throw at him, for his persistency was becoming a bore. In her infantile days when, with her brothers, this little friend would often pilot them to a wild bees' nest, and, at the cost of a sting or two, an unexpected feast of fat combs, he was welcome enough. Now his use had gone by. Yet he persistently skipped hither and thither and chattered on.

The sun, now mounting above the trees, began to shed his rays, and that with no uncertain touch, upon her uncovered head, fusing the aureole with yet a more dazzling gold. Instinctively she picked up the large hat, and, rising, proceeded to pin it on. This movement produced another.

Produced another. Yes, and as startling as it was unexpected. Barely a dozen feet distant, where the dense shaggy growth touched the open, there shot up the head of a huge snake.

The girl stood as though turned to stone. She had no great fear of snakes in general, but this: why she had never seen one like it before. It was not a python, for it was of a strange, shining orange colour, and it had the heart-shaped head of the venomous species: moreover on the said head there was an erection of scales forming a kind of crest. It was hissing hideously, and the sinuous coils beneath the uplifted neck were squirming in a manner horribly suggestive of a rush and a spring. The girl simply dared not move—no, not even a finger. Had it been an ordinary snake, her course was

easy, to retire quietly. But this—why it had only to hurl itself its own length—or very little more—and then?

She stood, perfectly motionless, her hands still as they were—in the attitude of pinning on her hat. Her face had gone white and cold and clammy, and her eyes dilated; yet she dared not turn them away from the monster, or even lower them. A horrible fascination was upon her, such as she had often read about and openly scoffed at. And then all upon her mind was borne the tales she had heard from natives and up-country men about a very rare and terrible variety of the *imamba*, which reached an enormous size, and, unlike the serpent tribe in general, was actually aggressive and would attack without provocation. But this species was so rare that many even doubted its actual existence.

She dared not move—dared not stir a finger. Her hands were still raised to her head, but she dared not move them down, however gently. Her arms were aching with the strain, and still she stood staring at the glittering eyes, the gently waving neck, the black, forked tongue trickling forth and then withdrawing, and it seemed to her that that awful festoon of coils was gliding imperceptibly nearer. A lifetime of agony seemed concentrated in those few moments. Should she break the spell, and dash away as fast as ever she could run? And then she suddenly recognised that this was just what she was absolutely powerless to do. She could not move. The dread fascination was complete.

From sheer exhaustion her uplifted arms dropped to her sides. The movement either startled or enraged the formidable reptile, or both, for it emitted a hideous, whistling kind of hiss, and with a quick movement drew back its head and neck into a rigid curve as though to hurl itself forward. And the girl was powerless to move.

Crack—crack!

Two reports, like pistol shots, rang out behind her, and simultaneously a voice.

“Step back quietly. I’ll take care of this.”

Again the sharp reports, this time three—in rapid succession. But they were not from any firearm: they proceeded from a remarkably well plaited and well wielded raw-hide whip.

All unperceived a horseman had entered the open glade. Upon him the infuriated reptile now turned—which was precisely what he wanted to happen.

Backing his steed, a process to which that intelligent quadruped was by no means averse, he faced the great snake, firing a succession of whip cracks at it.

“Now run,” he called out. “I’ll draw the brute on.”

But he had reckoned without the innate ferocity of the said brute, for now uttering a fiendish hiss, it hurled itself straight at horse and rider. Nearly the whole of its huge length seemed to rise from the ground in that tremendous leap. The horse instinctively reared itself up on its hind legs, receiving the deadly fangs full in the chest, then whirling round, fell—fell right on to the writhing monster. And the rider?

With rare readiness of nerve and judgment the latter had slid from the saddle at exactly the right fraction of a moment, and now stood contemplating a furious convulsive intermingling of kicking hoofs and heaving coils. One deft slash of the raw-hide whip was capable of cutting the head off the terrible reptile, if only he could get it in. Then he suddenly grasped the fact that there was no need to do anything further at all. Though still squirming hideously the monster was dead. We have said that the horse, in falling, had come right down upon the reptile, and now it was found that the iron pommel of the saddle had snapped its vertebrae. The destroyed had in turn become the destroyer. It had avenged itself.

Its owner, however, gave it no thought just then. He turned to the girl. She was standing, with a large stone poised in her hand, a look of desperate resolution in her eyes. The man, for his part, decided that here was a picture he should never forget; the erect stateliness of the pose: the expression: the sublimity of a great resolution which had crushed down terror. She was magnificent, he told himself—lovely too.

“Why didn’t you make yourself scarce while you could?” he said. “I told you to, you know.”

“I wanted to see if I could be of some use,” she answered, dropping the stone which she had instinctively picked up as being the only approximate form of weapon at hand. “I should certainly have been killed if it hadn’t been for you. And the wonder is you weren’t. But your horse—I suppose there’s no chance for him?”

“None whatever. The bite of a mamba of that size and volume is absolutely fatal to man or beast.”

“It is a mamba then? But the size of it?”

“Yes. It’s the *indhlondhlo*—the crested variety. I’ve only seen one before, and it was nothing like the size of this. They are rather scarce.”

“And a good thing too,” said the girl with something of a shudder as they stood contemplating the still moving coils of their late enemy. “Your poor horse has revenged himself. Poor beast! Will his death be a painful one?”

“I don’t think so. A stupor, more or less gradual, usually attends death from snake-bite.”

As though to bear out its owner’s words, the poor animal, which had risen to its feet, now tottered, swayed, and then lay down.

“Well, I shall have to walk. But that’s nothing. I’m in hard training.”

The girl’s eyes opened wide.

“Walk? That you certainly will not, except as far as the house; and that’s no great distance. It’s nearly dinner time too,”—with a glance upwards at the sun. “And—you have saved my life, you know. I’m a bad hand at making a speech, but—will you take for granted all I’d like to say?”

The other felt a little foolish. This, to him, was an entirely new experience. This girl, for instance, was quite unlike any he had ever known before. Her absolute self-possession, free from any trace of posing or self-consciousness—why he did not know what to make of the situation. But one thing pushed itself unpleasantly to the fore in his mind. He was being taken somewhere to be thanked—by a lot of other people, and he didn't like being thanked. It made him feel a fool. The only thing to do was to pooh-pooh the whole incident; and yet—and yet—hang it, he did want to see some more of her, and wanted to see that some "some more" now, not put it off to some indefinite future time.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, rather lamely. "The affair was of no great account. You'd have got out of it anyhow. I think perhaps, I'd better start. Good-bye."

But she ignored the proffered hand. She deliberately put hers behind her back.

"Doesn't it occur to you," she said, "that I may be a little bit nervous going home alone after that experience? There may be another of the same species—what did you call it—*indhlondhlo*?—somewhere near. I never was afraid of a snake before."

Then he surrendered with a good grace—a very good grace—and profuse apologies.

"I confess I missed that point of view. Let me collect your painting things. Do you often come here to draw?"

"Yes, and everywhere else. I love it. I believe I could do something real in that way if only I had a show." And there was a clouding over of the speaker's face that was not lost upon her escort.

"By Jove! I should think you could," he answered, scrutinising the nearly finished sketch. "Why, this is perfect."

"I don't know if it'll ever be finished," she said. "I believe I'd be scared to come and sit here again. I don't know. I'll bring a shot-gun loaded with buckshot. No snake on earth could stand against that."

"Rather not," answered the other, vastly amused by this readiness, a downright matter-of-fact way of looking at things. "I suppose—er—you know how to handle firearms."

"Oh yes. I've learnt that. But I never bother about carrying them for purposes of defence. There's no use for it here."

"What about the natives? Is it quite wise for you to go rambling about the veldt alone, do you think?"

"Of course. Why they have known me all my life, and I have known them. There isn't one of them anywhere round here who wouldn't—give his life for me, I was almost going to say—let alone harm me."

The other was still more puzzled, and relapsed into silence for a little, thinking even yet harder as to the personality of the other actor in this strange adventure. She, for her part, was no less busied with regard to him. She saw beside her, as they stepped along the bush path together, some six feet of well-proportioned British manhood, not exactly in the first youth, and yet on the right side of middle age; and the bronzed face and clear eyes told of healthy wholesome living, and the readiness of resource of their owner she herself had just had an opportunity of gauging. The result was satisfactory.

The bush path ended, then a narrow one bordering a quince hedge which shut in a fine fruit garden. Here they overtook a man, who, at sound of footsteps, turned inquiringly—a tall man, with a strong, good-looking face and full brown beard just streaking with grey. The girl's clear voice broke the silence.

"Father. This gentleman has just saved my life."

Chapter Two.

The New Magistrate.

The older man started.

"What's that?" he said quickly, looking from the one to the other.

Briefly she told him. This was a man not easily moved, but he was then.

"And I should have been lying there instead of that poor horse," concluded the girl.

"I should think you would." Then, to the stranger, "Well, sir, I don't quite know what to say to you or how to put it—but I believe you can understand."

The said stranger, almost writhing from the force of the hand grip which the other was administering to him, realised that he did understand. This strong, impassive-looking man was obviously moved to the core, but what seemed passing strange was that he refrained from any little outward and natural act of affection, or even word, towards his child who had just escaped a horrible death. No, that omission, indeed, he could not understand.

"Why, of course," he answered. "But I'd better introduce myself. My name's Elvesdon, and I'm the new magistrate at Kwabulazi, so we shall not be very distant neighbours. I hope, too, that we shall become very much better acquainted."

"Same here. I'm Thornhill, and I own about thirteen thousand *morgen* (about double that number of acres), most of which you can see from where we stand, and a good deal of which is of no earthly use except to look at—or to paint," with a smile at his daughter.

"It certainly is very good to look at," said the stranger. "Does it hold much wild game, Mr Thornhill?"

"Middling. See that line of krantz yonder?" pointing to a craggy wall, about a mile away. "Well, that's all bored with

holes and caves—I was going to say it was filled with tiger (leopard) like bee-grubs in a comb, but that's a little too tall. Still there are too many. Are you a sportsman, Mr—Elvesdon? Though—you must be, after what I've just heard."

"I'm death on it. Where I've come from there wasn't any."

"Where's that?"

"The Sezelani. All sugar cane and coolies. Beastly hot, too. I'm jolly glad of this move."

"Well I hope you'll make up for it here. There's a fair number of bushbuck in the kloofs—duiker and blekbok too, guinea fowl, and other small fry. So be sure and bring your gun over whenever you can and like."

"Thanks awfully," replied Elvesdon, thinking he would manage to do this pretty often.

They had reached the homestead. The house was a one-storeyed, bungalow-like building, with a thatched verandah running round three sides of it. It stood on a slope, and the ground in front fell away from a fenced-in bit of garden ground down a well-grown mealie land, whose tall stalks were loaded with ripening cobs. Then the wild bush veldt began. Black kloofs, dense with forest trees; bush-clad slopes, culminating in a great bronze-faced krantz frowning down in overhanging grandeur; here and there patches of open green as a relief to the profusion of multi-hued foliage—in truth in whatever direction the eye might turn, that which met it was indeed good to look at, as the stranger had said.

The said stranger, as they entered the house, was exercised by no small amount of curiosity. Of what did this household consist? he asked himself. The other members of the family, for instance, what were they like, he wondered? Like this girl—who had struck him as so unlike any other girl he had ever seen? Like her father—who in his own way seemed almost to stand unique? But beyond themselves there seemed to be nobody else in the house at all.

The room he was ushered into was cool and shaded. It was got up with innumerable knick-knacks. There were water-colour sketches on the walls—and framed photographic portraits placed about on easels. There was a piano, and other signs of feminine occupation. But nothing was overdone. The furniture was light and not overcrowded, thoroughly suitable to a hot climate. After the noontide glare outside, the room struck him as cool and restful to a degree—refined, too; in short a very perfect boudoir.

"Nice little room, isn't it?" said his host rejoining him, for he had excused himself for a minute. "Yes, that portrait—that's my eldest boy. Poor chap, he *was* killed in the Matabele rising in '96. That other's the second—I've only the two. He's away at the Rand; making his fortune—as he thinks; fortunately he's got none to lose."

"What fine looking fellows," said Elvesdon. "By Jove they are."

The other smiled.

"That group there," he went on, "represents Edala in various stages of growing up. You'll recognise the latest."

"Yes. It's a splendid likeness." The while he was thinking to himself, "Edala! what an out-of-the-way name. Edala! Well, it fits its owner anyway."

"I daresay you'd like a cold splash—we'll have dinner directly. Come this way. You'll find everything in there," opening the door of a spare room.

His host's voice almost made Elvesdon start, so wrapped up was he in his new train of thought. It did not leave him, either, when he was splashing his head and face in a basin of cold water. Truly this was a strange beginning to his new term of office; for he had only been at Kwabulazi a few days. Well, it was a good one anyhow.

On entering the dining-room he did not know whether to feel surprised or not. Only three places were laid. There was no Mrs Thornhill then? These two—father and daughter—were alone together.

But before they had got half through the meal Elvesdon became alive to something. There was not that freedom and cordiality between the two, that whole-souled intimacy of companionship, which under the circumstances might have been expected. A kind of constraint seemed to rest between them, and yet why? It was puzzling. Remembering the real emotion displayed by his host when the latter had learned what had occurred that morning, it was even more puzzling. He did not fail, however, to note that the affection seemed mostly on the parental side. This struck him as strange: nor did there appear to be anything to account for it. There was nothing of the tyrannical or even irritable type of parent about his host, who, on the contrary, seemed calm and quiet and considerate in everything he said or did; he himself had been greatly taken with him. What then could it mean?

Ah, now a solution presented itself. The girl had probably contracted some engagement, or wanted to, to which her father had objected. And in the result there was an estrangement between them. He had seen one or two cases of the kind before. The thought, however, seemed to depress him though half-unconsciously. Yet why should it? What could it possibly matter to him—he asked himself. Yes, what the devil could it matter to him? Thus pondering, he joined in the conversation in a half-absent kind of way, though wholly unconscious of any such frame of mind. The fact, however, did not escape his host, who was divided in opinion as to the cause.

"I suppose you've had a good deal of experience in the native department," said the latter, when they had got into roomy cane-chairs on the verandah and pipes were in full blast. Edala had retired, announcing an intention of having forty winks and reappearing when it was cooler.

"Fair. I was on the Pondo border for a time. It was more interesting, in a way, still I'm glad to get back here."

"What do you think of these rumours of unrest?" said Thornhill.

"There is unrest, and it wants careful handling. Still you haven't got to believe everything you hear. I've been doing a round since I came, trying to get at the general feeling. I was at Tongwana's kraal this morning and the old chap was profusely civil, so were all his people: in fact it was on my way back from there that I—er—first met your daughter."

“Oh, Tongwana? Yes, he’s all right. By the way, I was forgetting. If you’ll excuse me for a minute I’ll send some boys down to collect your saddle and bridle.”

“Thanks. I daresay you could lend me some sort of a mount to get home on, could you?”

“Oh, you shan’t walk,” said Thornhill, drily, over his shoulder.

He soon returned, and the two sat chatting over things in general and the neighbourhood in particular; as to which latter Elvesdon was loud in his appreciation. It was delightful country, he declared, and this farm especially was charmingly situated. The other smiled.

“Well, ride over whenever you feel inclined. We shall always be delighted to see you,” the speaker had grown grave, and his hearer knew what he was thinking about. “I don’t know if you’re very hard-worked. I know that outlying Civil servants are not as a rule—your predecessor certainly wasn’t. So whenever you don’t know what else to do with yourself, why this isn’t an overpoweringly long ride. We might get up a day in the kloofs when the close time is over.”

Elvesdon jumped at this, and then Edala reappeared, stating two indisputable facts—that it was cooler, and, incidentally, tea-time. At last, with many a qualm of reluctance, he got up and declared it was time to go.

“Must you?” said the girl, with a quick lift of the eyes which he thought infinitely captivating.

“I’m afraid so, Miss Thornhill, though I do it with reluctance. Stern duty calls, you see. There’s no moon, and I don’t know this part of the country at all yet. I should get hopelessly entangled for the night in some most impenetrable part of the kloofs, and I have to hold Court early to-morrow; for there happens to be rather a lot to get through.”

“Edala, dear,” said Thornhill, “just sing out to them at the back to put Mr Elvesdon’s saddle on—the horse I told them.”

The girl reappeared in a moment, and then good-byes were interchanged. To Elvesdon’s relief nothing more was said on the subject of his timely aid, but he was appreciative of a great cordiality of manner.

“Here’s something that’ll carry you, Mr Elvesdon,” said Thornhill, as a horse was brought round to the stoep, a well groomed, capable looking beast with good paces. “You needn’t trouble to send him back again, if you’ll oblige me by accepting him. You lost your own on my account you know.”

But the other began to protest. Why all the horses in the world would be cheap at the price of what his own had been able to effect, he declared with, at that stage, somewhat unnecessary vehemence. Besides it seemed too much like accepting a reward for what he had done, though this he did not say.

“You are not offended, are you?” said Thornhill.

“Offended? No. But—er—”

“Well, I shall be if you refuse to do me this favour, so let’s have no more *indaba* on the subject,” rejoined Thornhill, shortly.

The other gave way. He saw no alternative, for the last thing in the world he desired was to offend Edala’s father. The latter’s next words made the situation easier.

“Hope we shall see you again soon. Remember you’ll always find a real welcome here at any time, so don’t stand on ceremony. Good-bye.”

The younger man echoed the word heartily as he rode away. And then something struck him as funny. He was accustomed to issuing orders to other people, and now the positions were reversed. He had been dictated to, and that by no official superior but by a stranger of a few hours’ acquaintance, and he had meekly done as he was told. Yes, it was funny.

The two stood looking after him as he disappeared down the bush path. Then the girl said:

“Father, what have you done? You’ve given away Ratels—yes, given him away. And you’ve often said you wouldn’t part with him for five times his real value.”

“Yes. But I’ve never said I wouldn’t part with him for fifty thousand times—for fifty million times his real value.”

He dropped a hand upon her shoulder—that was all—then turned abruptly and went inside. The girl standing there alone gazed forth upon the tossing splendours of the sunlit wilderness, but actually seeing nothing of them, for her eyes were dim and moist. A struggle was going on within her. Then the lips, which had begun to tremble, hardened into firm compression. The struggle was over—unfortunately.

Chapter Three.

The Stranger from Zululand.

At the time we make his acquaintance Michael Thornhill did not take his stock-farming seriously, but rather as a pastime. This he could afford to do, as from one source or another he had enough to last him comfortably for the rest of his life, and also to start his remaining son in anything sound and likely to bear good results.

His operations, then, in that line just paid their way, but very little more—a result in nowise due to any lack of capacity on his part, for he had gone through the mill himself in earlier life and was as thoroughly at home in all pertaining to stock-raising as the most strenuous and practical farmers in the colony. But he had a hobby, and it was a good one, and that was—literature.

Not the manufacture of it—oh no—or we might have felt bound to withhold the qualifying adjective. The absorption of it—ancient and modern—was his craze and his delight. He never had found time to indulge this during a hard-worked and hardening life, but had always looked forward to a good time coming when he should be able to do so. Now it had come.

It may be wondered why he did not settle down in some town, where there was a good library, and acquaintances from whom he could borrow useful books; and indeed several did venture so to hint. But his answer was simple. He had lived in the veldt all his life—up country or down, or on the road. He would feel lost if he did not wake up to hear the multifold sounds of the bush—to inhale the fresh, strong, sweet air as the sun shot up fiery over tree-fringed ridge or iron mountain top. And the life of the veldt! It had always been his life—it was too late to change now. To look round on the black wildness of those bushy kloofs, or yonder great mountain, frowning down majestically, with its mighty cliff wall shining red in the afterglow of the sunset, and to realise that he owned all this—that this fragment of splendid Nature was his property—all his own—why the realisation was sheer ecstasy. Whereby it is obvious that there was a large element of the poetic about the man.

Exchange all this for a sun-baked, dust-swept town? Not he. It had even been hinted to him by well meaning acquaintances—mostly of the feminine persuasion—that there was his daughter to be considered, that life alone in a wild and sparsely colonised part of the country was rather a dull life for a girl. This was certainly touching him on a susceptible point, but to such representations he would reply that even up-to-date fathers were entitled to some consideration—that even they could not be required to take a back seat in every question. For the rest there was nothing he denied his daughter which by any possibility he could procure for her; moreover she could have as many friends to stay with her as the house would hold, and for as long as she chose. But somehow she seldom had any. For some reason or other they rarely came. This, however, did not trouble Edala in the least. She was not particularly fond of other girls. She was too individual for most girls of her age. They could not quite make her out. And—there may have been another reason.

But on this score Edala herself never complained. Her occupations and amusements filled up all her time, and she never felt lonely. She could shoot, too, and sometimes, when out with her father, would turn over a big bushbuck ram streaking across a small open space, as neatly as he could himself. This was only when they were alone together. If there was a regular hunt she never took part in it.

Her ambition Was to become an art student, at one of the great centres. She firmly believed in her own capabilities in that line. Her father had taken her to Europe on purpose to show her all that was best of the kind, and she had come back more dissatisfied than ever. She wanted to join the regular ranks—to start at the bottom of the ladder. But Michael Thornhill had a will of his own.

“Patience, dear,” he would say. “You have plenty of time before you, and I don’t see the fun of raising children to have them desert me just when I want them most.”

Edala had not taken the remark in good part. She had flashed forth that it was no good having anything in one, if one was to be stuck away on a Natal farm all one’s life with no opportunity of bringing it out. Her father shook his head sadly.

“There may come a day when you will be glad to find yourself back on that same Natal farm,” he said. Then he went out.

Of this he was thinking as he sat in his library a few mornings after Elvesdon’s timely appearance. Why now should he not let her have her way? Why should he not send her to Europe as she wished? He himself could sell or let the farm, and trek far up country on a protracted hunting expedition; for the idea of life here without Edala was not to be thought of for a moment.

There was more than a sense of thwarted ambition which came between himself and the child he idolised. The dark cloud that separated them took the form of a dead hand. Black and bitter suspicion corroded the girl’s mind, and when the consciousness of it was more especially brought home to Thornhill from time to time, the whirlwind of vengeful hate that stormed through his heart was simply inconceivable. But not towards her. It was retrospective.

Just such a paroxysm was on him now. He could not read. He gazed listlessly around at his well filled book-shelves—with their miscellaneous stock of literature—in which he took such pleasure and pride, but made no move towards disturbing their contents. A restlessness came upon him. He could not remain still. Jumping up, he put his head through the window and shouted out to the stable boy to saddle up a horse.

Edala was on the stoep as he passed out. She was putting some finishing touches to a water-colour drawing. In his then mood he did not suggest that she should accompany him; perhaps he feared the effect of a refusal or a reluctant consent.

“Are you going out, father? It’s awfully hot.”

“Yes, I’m going a short round. Back by dinner time.”

Three or four great rough-haired dogs, lying in the shade behind the stable, sprang up as the horse was led forth, whining and squirming with wild excitement at sight of the gun in their master’s hand. He, however, drove them back; he was not going to hunt, but there was always the chance of coming across unwary “vermin”—a jackal perhaps, or a *rooikat*.

The first point he made for was the scene of yesterday’s episode. As he approached it a low hum of voices was borne to his ears. Some half dozen natives stood clustered round the spot. The carcase of Elvesdon’s horse lay swollen and distended, tainting the air, and beside it the great snake. But on the latter was their attention concentrated.

“*Whau*! but that was the very king of serpents,” one of them was saying. “I, who am old, have never seen one like it—no never.”

“M-m!” hummed his hearers. “*Nkose*!”

This in respectful greeting as they became aware of the new arrival’s presence. He acknowledged it.

“I, who am old, have never seen one like it, *impela*,” repeated the speaker. “*Nkose*. The snake—the king of snakes—has killed the horse, but who has killed the snake?”

“The horse,” said Thornhill. “He fell over on it and broke its back, just after it had struck him.”

“It is the horse of—of—the new magistrate—at Kwabulazi,” went on the other. “He was at my kraal just before.”

“That is so, Tongwana. Here is *gwai*,” getting out a large snuff-horn, which came in handy on such occasions.

“*Nkose*!” cried the chief, receiving it in both hands. He was an old man, with a white beard, and, of course, head-ringed. Two of the others were also ringed. As Thornhill told the story of the occurrence many were the murmurs of surprise that went up. The new magistrate at Kwabulazi was clearly no fool of a white man, and this inference impressed them greatly.

One of them, however, it did not seem to impress at all, and that was one of the ringed men. He had listened in a careless, almost contemptuous way to the narrative, uttering no remark or interjection. He was of fine stature, and unlike Tongwana and two or three of the others, wore no article of European clothing; wherein he showed taste, for the savage in his *mútya* alone looks an immeasurably finer savage than his brother clad in the same, with a super-added shirt, usually none too clean. Him Thornhill set down as a Zulu from beyond the border: but at the same time he was vaguely conscious of having seen him somewhere before.

This man now, without a word of farewell greeting, detached himself from the group, and began to walk leisurely away. Then it became noticeable that he walked with a slight limp.

“Bullet in the war of ’79 did that,” decided Thornhill grimly, as he looked after him. “Wonder if he’ll compete for another distinguishing mark of the same kind before long.” Then aloud—

“Who is he?”

They looked at each other.

“He is a stranger, *Nkose*,” answered Tongwana with a whimsical smile. “From the other side?”

“*E-hé*.”

“Yet it seems I have seen him before. No matter. For the rest, *amadoda*, the house is very near and contains that which is good to eat and drink. The *Inkosazana* (lit. Little Chieftainess) is there, and will see to that. I return soon myself. *Hambani gahle*!”

They were delighted, and chorussed a sonorous farewell. Thornhill made it a rule to treat his native neighbours on liberal and friendly terms, consequently the relations between them were of the best. None of his stock was ever missing nor did he ever lack farm servants. Incidentally, some of his white neighbours disagreed with him on the point. They said he was spoiling the natives. But, out of the plenitude of his experience he had found it a policy that paid.

Now, when after a few minutes’ ride along the bush track he overtook the stranger, that worthy’s demeanour towards himself constituted quite an unusual experience. It was off-hand, to say the least of it, almost offensive.

“May I not have first right to ride along the paths on my own farm?” began Thornhill, banteringly. For the path here was exceedingly narrow with high thick bush on either hand, and the other showed not the least anxiety to make way for him, but strode on as though there was no one within a hundred miles. It was all Thornhill could do to restrain himself from bringing down the butt of his gun hard and violently between the broad, shining shoulders. It was, if possible, more difficult still, as the stranger replied, without halting or even looking back:

“Patience, Inqoto. The path is not wide enough for two.”

This *gazula*—or addressing a white man familiarly by his native name, even though that name in this instance was a complimentary one, referring to decisiveness of character—would have led then and there to a breach of the peace on the part of most white men, especially as the tone of the speaker bordered on the contemptuous. This one only waxed coldly sarcastic.

“I see you, King. *Bayéte*, King of the Heavens and the world! Elephant! Lion! Divider of the Sun! Shaker of the Earth!” he went on, giving the other half a dozen more titles of royal *sibongo. “Whau*! It is truly the Great Great One come to life again, for who else in these times would walk about my farm armed with assegais?”

The path had now widened out. The savage halted and stepped aside.

“Do you know me, Inqoto?” he said. “Have you ever seen me before?”

“Surely. O Elephant. In another world,” came the ready and sarcastic reply.

“M-m! In another world. But it is in this world you shall see me again, Inqoto. Ah, ah! In this world. *Hamba gahle*!”

With which farewell, insolently sneering, the speaker turned and strolled leisurely away.

Chapter Four.

The Magistracy at Kwabulazi.

The magistracy buildings at Kwabulazi, consisted of a roughly built thatched bungalow, a red brick oblong which was the Court house, and various groups of native huts which served to house the other Court officials—white and coloured—and the handful of mounted Police permanently quartered there. Another red brick structure represented the Post and Telegraph Office. The place was situated at the foot of a great mountain whose wooded slopes made, scenically, a fine background. In front the veldt rolled gently away; quite open, and sparsely dotted with mimosa; and for miles around, at intervals, rose the smoke of native kraals; for this was an important location.

Within the red brick oblong mentioned above Elvesdon sat, administering justice. There was not much to administer that day, for the cases before him involved the settlement of a series of the most petty and trivial disputes relating to cattle or other property, protracted beyond about five times their due length, as the way is with natives once they get to law. Beyond the parties concerned there was no audience to speak of. Three or four old ringed men, squatted in a corner on the floor, drowsed and blinked through the proceedings; while now and again two or three natives would enter noiselessly, listen for a few minutes and then as noiselessly depart.

The morning was drawing to an end, for which Elvesdon was not sorry. It was very hot, and the Court room was becoming unpleasantly redolent of native humanity. He was about to adjourn, when he became aware of the entrance of somebody. Looking up he beheld Thornhill.

The latter stood leaning against the wall just inside the door. Elvesdon, while putting three or four final questions to a voluble and perspiring witness, found himself wondering whether Thornhill was alone, or whether his daughter, preferring the shade and open air to the heat and stuffiness of the Court room, was waiting for him outside. So he sent down the witness and adjourned the Court straight away.

Thornhill crossed the room to shake hands with the clerk, whom he knew, and who was gathering up his papers, then he adjourned to the magistrate's office.

Thither Elvesdon had gone straight on leaving the bench. If he had one little weakness it was—well, a very adequate sense of his official position, but only when not off duty—and this weakness suggested to him that it might impress the other more if he received him there, instead of going forward to greet him in the emptying Court room. As a matter of fact Elvesdon did show to advantage to the accompaniment of a tinge of officialdom, but, we are careful to emphasise, only at the proper time and place.

"Come in," he called out in response to a knock. "Ah, Mr Thornhill, I'm so glad to see you," and there was no official stiffness now about his tone or his handshake. "Anything I can do for you? But unless it's of first-rate importance it'll keep till after lunch, which you are going to take with me. So let's go and get it."

They went out into the fierce noontide glare, but even it was an improvement after the stuffiness within. Elvesdon called to a native constable to take Thornhill's horse, and wondered if he felt a twinge of disappointment as he saw there was only one horse to be taken care of. Groups of natives squatting about in the shade, fighting all the points of evidence over again, saluted as they passed.

The clerk joined them at table. He was a thick-set stolid youth, with a shock of light hair, and a countenance wooden and mask-like; without much conversational ability, but a first-rate man at his work. For living purposes, he inhabited a couple of native huts, but messed with his official chief: which in many cases was a bore, as the latter subsequently explained to Thornhill; but Prior had had the same arrangement with the former man, and he couldn't turn the poor devil out to feed by himself, which in that eventuality he would have had to do. Besides, he was a very decent fellow even if a bit heavy on hand.

During lunch they talked about sport, and the state of the country, and ordinary things. Immediately afterwards the clerk went out.

"Well, I'm getting firm into the saddle here, you see," said Elvesdon, as they lit their pipes. "And I'm not sure that the situation isn't going to turn out interesting."

"Think so? Look here, I haven't exactly come to look you up officially, still as my round took me rather near Kwabulazi, I thought I'd give you a look in and mention a little matter."

"Well whatever the 'little matter' may be, I'm glad it had that effect. And now what is it?"

Thornhill told him about the meeting with Tongwana and his people, and the mysterious stranger who was in their company. Told him too of the outrageous impudence of the man in refusing to get out of the way for him.

"It was all I could do to keep my hands off him," he said. "Nothing but the thought that he'd certainly use his assegais and I should have to shoot him dead in self defence kept me from pounding him between the shoulders with the butt of the gun as he swaggered along."

"And this was quite near your house, you say?"

"Yes. Right bang on the spot where you so pluckily saved my girl's life, Elvesdon. I've heard all full details now."

Elvesdon reddened slightly, but he was secretly pleased.

"Oh, come now," he protested. "I don't know that it requires much pluck to crack a whip at a snake. And if it comes to that, I think it was your daughter who showed the pluck. I told her to cut and run while I drew the brute off. D'you think she would? Not a bit of it. She had picked up a whacking big stone and was standing there ready to heave it. I tell you it was a magnificent sight. Suggested a sort of classical heroine up-to-date. But—I say. Do you think it's altogether safe for a girl to go about so much alone round here?"

"Round here I do. The people have known her since she was a little thing and take a sort of proprietary interest in her. For the rest, she can use a six shooter—and that quickly and straight. I taught her."

Elvesdon was on the point of observing that she was not provided with that opportune weapon at the critical moment of a few days previous, but an instinctive warning that it might seem a little too much like taking the other to task caused him to refrain. But he said:

"What of that swaggering impudent swine we were talking about? Supposing he were to pay your place a visit in your absence?"

"There are four great *kwai* dogs who'd pull down the devil himself at a word from either of us—you saw them, Elvesdon. As an alternative Edala would drill him through and through—with no toy pistol, mind you, but real business-like lead, if he made the slightest act of aggression. Besides, a Zulu from beyond the river, and a head-ringed one at that,

wouldn't. So, you see, she's pretty safe."

"Oh, he's a Zulu from beyond the river, is he?"

"So Tongwana said. And he looked like one."

"And he was carrying assegais?"

"Rather. Two small ones and a big *umkonto*. I chaffed him, gave him royal *sibongo*, and it made him mad. You know, Elvesdon, how these chaps hate being chaffed."

"Of course. But I think I'll have this one looked after. Anyway he's no business cutting about with assegais. I don't want to arrest him though, if it can possibly be avoided. That sort of thing only irritates the others, and does no good, unless of course you can prove anything distinctly against them; which, just now, you hardly ever can." Then, raising his voice, "*Wa, Teliso*!"

In obedience to the shout a man came forward, emerging from behind the Court house. He was a native detective attached to the magistracy. Saluting, he stood and awaited orders.

Then those three—the two white men seated on the steps of the stoep—held a quarter of an hour's conference, speaking rapidly, and in the vernacular. Teliso thought he knew the stranger. His name? No, that he could not say—as a matter of fact he knew it perfectly. He might be able to find it out—given every facility. Was he from beyond the border, and if so who was his chief? Of this too, Teliso professed ignorance, though he could find out, given time and every facility. Here likewise, he was in a position to give perfectly correct answers then and there, but Teliso was in his humble way a Government official, and thoroughly understood the art of "magnifying his office." He was not going to adopt any such undignified course of procedure as to give a direct answer. He looked forward to being sent on a secret mission, with many days of pleasant sojourn among the kraals of his countrymen, well regaled with plenty of beef and beer, and—other things. So he reiterated his ability to find out all about the stranger if entrusted with that delicate errand. At that, for the time, he was dismissed.

"What sort of chap's that, Elvesdon?" said Thornhill re-lighting his pipe.

"Haven't tried him yet. Why?"

"You may have to 'try' him yet, in another sense," returned Thornhill, drily, shading the third match with his hand. "Look here. I don't want to seem to run your show for you, but I've been here a goodish while, and I *hear* things. If you'll take a tip from me—you're not obliged to, you know—you won't trust everything to Teliso. Don't mind my saying that?"

"Certainly not. In fact, I'm obliged to you. To my mind if there's anything idiotic in the world it's making light of the experience of men of experience."

"Well, you can always command mine—on the quiet of course—and I shan't be in the least put out if you don't agree with it. Now I can see you're longing to get back to your job, so I'll saddle up."

"Er—the fact is, I've got a lot of these tin-pot cases to worry through—so I'll get you to excuse me. By the way, Thornhill, I'm going to take you at your word, and invade you on Sunday. I'm beastly all-by-myself here when there's no work. How does that pan out?"

"Any number of ounces to the ton. Come as early as you like, and, there's a bed for you, if you don't want to get back here till next morning. Good Lord, Elvesdon, when I think of—"

"But, don't 'think of'," interrupted the other, hurriedly. "Very well. So long—till Sunday."

Thornhill's horse had been brought round, and as he got into the saddle Elvesdon turned away to the Court house. And the latter as he got there, felt as if he was treading on air. Yet why should he—why the devil should he?—he kept unconsciously asking himself.

Thornhill, passing the clerk's quarters, saw the latter just coming out.

"Hallo, Prior!" he hailed. "Good-bye, I'm off."

The young man came over to him.

"Good-bye, Mr Thornhill," he said. "You don't often look us up in these days."

"You don't often look me up, Prior, for the matter of that."

"Oh well, Mr Thornhill," said the other shamefacedly. "I should like to, you know. Er—may I come and try for a bushbuck someday?"

"Why of course you may, man, any mortal time you feel inclined, or can. By the way, how do you like your new chief?"

"No end. He's—er—he's such a gentleman."

There was a world of admiration—of hero worship in the young man's tone, and colonial youth is by no means prone to such.

"Ah," replied Thornhill. "Well, I agree with you, Prior. Good-bye."

Chapter Five.

The Ethiopian Emissary.

The kraals of the chief, Babatyana, lay sleeping. So brilliant was this starlight, however, that the yellow domes of the thatch huts could be distinguished from the ridge—even counted. The latter operation would have resulted in the discovery that the collection of kraals, dotted along the wide, bushy valley, numbered among them some three hundred huts; but these, of course, represented only a section of the tribe over which Babatyana was chief.

It is a strange sight that of a large, sleeping kraal—or a number of them, in the wizard hush and calm beauty of an African night. It is so in harmony with setting and surrounding; the starlight showing up the ghostly loom of mountain, or suggesting the weird mystery of dark wilderness lying beneath, where deadly things creep and lurk. And then, these human habitations, themselves constructed of the grass which springs up around them, of the very thorns which impede the progress of their denizens, they stand, in primitive symmetry—not rude, because that which is circular is nothing if not symmetrical—lying there in their pathetic insignificance under the vast height of Heaven's vault. And the said denizens sleeping there! Hopes and fears, virtues and vices; capacity for intrigue, cupidity; redeeming traits, human weaknesses—all the same, whether sleeping within the kraal of the savage to the lullaby of the voices of prowling creatures of the night, or in stately mansion amid the roar and rattle of the metropolis of the world. All the same—all, all!

The air is fresh and sweet with the fragrance of flowering shrubs, is faintly melodious with the ghostly whistle of circling plover invisible overhead. The cry of a jackal rings out from the hillside, receding further and further, to be answered again from another point in the misty gloom—then the bark of a restless dog in some slumbering kraal beneath. Or the hoot of a night bird hawking above the silent expanse, and the droning boom of a great beetle mingling with the shrill, whistling voice of tree frogs. Man is silent, but Nature never.

Along the ridge overlooking Babatyana's kraals a dusty waggon road winds like a riband, distinguishable from the darker veldt in the starlight. It follows the apex of the ridge, and is just the place to avoid during those dry thunder-storms which in Natal seem to hunt in couples nearly every day during the hot months. Then the wayfarer may well leave the highway, and dive down into one of the bushy kloofs on either side, and wait until the turmoil passes; for the lightning will strike down upon that high, exposed pathway, every sheeting flash not much less dangerous than a shell from hostile artillery.

To-night, however, the elements are at peace, but man is represented by a single unit.

Natives, as a rule, are not given to wandering about alone at night, but this one is obviously here with a purpose. Like a statue he stands, gazing down the road as though on the look-out for something or somebody. He is a tall man, and ringed: and as he wraps his blanket closer around him—for there is a tinge of chill in the night air—and takes a few paces, it might be seen that he walks with a slight limp.

Another hour goes by, and still he stands, ever watchful, and suffering nothing to escape him, for the patience of the savage is inexhaustible. And now a glow suffuses the far horizon, widening and brightening; then the broad disc of a full moon soars redly aloft, and lo, the land is steeped in subdued unearthly light—plain, and ridge, and distant mountain, all stand revealed; and the clusters of domed huts in the broad valley beneath show out sharply defined. But these are no longer silent. First a low, long-drawn wail, then another and another from different points, culminating in still more drawn out howls, and the dismal sounds echo through the silence in weird cadence. Half the curs in the slumbering kraals are baying the newly risen moon.

Her light falls full upon the watcher, throwing out his tall form into statuesque relief, and glinting on the polished shine of his head-ring. But for the limp his gait as he slowly paces up and down would be a stately one. Even then there is an unconscious dignity about the man, as with head held proudly aloft, he gazes out over the moonlit expanse, and it is the dignity of a natural ruler of men.

Suddenly he stops short in his walk, and stands, listening intently. You or I could have heard nothing, but he can, and what he hears is the sound of hoof-strokes.

Down the road now he takes his way, walking rapidly, and soon the hoof-strokes draw very near indeed. Then he stops, and starts singing to himself in a low, melodious croon.

The horseman appears in sight, advancing at a pace that is half jog-trot, half canter. The moonlight reveals a thick-set, burly figure, encased in a suit of clerical black. But the face which now shows between the bow of the white "choker" and the wide-awake hat is not many shades lighter than the whole get-up.

"*Saku bona, Mfundisi*," is the greeting of the watcher, whose singing, purposely turned on to guard against the horse shying or stampeding at the sudden appearance of anything living, has had that effect.

"*Yeh-bo*," answered the other. "Do I see Manamandhla, the Zulu?"

"Of the People of the Heavens am I, *Umfundisi*," was the reply, but the tone in which the speaker enunciates the word "Umfundisi"—which means "teacher" or "missionary"—contains a very thinly veiled sneer. "The people down there have been awaiting you long."

"In the Cause, brother, in our holy Cause, no man's time is his own," answered the horseman, sanctimoniously. "*Whau*! have not I been inoculating its sacred principles into the people at Ncapele's kraal—or striving to, for Ncapele is old, and when a man is old enthusiasm is dead within him. It is the young whom we have to teach. Wherefore I could not turn my back upon him too soon."

The speaker did not think it necessary to explain that the undue time it had taken to roast the succulent young goat which Ncapele had caused to be slaughtered for his refection had had anything to do with the lateness of his arrival. For that chief, although "a heathen man," was not unmindful of the duties of hospitality. Which definition applied equally to Manamandhla the Zulu; wherefore the attitude of that fine savage towards the smug preacher to whom he had undertaken the office of guide, was one of ill-concealed contempt.

"And the people—the people of Babatyana," went on the latter, "are they ready to hear the good news—the glorious gospel of light and freedom?"

“They are ready,” answered Manamandhla, who was striding beside the other, easily keeping pace with the horse. “They are ready—ah-ah—very ready.”

“That is well—very well.”

Here was an edifying picture, was it not, this zealous missionary, labouring day and night to spread the good news among the benighted heathen, and he one of their own colour? They, too, waiting to welcome him, to give up their night’s rest even, in order to hang upon his words—truly a heart-stirring picture, was it not?

We shall see.

Guided by Manamandhla by short cuts across the veldt, the traveller was not long in reaching his destination. His arrival had been momentarily expected, and with the first distant sounds of his horse’s hoofs, the carcase of a recently slaughtered goat had been quartered up and placed upon a fire of glowing embers. The preacher rubbed his fat hands together with anticipatory delight as his broad nostrils snuffed from afar the savoury odour of the roast.

“Ah brother, the people are ever hospitable to those who bring them tidings of the Cause,” he remarked, complacently.

“And to those who do not,” rejoined the Zulu.

Assuredly the emissary had no reason to complain of the substantial nature of his reception, and so decided that worthy himself, as he sat within the chief’s hut, tearing the juicy meat from the ribs with his teeth, and washing it down with huge draughts from the bowls of *tywala* which had been brought in. Ah, it was good to live like this. Meat—everywhere—plenty of it, wherever he went—meat—fresh, and succulent and juicy, as different as day from night to the dried up, tasteless, insipid stuff to which he sat down when in civilisation. *Tywala* too—newly brewed, humming, and, above all, plentiful. Yes, it was good! He had taken off his black coat and waistcoat, mainly with the object of preserving them from grease. Indeed had he followed his own inclination it is far from certain that he would not have taken off everything else. It was a disgusting spectacle, this fat, smug, black preacher, sitting there in his shirt, his white choker all awry, tearing at the steaming bones like a dog, his face and hands smeared with grease; a revolting sight, immeasurably more so than that of the ring of unclothed savages who were his entertainers and fellow feasters.

Nothing was heard but the champ of hungry jaws. Such a serious matter as eating must not be interfered with by conversation. At last there was very little left of the carcase of the goat but the bones, and one by one the feasters dropped out and leaned back against the walls of the hut.

The latter was lighted by two candles stuck in bottle necks, a device learned from the white man. Babatyana and several others started pipes, also an institution learned from the white man. But Manamandhla, the conservative Zulu, confined himself to the contents of his snuff-horn. Secretly, in his heart of hearts, he held his entertainers in some degree of contempt, as became one of the royal race. Babatyana was an influential chief, but only so by favour of the whites. What was he but a Kafula (term of contempt used by Zulus for Natal natives)? But Manamandhla was far too shrewd to impair the success of his mission by suffering any of his secret feelings to appear.

All the same, although he lived on the wrong side of the river from the other’s point of view, there was very little admixture of baser blood in Babatyana’s system. His father had been a Zulu of pure blood and his mother very nearly so. They had crossed into Natal as refugees, after Nongalaza defeated Dingane, and had there remained. Seen in the dim light of the candles, Babatyana was an elderly man, with a shrewd, lined face; in fact there was no perceptible difference in his aspect or bearing from that of those who affected to despise him. Now he turned to his guest.

“The news, brother, what is it?”

“The news? *Au*! it is great. Everywhere we have our emissaries; everywhere the people are listening. They are tired of being dogs to the whites: tired of having to send their children away to work, so as to find money to pay the whites. Soon our plan of deliverance will be complete, soon when we have brought home universal brotherhood to those of one colour—and, brothers, the time is now very near.”

“And that time—when it comes—who will lead the people, *Umfundisi*?” asked an old head-ringed man who was seated next to the chief.

“The leader will be found,” was the ready answer. “It may be that he is found—already found.”

“Is he found on this side of the river or on the other?” went on the old man, who was inclined to “heckle” the visitor.

“That, as yet, is dark. But—he is found.”

A murmur went round the group. They were becoming interested. Only Manamandhla remained perfectly impassive. He made no remarks and asked no questions.

The conversation ran on in subdued tones, which however grew more and more animated. The emissary was glib of tongue and knew how to hold his audience. At last Babatyana said:

“It sounds well, Jobo. Now is the time to tell it—or some of it—to the people outside. They wait to hear.”

The Rev. Job Magwegwe—by the way the name by which the chief had addressed him was a corruption of his “Christiana” name—was an educated Fingo, hailing from the Cape Colony, where he had been trained for a missionary, and finally became a qualified minister in one of the more important sects whose activity lay in that direction. But he promptly saw that in the capacity of missionary he was going to prove a failure. Those of his own colour openly scoffed at him. What could he teach them, they asked? He was one of themselves, his father was So-and-So—and no better than any of them. The whites could teach them things, but a black man could not teach a black man anything. And so on.

But luck befriended the Rev. Job. The Ethiopian movement had just come into being, and here he saw his chance. There was more to be made by going about among distant races where his origin was not known, living on the fat of the land, and preaching a visionary deliverance from imaginary evils to those well attuned to listen, than staying at home,

striving to drill into a contemptuous audience the “tenets” of a dry-as-dust and very defective form of Christianity. So he promptly migrated to Natal, and being a plausible, smooth-tongued rogue soon found himself in clover, in the official capacity of an accredited emissary of the “Ethiopian Church,” whose mission it was to instil in the native mind the high-sounding doctrine of “Africa for its natives.”

Chapter Six.

A Native Utopia.

The open space outside the kraal was thronged. Hundreds had collected in obedience to the word of the chief. More were still coming in, and the preacher rubbed his fat hands together with smug complacency. Your educated native is nothing if not conceited, and the Rev. Job Magwegwe was no exception to this rule. Here was an audience for him; a noble audience, and, withal an appreciative one.

His appearance was greeted by a deep murmur from the expectant crowd, which at once disposed itself to listen. He had resumed his black coat and waistcoat and settled his white choker; he was not going to omit any accessory to his clerical dignity if he knew it.

He led off with a long prayer, to which most of those present listened with ill-concealed boredom, but the smug self-conceit of the man had captured his better judgment, and he was only brought up by Babatyana remarking in an audible aside that the people had not assembled to take part in a prayer meeting but to hear the news. So he took the hint and started his address.

He began by sketching the history of the people, within their own time. Since the days of the old wars they had increased immensely and were still increasing, so that soon the land would not be able to hold its population. It would hold them but for the white man. The white man. But was this the white man’s land? Did Nkulunkulu (Literally, “The Great Guest.” one of the names for the Deity) give him this land? No. The white man came over the sea in ships and took it. Nkulunkulu said “This is the black man’s land and here have I placed him,” yet the white man took it. The whites came over in small numbers, then more. But even now what were their numbers? Why, a handful, a mere handful. The whites who ruled them could live in an ostrich’s nest, when compared to the blacks whom they had dispossessed. And why had they been able to dispossess them? Because there was no unity among the native nations. Each was jealous of the other and none could combine. The time, however, was at hand when these dissensions should be of the past; when all the native nations should unite, when their native land should belong to them and not to the white man, when the Amazulu and the Basutu, the tribes in Natal and the Amampondo and the Amaxosa should all possess their own again, should all dwell together as brothers, none lording it over the other, should dwell together in peace and unity in the land which Nkulunkulu had given to them—to them and not to the white man.

The preacher was working himself up to a pitch of eloquence that impressed his audience—and a native orator can be very eloquent indeed. Murmurs of applause greeted his periods, and now as he paused to wipe his clammy forehead with the white handkerchief of civilisation, these grew quite tumultuous. Only Manamandhla the Zulu kept saturnine silence. He knew who, in this wonderful brotherhood of equality, was going to have the upper hand, and any idea to the contrary moved him to mirth, as too absurd to be worthy of a moment’s consideration.

But the ways of Nkulunkulu—went on the preacher unctuously—though sometimes slow were always sure, and now He had revealed His will to some who had come across great distances of sea to bring it to them; not white men but black like themselves. These had come hither with a message of deliverance to all the dark races, and he himself was a humble mouthpiece of such. But there were many such mouthpieces. They were everywhere, and were being heard gladly. Who could refuse to hear them? The people of this land were being oppressed and trampled upon; and so it was wherever the white man set down his foot. Let them look at the past. Where were the nations that dwelt proudly in their own lands? Gone, utterly gone, or slaves to the white man; who planted his own laws upon them and punished them heavily if they did not obey.

The crafty rascal however found it convenient to ignore the fact that the worst that the white man had ever done to them was a joke when compared with the treatment formerly meted out to the black man by his brother black. Then he proceeded to quote from the Scriptures.

There was a fair sprinkling of *amakolwa* among his audience, i.e. those who had been converted to Christianity—of a sort—and these now listened with renewed zest. They would appreciate his arguments, and afterwards make them plain to their fellow countrymen not so privileged, in their discussions from kraal to kraal.

He deftly quoted from the history of the Israelites, and their deliverance from the Egyptian bondage, making out that these were in similar bondage, that the promises made to Israel were given to them too. He went further. He even assured them that they were offshoots of Israel, cleverly citing numbers of their national and tribal customs, some obsolete but many still in force, which exactly corresponded with the precepts of the Mosaic law. The great book of the white men which revealed the will of Nkulunkulu, he declared, was wrongly so called, in that it was not revealed to white men at all, but to dark men. The whites had stolen it, as they stole everything.

A deep bass hum of applause broke from his audience. It was a strange scene. The vast assemblage held spellbound, the preacher, arrayed as one who preaches the gospel of peace, instead, swaying this multitude of dark savages with the gospel of revolt and war, and all the ruthless atrocity of horror which such represents. All spellbound there in the clear light of the broad moon, flooding down upon ridge and valley, and loom of mountain misty against the stars.

For upwards of another hour the preacher went on, the entranced audience drinking in every word. They could have listened to him all night, but he had too much natural astuteness to risk repeating himself.

“Brothers,” he concluded, “I have shown you your bondage. You are increasing, as the chosen people of old, and the more you are increasing the more you have to pay in taxes to the white man; the more you have to submit to his slave-imposing laws. You may say—as many have said—‘What can we do? The white man has cannon and we have the assegai, what chance then have we?’ But even the white man’s cannon is not able to go everywhere, and even if it could, there is a more powerful weapon still. There are those who rule the whites who will lift up a voice in your behalf. Who will say—‘Stop. This has gone far enough. We will not have our black brethren butchered solely because they are black.’ I know what I say, for I have seen and talked with such. ‘Stop,’ they will say. ‘Bloodshed must cease.’ And the nation will approve because war costs money, and white people are no fonder of having to pay than are black people. Then when

their fighting men are withdrawn—then we will rise in our might, in one overwhelming black wave, and sweep all these whites back into the sea, whence they came. Be patient. You will have 'the word' in good time and that time soon. I have shown you your bondage, now I am showing you your way out, for it is the will of Nkulunkulu. I have done."

A deep murmur arose. The vast multitude, moved to the core, took some time to realise that the proceedings were over. Then it broke up. Many remained on the ground, squatting in groups, eagerly discussing the points put forward; others broke up, and in twos or threes, or singly, departed for their homes. Among the latter was Teliso the native detective.

Not all, however, so went. There was a disposition among some of the headmen to probe further the speaker's statements. Who were these rulers among the Amangisi (English) who would call upon their countrymen to stop the war? enquired the old man who had shown a disposition to heckle the preacher in Babatyana's hut. He was old, but he had never heard of the chiefs of any people who would seek to turn that people back in the moment of their victory. *Whau*! this was wonderful news, but—who were they?

"M-m! Who are they?" hummed the others. But the Rev. Job was not nonplussed.

"They are among the head indunas of the nation," he replied. "The ways of the white man are not as our ways, else that which I have been telling you would seem so much childish folly. Brothers, you will remember how the indunas of the Amangisi treated the Amabuna (Boers) when they had conquered them many years ago. They gave them back all their lands, and went away. They lost hundreds and hundreds of fighting men at the hands of the Amabuna, yet they gave them back all their lands, nor did they even exact any tribute. And what happened yesterday? After three years of fighting, wherein thousands and thousands of Amangisi were slain, did they not pay the Amabuna largely to make peace? Are they not preparing even now to give them back their lands once more? *Whau*! And even so will they deal with us."

"And the King?" put in Babatyana with his head on one side. "The King of the Amangisi? What will he do with such indunas as they?"

"He will do as his indunas advise, brother, for such is the way with the Amangisi."

"A king who is ruled by his indunas is as a dog that is wagged by its tail. U' Tshaka!" returned Baba tyana vehemently, swearing by the name of the great Zulu. And the others murmured assent.

"Yet it is so, *amadoda*. I, who have seen, I, who know, tell you so."

And the confidence with which the speaker declared this, the certainty in his whole manner and look, staggered the doubters. In such wise was the venom drop injected by these snakes in the grass fostered and educated all unknowingly by the agencies of philanthropy and civilisation.

"Great news have we heard this night, brothers. But, even though we drive the Amangisi out, have we not to reckon with the Amabuna? They are terrible fighters. Not all the tribes in the world could drive *them* out, *impela*!"

The speaker was Teliso, who had joined a group which was discussing what they had heard.

"Not all the tribes in the world!" repeated one, derisively. "Hear that!"

"Even that Lion, Dingane, had to flee before them," urged the detective.

"Ha! Was there not another Lion of Zulu that roared louder, and divided the nation? But for this they had been driven out themselves."

"M-m!" hummed another. "That is as the preacher says. Combine—do not divide."

"And this preacher—will he speak again here?" asked Teliso innocently.

"Not here. At Nteseni's Great Place. There will he speak. But many will go from here to listen."

The detective was on the point of asking whether he was likely to cross to the other side, and talk with the chiefs in Zululand, but judged it wise not to seem too curious. He could find that out later, for he had made up his mind to be one of those who should go on from here to Nteseni's Great Place.

For Teliso was having a good time. There had been a fair season and food was plentiful. The people were hospitable; and he was just as fond of meat and *tywala* as any other native. He was faithful to his employers, the Government, according to his lights, but his pay was not on a luxurious scale, and the risks he ran were at times considerable. So he made up his mind to combine pleasure with business—to lay himself out to have a good time. And—who shall blame him?

Chapter Seven.

Of a Day of Rest.

Sunday had come round—had dawned, just such a morning as anybody could have wished, cloudless, glowing—warm of course, it would be hot in an hour or so, but Elvesdon, like other people, was used to this at the time of year and cared not a rush for it, especially as he was dressed accordingly.

His horse was being led up and down before the stoep by his native servant. The animal was chafing impatiently as though aware that it was bound for its old home. It was the horse that Thornhill had pressed upon his acceptance, and somehow Elvesdon could not help wishing that he had not. The animal was a fine, useful, well-looking beast—this he fully appreciated; but somehow he could not shake off the idea that it was a sort of compensation for what he had been able—privileged—to do, and this idea he did not like in the least.

Well, after all, it was a mistake to be too thin-skinned, he decided. Probably the donor did not look at it in that light at all. At any rate he was going to put in a long, enjoyable day in the company of the said donor—and in that of somebody else; so, in the best of spirits, he raised the stirrups by a hole or two and swung himself into the saddle.

"So long, Prior," he called out to the clerk, who was standing by, watching his departure. "I may or may not be back to-night, but in any case shall be here in the morning in time to open as usual."

"All right, sir. So long."

The young man gazed after him, perhaps a trifle wistfully. The day would be a bit dull without him. He had grown to like his new chief more than a little, as we heard him admit to Thornhill in no uncertain tones, and enjoyed his conversation. Well, he would get through the day as he had got through so many other Sundays—taking it thoroughly easy; with a pipe, and the last illustrated papers out from England and a magazine or two: then a snooze in the heat of the afternoon, and perhaps a smoke and chat with the sergeant of Mounted Police. And he was used to it.

Elvesdon rode on, his pulses keeping pace with every elastic bound of his steed. He was in the very heyday of his prime, and in the full health and strength of his physical being rejoiced in the sheer joy of living. Higher and higher mounted the flaming wheel of the sun above the roll of those golden plains; and sheeny winged birds, flashing from frond to frond, seemed to echo in their gladsome piping the exaltation which thrilled through his own heart. What was it that had given rise to this new exaltation, this new interest? He did not trouble to answer the mental, unformed question; he realised it, and that was sufficient.

From the open, undulating plains his way dived down suddenly, by a rocky path, into the rugged broken country where deep kloofs, dense with thick growth, fell away, their black slopes overhung perchance with craggy rock walls whose ledges gave anchor to the spiky aloe, or scarlet hung Kafferboen. Each labyrinthine defile widened out into another, or to a grassy bottom shaded by the smooth wall of a red ironstone krantz rising majestic and sheer. The chatter of monkeys skipping among the tree-tops, mingled with the clear whistle of spreeuws in the cool shade, the whole dominated by the deep, hoarse bark of the sentinel baboon, aloft among the crags, keeping wary watch upon the unseen troop digging for succulent roots on the hillside below.

On high, beyond the wildering trees cresting the ridge on the further side of the valley, a great red turret stood forth against the blue of the heavens. Elvesdon recognised that he was near the scene of the adventure, and now the deep-mouthed baying of dogs, as though suddenly roused, yet somewhat distant, showed that he was nearing his destination; for the clink of hoof-stroke, and the jingle of bit, carries far in a still, clear atmosphere and hilly country.

A rush of dogs, bellowing, open-mouthed, met him as he paced up the last slope, but their hostility died down to muttered grumblings as they recognised the horse, if not the rider, as they escorted both to the house. Thornhill came forth.

"Glad to see you," he said as they clasped hands. "Going to be hot, I think. Come inside."

Then a hail having extracted a boy, from somewhere behind the house, Ratels was taken away to be off-saddled, and was soon seen, prancing and neighing in an adjoining paddock, as though in sheer delight at finding himself at home again. Then Edala appeared. Her greeting of the visitor was perfectly frank and self possessed, but Elvesdon was surprised to find himself feeling, for the moment, a trifle disappointed that there was not a little more cordiality about it. But the straight glance of her blue eyes was charming, so too was the lift of upper lip shewing the gleam of white teeth, in her welcoming smile.

"I've kept my resolution, Mr Elvesdon," she said. "I haven't been out by myself without a shot-gun since. In fact, I believe I've caught myself almost wishing another *indhlondhlo* would show up so that I might try conclusions with him, this time not at a disadvantage."

"I wouldn't like to insure the snake, Miss Thornhill," laughed the other.

"Thanks. You know—old Tongwana was round here a day or two afterwards, and he was saying you must be *tagati* indeed to have escaped. In fact I don't think he and the others who were with him more than half swallowed what had happened—a set of unbelieving Jews."

"Well, do you know, it would make rather a tall story. It was so absolutely a case of poetic justice. I don't believe I should get more than seven people in ten to swallow it myself—and snake stories always are received with prejudice."

"Rather," said Thornhill. "And yet more than one fact I have actually known in my up-country experience would knock out anything I've ever heard, or read in fiction for sheer incredibility of coincidence."

Elvesdon pricked up his ears.

"I'd like to hear about those," he said.

"Some day perhaps," answered the other carelessly. "Edala dear, get Mr Elvesdon something after his ride. I believe he'd appreciate it, and I know I should—although I haven't had a ride. It's a 'dry' sort of morning. Then I move that we go and sit under the fig-trees, and smoke pipes."

"Carried nem. con.," pronounced Edala.

"Pipes and all—all round I mean, Miss Thornhill?" said Elvesdon.

She looked at him with a smile of half lofty merriment.

"I'm surprised at you, Mr Elvesdon. Disappointed too. Really I am. That's too thin, yet you could not resist it."

"Frankly it is," laughed the culprit. "I'm surprised at myself. Will that do?"

"This time—yes. But—" with a deprecatory shake of the golden head. "Well, let's make a move."

“This is no end of a jolly spot whereon to laze away a restful morning,” declared Elvesdon, as snugly disposed in a cane-chair he puffed out contented clouds of smoke.

“Isn’t it?” said Thornhill, who was similarly employed. “And it’s always cool here, however broiling it may be outside, unless of course there’s the hot wind on. That always rakes everything.”

Overhead the boughs of the tall fig-trees, with their wealth of broad leaves, made a most effective canopy. Behind was a high pomegranate hedge, in front young willows fringing a small runnel fed by the dam lower down, where bevies of finks fluttered in and out of their pendulous nests, making the air lively with their cheerful twitter. Glimpsed through an opening here and there the warm sun-rays shot down in golden kiss upon drooping loads of peaches and pears hanging from the fruit trees beyond.

“What’s the latest, Mr Elvesdon? Is there any fresh development in this unrest movement?”

It was Edala who spoke. Elvesdon had been contemplating her with a furtive but admiring satisfaction, as she sat there in her low chair, the gold aureole of her head resting back against her clasped hands. There was something in her every movement—her every pose—that fascinated him; yet not an atom of self-consciousness or posing was there about her. And her very attire. The well-fitting blouse of light blue, set off the blue of her eyes, the gold of her hair; the cool white skirt, from which peeped one white shoe—all, he decided, was perfect. At the question he half started.

“The latest?” he echoed. “Well, Miss Thornhill, I don’t think there is any ‘latest.’ Things are much the same as ever, and likely to remain so.”

Her eyes were full upon his face, which they seemed to be reading like an open page. She shook her head slightly.

“Ah—you are not going to tell me. You won’t say anything before me because I’m a girl. That’s what you’re thinking. Now—isn’t it?”

Elvesdon, whom we believe we have shown was as far from being a fool as the small minority of people, felt a little disconcerted, and only hoped he was not showing it. As a matter of fact that was exactly what he had been thinking. All his official instincts were dead against discussing official matters in the presence of the other sex; and the question she had asked certainly covered very official matters; far more official—even delicate—at that juncture than his light and ready answer should have led his questioner to believe. Equally, as a matter of fact, she was not deceived by its lightness and readiness for one moment. But before he could frame a second answer Thornhill came to the rescue.

“What should there be of the ‘latest,’ child?” he said, dropping a sinewy sun-browned hand caressingly upon her long slim, and yet also sun-browned one. “You shouldn’t rush Mr Elvesdon in his official capacity you know. It isn’t playing the game. Besides, it’s a sort of ‘day of rest’ remember, so we mustn’t talk shop.”

“Ah-ah-ah! That’s all very well,” she answered, with a laugh, but not wholly a mirthful one. “If you two were alone together you’d be talking no end of that very kind of shop. I know.”

Elvesdon had quite recovered his self-possession. His official susceptibilities were somewhat ruffled by the remark. It was not a question thoughtlessly put by a mere thoughtless girl. This was nothing of the kind, but a woman, with infinite capacity for thought. The question was nothing, but the manner in which the answer had been taken argued something of petulance, even obstinacy. Now the latter is not an attractive quality in the other sex, he decided, even less, if possible, than in his own.

Then he mentally damned himself for a suspicious and most ill-conditioned curmudgeon, an official prig. This girl with the thoughtful eyes, and quick, bright, intelligent mind, had asked him a mere harmless question—only for information, for she was interested in everything; not out of motives of curiosity—and lo, he had shrunk into his official shell, and had more than half snubbed her; snubbed her by implication at any rate. But—how she puzzled him. He had seen her but once before, but he had thought of her a good many more times than that. She was so totally unlike any other girl he had ever seen in his life.

“Have you been drawing much lately, Miss Thornhill?” he said, interestedly, as though to make up for his former answer. But the remark had just the opposite effect. He was ‘talking down to’ her now, Edala was thinking. Drawing, painting, singing—those were interests enough for a girl. She must not raise her eyes to weightier and more human matters. But her nature was an intensely self-concentrated one, and self-controlled.

“Oh, yes,” she answered easily, and as if the other matter had clean passed from her mind. “I’m thinking of going in for native studies. Would they catch on in Europe should you think, Mr Elvesdon?”

“They’d have the advantage of originality, at any rate,” he answered. A merry peal escaped Edala.

“What a good *official* reply,” she cried. “Never mind, Mr Elvesdon. I like it. If you had declared they could not do otherwise I don’t know what I should have thought of you, if only that never having seen a sample you couldn’t possibly know that they were any good at all.”

“Why, obviously,” rejoined Elvesdon, secretly pleased with himself for having refrained from giving utterance to a second banality. “I’m afraid I’m too old to launch out into paying compliments; and”—he added slyly—“too *official*.”

Thornhill chuckled. He, silently emitting puffs of smoke, was watching the battle of wits between the pair and keenly enjoying it. Moreover he rejoiced that Edala should have found a foeman worthy of her steel, one with whom she could sharpen wits. It would relieve the dulness of her life, render her more contented perhaps. Nor did the admiration which would now and then shine out prominently in the eyes of their visitor, when the latter was animated, and therefore off his guard, escape him. So he listened, and smoked complacently, as they branched off from one topic to another, sometimes indulging in a passage of arms, frequently agreeing enthusiastically. Yes, it was a pleasant way of getting through the morning of a “day of rest.”

Chapter Eight.

“I know what we must do this afternoon, father,” said Edala, when dinner was nearly over. “We’ll take Mr Elvesdon to the top of Sipazi.”

Elvesdon looked puzzled.

“Do you mean on to the roof, Miss Thornhill?” he said.

The girl went off into another merry peal; the point of the joke being that the farm was so named, after a certain striking mountain which stood opposite, but this their visitor did not know.

“I don’t believe you meant that seriously,” she said.

“But I did. Why not?”

“When you come to know your own district a little better, Mr Elvesdon,” she pronounced with mock severity, “you will know that that flat topped mountain over there beyond the kloof—the one with that splendid red krantz at the top—is called Sipazi-pazi, on account of the glimmer which seems to set it on fire when the sun gets on to it at a certain angle.”

“Good name that,” he answered, looking at the stately pile with renewed interest. “But then, unfortunately, I have only just come into my ‘own district’ and haven’t quite had time to ‘know’ everything.”

“Well then, this place is named after the mountain,” she went on, loftily ignoring the retort. “But the doubled word is too much of a mouthful, so we cut it down, and call both just Sipazi. In fact so do the natives themselves.”

“I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of its summit. When shall we start?”

“Oh, not yet. When it’s cooler. It doesn’t take long to go up, and the sunsets from there are simply indescribable.”

Throughout dinner Edala had seemed quite outside of herself. She had descanted volubly on all her favourite topics; had bantered, and argued, and pretended to disagree for the sake of arguing again. Her father was not a little astonished. He had never seen her as animated as this for years—certainly not since she had been grown up. Elvesdon was amusing, and talked well, but Thornhill would never have suspected him of being able to draw Edala out of her shell as he had succeeded in doing.

Dinner was over at last, and an uncommonly good one it had been; so much so as to move Elvesdon to congratulate his host on the excellence of his cook.

“Oh, he’s a coolie,” answered Thornhill. “He’s a great rascal, and was kicked out of one of the hotels in Maritzburg for boozing. I take jolly good care he gets no chance of that here, but he must have been bad if they had to get rid of him, for he *can* cook.”

(Coolie: In Natal all natives of India, of whatever occupation or profession, are so called. It is an absurd misnomer of course; about as much so as to talk about a ‘Boer Judge’ or a ‘Boer engineer’—but it sticks, and always will.)

“By Jingo he can!” assented Elvesdon emphatically. “Those sasaatjes were simply divine.”

“Mr Elvesdon clearly appreciates good ‘skoff’,” said Edala. “Great minds skip together, for so do I.”

“I appreciate good everything, I believe,” he answered as they got up, “especially good singing. Won’t you give us a song, Miss Thornhill? I haven’t heard you yet.”

“Immediately after dinner? Why, I should positively croak. No, that’s no time for vocal exercise. To-night perhaps—you will stay the night, won’t you? Well, so long. I am going to take it easy in private life until it gets cooler. Meanwhile I’ll leave you to exchange *official* news,” she added maliciously, over her shoulder.

“I can’t think what you’ve done to that child, Elvesdon,” remarked his host, when they were sitting alone together on the stoep. “I never saw her so lively before, or anything like it; certainly not since she was a little girl. Yet you managed to ‘draw’ her most effectually.”

Elvesdon was human, and at this profuse anointment of his self-esteem he mentally purred. Yet he did not know what the very deuce to answer. He could not, for instance, tell his host that this sort of life must be rather a monotonous one for a girl, and therefore anyone from outside, he supposed would make a welcome change.

“I don’t know how it was done,” he said, with a deprecatory laugh. “Your daughter evidently has very artistic instincts, Thornhill. I can’t say I have, but I’ve been a bit among people who cut in for that sort of thing, and may have absorbed some of their jargon. I suppose that is what interested her.”

“Heard any more about that suspicious stranger I came over to tell you about the other day?” said Thornhill, characteristically changing the subject without any sort of prelude.

“Yes, I have. As you supposed, he’s a Zulu from beyond the river, one of Mehlo-ka-zulu’s chief men. He’s got no business at all in these locations, but you know as well as I do that it’s sometimes sound policy to shut one eye. To interfere with him just now would do more harm than good; the tax-collecting time is coming on, and the people want smoothing down, not brushing up.”

“That’s so,” said the other, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. “Oh he belongs to Mehlo-ka-zulu does he? M’yes. Mehlo-ka-zulu’s a fine fellow but a bit of a firebrand. If anything went wrong here it wouldn’t be long before he had a finger in the pie. At least—so *I* predict.”

Thus they talked on, airing official matters even as Edala had declared they would. Elvesdon for his part rejoiced at

finding a man such as this, right at his very door, so to say; from the well of whose shrewdness and experience he could draw at will. Then they went round to the stables, and soon the slant of the sunbeams told that the heat of the day was passed.

"Well, are we ready for Sipazi? The sun is going off the valley, and we shall have it splendidly cool."

They turned. Edala was looking fresh, and even, for her, rosy, after her nap. Elvesdon almost started. This dash of colour was all that was needed to render the face absolutely a lovely one.

"Look, Mr Elvesdon," she went on. "Now is the time when the sun gets on the big krantz, and makes it gleam like fire. Look."

He did look. The majestic mountain towered up from the sombre moist depths of the now shaded valley below, its slopes striped with tongues of dark bush, shooting up to where they culminated in a sheer wall of cliff, smooth, absolutely perpendicular where not overhanging. Upon this now, the slanting rays of the westering sun were striking at an angle, and the whole face of the gigantic rock wall, scarcely less than three hundred feet sheer, was glowing and sparkling as though it had suddenly burst into flame.

"*Wo! Sipazi-pazi*!" exclaimed Edala, shading her eyes, in laughing imitation of the natives. "Now, haven't we got something to be proud of, Mr Elvesdon? Fancy owning such a fragment of the globe as that—you see, I can't help bragging about it. Now come along and let's get to the top. Here are the horses."

Those useful quadrupeds were being driven in by a mounted boy, and soon the saddles were on them and the three were in the saddles. In about half an hour they had dived down through the broad, shaded valley beneath, now delightfully cool, and stumbling up a rugged bush path had gained the tree-lined ridge, or saddle, which connected the splendid mountain with the opposite range.

"We'll leave the horses here," said Edala. "You can ride to the top by the other side but it's an awful long way round, nearly an hour, whereas here we can climb up by a cleft in the rock in about a quarter of an hour. Can you climb, Mr Elvesdon?"

"I believe I can do most things when I'm put to it."

"Well then come along," she cried, taking the lead. "There are such jolly maidenhair ferns, too, all the way up."

"I think I'll wait for you here and smoke a pipe," said Thornhill.

"No, no, father. You must come up too."

"Well, I will then. By the way Elvesdon. Take care how you move about when you're on top. There are some rock crevices there, hidden away in the long grass, and if you got into some of them we should have to send round to about ten farms before we could get hold of enough combined length of reims to get you out, even if we could then."

"By Jove, are there?"

"Never mind. I'll take care of you," called Edala. "Come on after me."

And in her lithe agility she drew herself up from rock to rock, now poising for a moment on one foot, then springing higher to another point of vantage.

The place they were now in was a very steep, chimney-like rock gully, such as would be known in Alpine parlance as a 'couloir.' To those of weak nerve or dizzily inclined heads it would have looked formidable enough, for, besides its own height, from a little way up it seemed as if it overhung the whole depth of the valley. Above, too, craggy jutting rocks, shooting forth savagely against the sky, looked as though about to fall on and overwhelm the invaders of their mountain solitude. In hard fact it was safe enough, being indeed a gigantic natural stairway thickly coated with oozy moss, while the sides were festooned with masses of beautiful maidenhair fern.

"Here we are at last," cried Edala as they gained the summit. "Confess. Doesn't this repay any amount of trouble?"

"I should think it did," answered Elvesdon, "or would, rather; for getting here has been no trouble at all."

It was as though they were poised in mid-air. Beneath, the homestead lay, like a group of tiny toy buildings. Around, everywhere billowing masses of mountain, dark recesses of forest grown kloofs, gleaming cliffs now catching the westering sun's parting kiss; the roll of the mimosa strewn plains seeming absolutely flat from this altitude. Here and there too the circle of a native kraal surmounted by its inevitable thread of blue smoke, and far-away in the distance the dim peaks of the Drakensberg range.

"Come and look over the Sipazi krantz," said Edala, at length, when the awed silence with which this stupendous panorama could not fail to strike a newcomer, had been broken.

"Look over it!" echoed Elvesdon. "Why it seems to me that the ground slopes down to its brink at a pretty steep angle. You can't lie flat there. You'd tilt over head first."

"You'll see," was the answer. And the speaker proceeded to climb down, face to the mountain, a very steep grass slope indeed, so steep as to be almost a precipice. Tough roots, however, grew here, strong enough to afford a securer hold than might have been expected; then where the slope ended she stopped. A stunted tree grew here on the very edge of the abyss, and horizontally over the same, shooting first slightly downwards and then up, the bend of its trunk forming a seat. And into this seat did the girl by a deft movement, and without the slightest hesitation, quickly glide.

"This is how you look over the Sipazi krantz," she laughed up at him, her blue eyes dancing. "It's the only way in which you can look over it at all. *What* a drop!"

Holding on to the bough above her shoulder with one hand she sat there, gazing down, her feet dangling over the

ghastly abyss. Elvesdon seemed to feel his blood freeze within him, and his knees knocked together. Even the tree shook and trembled beneath her weight.

“Isn’t it rather dangerous?” he called out, striving to master the tremulous anxiety of his voice. “The tree might give way, you know.”

“It never has yet, which of course is not to say it never will—as you were about to remark,” she laughed back. “Well, I’ll come up.”

“Yes do,” he said, bending over the brow of the grass-roll as though to help her. But she needed no help. She sprang up, lithe, agile as a cat, and in a moment was beside him.

“Would you like to try it?” she said eagerly, as if the feat was the most ordinary one in the world. “Would you like to look over Sipazi? I can tell you it’s worth it. It feels like flying. But don’t if you think you can’t,” she added, quick to take in the not to be concealed momentary hesitation.

That challenge settled it; yet the words were not meant as a challenge at all, but as sheer practical warning. She would not have thought an atom the worse of him if he had laughingly declined, but Elvesdon did not know this. Was he going to shrink from a feat which a girl could perform—had often performed? Not he.

“Yes. I think I should,” he answered. “I should like to be able to brag of having looked over Sipazi.”

Yet as he let himself down over the grass and root-hung brow which led to the actual brink, he owned to himself that by no possibility could he ever tell a bigger he, and further, that at that moment he would cheerfully have forfeited a year’s pay to find himself standing safe and sound on the summit again. Well, he would not look down. He would get through the performance as quickly as possible, and return.

He was out on the tree, grasping the branch her hand had held on by. Yet why did the confounded trunk tremble and sway so, and—horror! it seemed to be giving way, actually sinking under him. The ghastly thought darted through his mind that there was all the difference in their weight—that that which would carry her would break down with him. His nerve was tottering. His face grew icy cold, and the hand which held the bough trembled violently. He was perched over that awful height even as she had been. He was not unused to heights, but to be suspended thus between heaven and earth in mid-air—no, to that he was not used. Beneath him the face of the great rock wall sloped away *inwards*. Anyone falling from here would strike the ground about thirty feet from its base. All the world seemed going round with him—not even the thought that Edala had just done the same thing availed to pull him together. He must go—must hurl himself off and end this agony of nightmare—when—

“You down there, Elvesdon? Well, come up, because it’s getting late, and it’s time to think of getting back.”

The calm, strong, matter of fact tones of Thornhill broke the spell like magic. This was an everyday performance after all, was the effect they conveyed. Elvesdon’s nerve had returned. He was himself again.

“Let’s see. What’s the best way of getting off?” he asked, trying to suppress the tremor in his voice.

“Same as you got on. Grab hold of that root above, there under the stone, and—don’t look down. Look up. That’s all right,” as Elvesdon, panting somewhat, stood once more on the summit beside them.

“Well done,” cried Edala enthusiastically. “You are the only one besides myself who has ever looked over the Sipazi krantz. Several have tried but none of them had the nerve to get as far as the tree. Some wouldn’t even go at all.”

“The only sensible ones of the lot,” said Thornhill shortly. “It’s a fool’s trick, anyway.”

“Have you done it yourself, Thornhill?” asked Elvesdon. “I suppose you have?”

“Not any. Anyone could see that the thing wouldn’t stand my weight for a minute: even if I were such a—” He checked himself, remembering that his guest had just qualified for the uncomplimentary substantive he had been on the point of defining. “But I’m going to have a charge of dynamite brought up here and the thing blown to blazes. It’s too silly risky.”

Elvesdon was rather astonished. Thornhill was undergoing the process known as ‘working himself up.’ Yet when he himself was down there, his host’s tone had been absolutely level. And Thornhill himself was making up his mind to talk very seriously to Edala on the subject, little thinking that before any opportunity of doing so should come round, that might occur which should put any such idea clean out of his mind.

Chapter Nine.

The Zulu Again.

“You’re going to do nothing of the kind, father,” said Edala, taking up the challenge. “I’m not going to have my aerial throne blown to blazes at all. Why it’s a curiosity—one of the sights. I bring everybody up here to see it.”

“And to sit on it?” rejoined Elvesdon, mischievously.

“Only that no one ever has, except you. Tell me. What did it feel like, for the first time?”

Her straight, clear glance was full upon his face. He was thinking that ‘the first time’ felt uncommonly like being the last. But he answered:

“Well, I don’t know. It was a queer experience—for the first time. To be absolutely candid I won’t pretend that I completely enjoyed it.”

“I know you didn’t. I could see that your hand on the bough was not quite steady. That makes it all the more a big thing to have done.”

“What did you yourself feel like the first time, Miss Thornhill, and—what on earth put the idea into your head?”

“I felt just as I do now, how glorious it was being suspended in mid-air,”—the listener felt creepy in the calves of the legs, as the words brought back his own feelings. “What put it into my head? I was up here one day with another girl and it occurred to me it would be good fun to go and sit there, overhanging space. She didn’t believe I meant it, but I just climbed out on to the tree and sat there. She nearly fainted.”

“Well, nerve isn’t a monopoly of our sex. Look at the wonderful things women do—diving from a ghastly height into a narrow tank—or looping the loop on a bicycle, and so on. By George! it’s enough to make your hair stand on end to watch them.”

“We’ve missed the sunset,” cried Edala. “Never mind. You can see plenty of sunsets, but you can’t sit on my aerial throne every day. Why, where’s father?” looking around. “Oh, there; over by that flat rock.”

Thornhill had strolled away while the two were talking and was standing, shading a match to light his pipe, when—

“*Inkose*!”

He started slightly. The mountain top was flat and he had seen no one on it but themselves. The salute, however, had proceeded from a tall native, who had risen from behind the flat boulder before mentioned.

This man now advanced, and in the limp of his gait, the other recognised him as the Zulu. Then—Heavens and earth! He had wondered where he had seen him before. Now he knew.

But it was ghastly. No, the thing could not be. It was only a striking likeness. Moonlight is untrustworthy—and now, this light up here in the afterglow of the sunset was dusking. The Zulu stood—contemplating him with a faint, ironical grin.

“There are ‘mouths’ on this mountain top,” he began, “waiting to swallow up men—and women,” he added, with a glance at Edala who together with her companion had now come up. “*Whau*! it is easy to fall into such. There are those that only half swallow, and return their prey, such as that,”—pointing with his knobstick to the mouth of a crevice a few yards on the other side of the boulder. “Yet it may be that the prey though it returns to life does not do so unbitten. There are other ‘mouths’ who do not return their prey at all, and if it is sought for it is too late, for it is already dead.”

To two of the listeners this bit of dark talking was intelligible because they were familiar with the tricks and turns of the Zulu language. The speaker merely meant to convey that some of the crevices were more dangerous than others. But to the third there was nothing ‘dark’ about it. And then, either from the fact—which no one but herself would have noticed—that her father’s voice had lost some of its imperturbability, or by some mysterious conjunction of weird telepathy—Edala began to think there must be some deeper, darker meaning underlying the words. All sorts of ghastly conjectures shot through her mind, but all vague, shadowy, nebulous. Through them she heard the voice of Elvesdon questioning the stranger.

“Who are you?”

“Manamandhla, son of Gwegula.”

“Of the Zulu?”

“*Yeh-bo ’Nkose*.”

“And your chief—who is he?”

“The Government.”

“But your own chief?”

“The King.”

“Which king?” said Elvesdon, becoming ‘short.’

“*Au*! are there then two kings? I had not heard that.”

This answer given so quietly and innocently would have caused the other two to smile, only they were in no smiling mood.

“But who is your chief in Zululand, your Zulu chief?” went on Elvesdon, growing impatient. But the deprecatory smile on the other’s face was beautiful to behold. He replied.

“Now *Nkose*, I would ask—Are there any chiefs in Zululand other than the Government? Not to-day—Government is our chief.”

“Not Mehlo-ka-zulu?”

“He is my relative.”

Elvesdon burst out laughing.

“Confound the fellow, he reminds one of the Irish witness in ‘Handy Andy’,” he said. Then to the Zulu: “Where is your kraal?”

"*La-pa*. Over there." And the speaker pointed with his stick in a direction which conveyed the idea that he resided anywhere between the further side of the valley and the North Pole.

Elvesdon did not press the point, knowing perfectly well that he could find out all he wanted from other sources. Then, too, the deft way in which the Zulu fenced all his questions appealed strongly to his sense of the ridiculous. There was, moreover, nothing to be gained in particular by continuing his catechism; and One of the secrets of his success in the handling of natives was that he knew when to humour them and when to draw a tight rein.

"Do you know who I am?" he said.

"*Inkose* is the magistrate—the new magistrate—at Kwabulazi."

"That is so. But new only as regards Kwabulazi," returned Elvesdon meaningly. "So knowing who I am it is not surprising if I ask: 'What has a Zulu from beyond the border to do in Babatyana's location on this side?'"

"*Inkose*—I have always heard that under the King's rule all men are free, whether white or black, as long as they do no harm. And I am doing no harm."

"As long as they do no harm," repeated Elvesdon, with a touch of significance. "That is well, Manamandhla—that is well." And he turned away.

"Where are these crevices, Miss Thornhill? It's curious how they occur in some of these mountain ranges. I got into one myself once, but fortunately it wasn't particularly deep, or I should be there still."

"Where was that?"

"In the Cape Colony. I was there on leave, and put in a time with an old official pal of mine. We went reebok-shooting in the mountains, and I got into such a hole as one of these, stepped backwards into it. Fortunately my pal was near enough to hear me sing out, or I might not have been able to pull myself up."

"This is a deep one," said Edala. "Come and look. If you drop a stone over, you hear it clanging against the sides ever so far down. Listen, now."

She dropped a stone over, and both stood listening.

"By Jove, but it is deep," said Elvesdon. "And beastly dangerous too, almost hidden in the grass."

Thornhill had not joined them. He was seated on the flat rock, puffing away at his pipe. The ghastliness of the situation was known to him and to one other there present—and here was this unthinking girl dropping stones into this particular cleft, of all others on that mountain top—of all others in the world.

"That is one of the 'mouths' that gives not back its prey," said the deep voice of Manamandhla. "*Whau*! It retains that which it swallows." Then with a word of farewell greeting he withdrew, but in the opposite direction to that by which they had ascended.

"Hadn't we better go down?" said Thornhill. "It'll be dark directly."

"And it's shivery now," said Edala, looking round with a shudder. "Come along."

By the time they were off the moss-grown natural stairway it was nearly dark. The horses, hitched to a bush by the bridles, shook themselves and whinnied at their approach.

"What would be the effect of your 'aerial throne' by starlight, Miss Thornhill?" said Elvesdon, as they passed beneath the mighty cliff, whose loom cut straight and black against the myriad stars which came gushing out into the velvety vault.

"I've never tried it. I believe I'd be afraid. You know—the Kafirs say the Sipazi mountain is haunted, that all sorts of *tagati* sounds float off from the top of it at night."

"You afraid? Why I don't believe there's anything in the world that could scare *you*, after what I've seen."

"Oh isn't there? I'm rather afraid of lightning, for one thing."

"Are you?"

"Yes. You see, it's a thing that no precaution on earth will guard you against. You can stick up conductors on a house, or any sort of building, but you can't stick one on your hat, when you're out in the open. I always feel so utterly helpless."

"Well, of course it's risky. But you must remember the very small proportion of people who get hit compared with the numbers who spend a large slice of their lives exposed to it."

"So I do, but somehow it seems poor consolation when everything is fizzing and banging all round you and you expect every second to be knocked to kingdom come. No. I don't like it a bit—in the open that is. Under cover, though it's even a Kafir hut, I don't mind."

"You wouldn't like to be seated on the 'aerial throne' then, eh?" laughed Elvesdon.

"No, indeed. Look. There's a fine shooting star."

A streak like a falling rocket, and the phenomenon disappeared. Elvesdon gratefully admitted to himself that this homeward ride through the soft dews of falling night was wholly delightful. Yes, but—would it have been equally so were he alone, or with any other companion at his side—his host for instance; who had lingered behind to light a pipe, and had

not taken the trouble to catch them up again? He was constrained to own to himself that it would not. This girl was of a type wholly outside his experience, so natural, so absolutely unconventional. Her ways and ideas struck him somehow as peculiar to herself—and then her appearance—as striking as it was uncommon. He had not begun to fall in love with her, but could not ignore the possibility that he might, and in that case Heaven help him, for he felt pretty sure he would meet with no reciprocity.

Meanwhile, there was nothing to be gained by discounting potentialities, wherefore he laid himself out to make the most of the present time, and succeeded admirably well. If his host was rather abstracted and silent throughout the evening, Edala more than made up for it. She chatted away on every subject under the sun; and played and sang—both well—so that by the time he went to bed Elvesdon had come to the conclusion that he had never enjoyed himself so much—or got through such a jolly day in his life.

Chapter Ten.

A Chief—out of Date.

Zavula sat in his hut smoking, and—blinking.

Zavula was an old man. There were wisps of white beneath and above the dull, uncared for head-ring, for being a Natal native he did not keep his head scrupulously shaved, as the way of the ringed Zulu is. But his eyesight was very weak, wherefore he sat—and blinked. And he was alone.

A small fire burned in the bowl-like hollow in the centre of the hut. Into this Zavula was gazing. Perhaps he was dreaming dreams of the past—when he had been somebody, when he was looked up to and respected by thousands of tribesmen; when, too, he had gallantly led in person these same tribesmen, at the call of the white man's Government, against the hosts of Cetywayo the Great King, on the red plain of Isandhlwana—only to retire, in helter-skelter rout, together with such of the whites who had it in their power to do likewise, before the on-sweeping wave of the might of Zulu. Then, in those days, his word was law. He had been called upon to assist the Government, and he and his fighting men had done so loyally. It was not their fault if the white leader had been out-generalled by Tyingwayo, who had learned the art of war under Tshaka the Terrible. They had done their best, and had been thanked for it and remembered, when Cetywayo's power had melted into air, and the horns of that Bull, which had gored where they would, had been blunted and rendered harmless for ever.

And now here were his people engaged in running their heads against a rock. *Whau*! was ever such foolishness known? His people! He had no sons living. The two he had—both were slain in the waters of Umzinyati while striving to escape from the pursuing spears of the Great King—after Isandhlwana. His people, to whom his word had been law, had now turned to Babatyana. He himself was a chief no more.

Babatyana was his brother's son, and Babatyana was not old. Since the teaching of the white people had found footing in the land, and, worse still, since the teaching of certain black people from a far off country beyond the salt water, had come among them the old were no longer respected, no longer listened to. He, Zavula, was old, but Babatyana was not; wherefore the people turned to listen to the words of Babatyana. And Babatyana was plotting against the whites—against the Government. *Whau*! was ever such foolishness known?

What did Babatyana, and the fools who were listening to him, think they would gain—think they would do? The whites, who overthrew for ever the House of Senzangakona and the might of Zulu at the very zenith of its power and glory—were they to be overthrown in their turn by a few unorganised tribes all unskilled and unpractised in the art of war? The whites, who could bring guns to bear, each of which could fire a hundred bullets in every direction while a man could count scarce half that number—why Baba-tyana and his fools might as well run their heads hard against the nearest cliff and strive to beat that down as attempt such a thing as this. *Whau*! was ever such foolishness known?

They reckoned on help from the Amazulu? Well, what then? Even if they got it, where were the Amazulu now? They were no longer a nation. The power of the House of Senzangakona was gone for ever; and even if the splendid army of the last of those Elephants were here to fight on their side—what then? Even more now—ten times more—were the whites able to disperse such, like smoke; for their weapons were ten times better than any they had possessed at the time of the breaking up of the great House.

Whau! was ever such foolishness known!

And for what were the people plotting, these fools? Because they had to pay a little more in taxes than formerly, to pay for their own protection? Their own protection, for how would it have been with them had the Amabuna (Boer) come out best in the late struggle? The rule of the Amangisi (English), when the very worst had been said against it, was mild and merciful compared with what that of the Amabuna would be, were these masters of the land. Under this every man could enjoy his own and be free. And he was free, no man freer. But—under that? Again. Even if these strange preachers who had come among them with this poison under their tongues spoke truly; that the tribes were to combine and drive out the white man—whether Amabuna or Amangisi—what then? Somebody must be chief. There was no such thing as all men, all tribes and nations, being equal. The very idea was foolishness. Who then would be chief. Who then would be king? There was still a son of the House of Senzangakona alive. And the thinker, for his part, preferred the rule of the white man to that of the House of Senzangakona.

All of the above he had put before his people, and that not once only. But they had turned a deaf ear, or had listened but coldly. The spirit of unrest coursed high through their blood. The strange preachers were promising them a great and glorious future—and Babatyana had turned towards them a favourable ear. Zavula was old, they said among themselves; Babatyana was in his prime. He knew. He could walk with the times. The time had come for Zavula to go to sleep. Which sense may have accounted for the fact that Zavula now sat in his hut alone.

So the old chief sat there, gazing blinkingly into his dying fire, wondering why he should not be allowed to lay down his old bones in peace, instead of being hustled by a great crowd of idiots bent on seeking their own death. Had either or both of his two sons been alive how different things would have turned. He had taught them sound commonsense, at any rate, and would have been willing that the leadership of the tribe should devolve upon them. But Babatyana? *Whau*, Babatyana!

Now he was roused from his musings by a sound outside. It was the voice of someone singing—calling to him the

tribal *sibongo*, or praise. The door of the hut was pushed open and a youth crept in, saying that a stranger craved leave to speak with the chief.

Zavula, though old, and shorn of much of his tribal dignity, had plenty of the latter left—of a personal character. He did not hurry, and after a space of full five minutes he intimated that the stranger might come in.

A man crept in through the low doorway, and raising his right hand gave the chief *sibongo*. The latter acknowledged it with a murmur, then for a moment there was silence. The new arrival was a middle-aged ringed man, and though he had described himself as a stranger this was only as a term of humility. As a matter of fact he was one of Zavula's most influential headmen.

"I see you, Nxala," said the chief. "And now? What is the news?"

There was ever so faint a twinkle in the speaker's eyes as he asked the question, ever so ironical a *soupçon* in his tone.

"My father, things are moving. The news is great, but not to be cried aloud. The people are nearly ready."

"M-m! Nearly ready? Ready—for what?"

"The people are crying aloud for their father, the Chief of the Amahluzi, but he takes no part in their councils. His voice is not heard."

"The Chief of the Amahluzi takes no part in the councils of fools," returned the old man in tones of cold irony, looking through the other.

"Of fools?"

"Of fools—and worse. When children listen no more to the counsel of their fathers then are those children undone."

Again there was silence. Then Zavula raised his voice in a hail. In response two women appeared, and having received an order, returned in a minute or two bearing a large bowl of *tywala* and two smaller drinking vessels. Into these they poured some of the liquor, which creamed up with a pleasant frothing sound. Then, each having taken the preliminary sip, required by native etiquette, they withdrew.

The headman took a long pull at his beer, and then another. The firelight glowed upon the placid countenance and short white beard of the old chief and upon the shine of the new arrival's head-ring, and still there was silence. At last the latter spoke.

"The people are tired of the white man's exactions, my father. They have to pay more and more, and they are tired of it. They wish to hear the voice of their chief."

"They have heard that voice already, Nxala—not only once nor only twice. They have heard it as foolish, rebellious children. They will hear it no more. But the time is very near when they will wish, through blood and through tears, that they had listened to it."

An unpleasant look flitted across the crafty face of the headman.

"But they murmur, my father," he said. "They are saying—'Lo, our father, Zavula, is old, and he is asleep. But Babatyana is not old, and he is awake.' So say the people."

"*Whau*, Babatyana!"

The infinite contempt in the old man's tone was quiet and cutting. The evil look deepened in the face of the other. To hide it he took up his drinking vessel again, and drained it. His host at once refilled it from the large bowl, and also his own.

"Has the Chief of the Amahluzi no word for Babatyana?" went on Nxala.

"*Whau*, Babatyana!"

This time the contempt in the old man's tone was more cutting than before. The other appreciated it to the full.

"And to the people, father? The people, thy children?"

"The people? Fools—all fools. But to them I have one word—one last word. Let them come here with the rising of to-morrow's sun and hear it. Fools—because only a fool wants the same word uttered into his ear again and again."

If it be wondered that during this talk nothing definite was said—no plan propounded—it must be remembered that the colloquial process known as coming straight to the point is an attribute vested in the civilised man. To the savage it is utterly foreign, even abhorrent. These two knew perfectly well what was in each other's mind. There was no occasion to formulate anything. In matters of moment safety lay that way, a tradition fostered through countless generations. Now Babatyana's emissary knew that his mission had failed. Babatyana's chief—the chief of the Amahluzi tribe—was as firm as a rock. Suddenly Nxala's countenance lit up.

"*Whau*! The spear! The great spear!" he exclaimed. "That is the spear with which my father met the might of Cetywayo, and slew two warriors. I would fain gaze upon that spear once more."

Zavula turned his head, following the speaker's glance. Behind him hung a fine assegai, of the broad-bladed, short-handled Zulu type, which he had wielded with effect at Isandhlwana as leader of the Native Contingent, before he was forced to fly before the weight of numbers. But as he turned his head the hand of Nxala shot out by a quick movement; perhaps two inches, and no more. But Zavula, though old, was not the fool that the other—and, incidentally, the bulk of his people—chose to take him for.

“Ha! The spear?” he answered, in the genial, pleased tones of a veteran invited to enlarge once more on bygone deeds. “It was great, this *umkonto*, was it not? And now it must be kept bright or it will rust; for there is no more use for it.”

He rose, and turning his back full upon his guest, stood, deliberately taking down the weapon from where it hung behind him. For half a minute he thus stood, gazing lovingly upon it as he held it in his hand. But in a fraction of that half minute the hand of Nxala again shot out till it rested above the chief’s drinking vessel, and as quickly withdrew. The latter sat down again leisurely, the assegai in his hand.

“Yes. It is a great spear,” he went on meditatively, but carefully refraining from handing it to the other. “And there is no more use for it. But—we will drink to its memory.”

He raised the bowl before him. The other watching him, could hardly suppress the gleam of satisfaction which flitted across his face. But it faded in an instant. The bowl dropped from the chief’s hand on to his knees. The liquor gushed forth on to the floor.

“The bowl, my father,” cried Nxala eagerly. “Break it into pieces—in small pieces—for it is bad *múti* to drop it at the moment of drinking.”

“It is worse *múti*, sometimes, to drink the moment before dropping it,” answered the old man, tranquilly, setting the bowl beside him. “I will have another brought.” And again he raised his voice in a hail. Again the women appeared, and having supplied another bowl, and also a fresh brew of *tywala*, withdrew.

Nxala, watching, could scarcely restrain himself. The first part of his diabolical scheme had miscarried. Was it time for the second act? And there before him sat the old chief, the fine assegai in his hand—yet held in a firm grip, he did not fail to notice—crooning words of *sibongo* to it, as he recalled its deeds in past times. Had the scheme succeeded all would have gone so easy. This kraal of Zavula’s was an insignificant cluster of a dozen huts, whither the old chief loved to retire. He was old—what more natural than that he should die in retirement? Yes—it was time for the second act. He would give the signal.

“Have you heard, my father; the new song that the people have made?” he said. “The new war-song? Listen. This is how it runs.”

But before he had uttered three words of it a trampling of hoofs was heard outside the hut, and a lusty European voice—though speaking faultless Zulu—enquiring which was the hut of the chief. Following on the answer there came through the low door of the hut a man, a white man—and he was known to both as the magistrate’s clerk from Kwabulazi.

“Greeting to you, father,” he cried, falling into the native idiom, and shaking Zavula heartily by the hand.

“Greeting, my son,” answered the old chief genially. “Sit. Here is *tywala*. Have you ridden far?”

“Far? Have I not? And I am come to sleep at your kraal, for Kwabulazi is another stage away, and it is night, and my horse is dead lame.”

Nxala, taking in the situation, was beside himself with inward rage, which, in fact, had got nearly to that pitch where the Machiavellian caution of the savage is apt to forget, and lose itself in an outburst of uncontrolled, unthinking blood lust. But he had not overlooked the fact that the new arrival had, slung around him, a remarkably business-like revolver. No, the time was not yet.

A dozen armed savages, lying in wait in the dark bush shadows a little way beyond Zavula’s kraal, had sprung up at the first words of the new war-song, which was to be the signal, but subsided again at the sound of the approaching horse-hoofs. Now, after a muttered consultation, they withdrew to a distance to await their leader’s reappearance and instructions. But there was an armed white man, and he an official, sleeping at Zavula’s kraal, which made all the difference.

Twice that night the life of the chief of the Amahluzi had hung on a hair. It was saved—for the present.

Chapter Eleven.

“Good Night, Zavula!”

Elvesdon was seated in his inner office, busied with his ordinary routine work. It was afternoon and hot, and he had thrown off his coat and waistcoat, and sat in his shirt and light duck trousers smoking a pipe of excellent Magaliesberg. Court was over, he had disposed of the few cases, mostly of a trumpery nature, before lunch, and now the office work was not of a particularly engrossing character; wherefore perhaps it was not strange that his thoughts should go back to his Sunday visit, which, of course, spelt Edala Thornhill.

The worst of it was she had been occupying his thoughts of late, and that even when he had seen her but once. Now he had seen her twice—had spent a whole day in her society. And she was occupying his thoughts more than ever. Yet—why?

He was not in his first youth, nor was she the first of the other sex he had been interested in. He had had experiences, as a fine, well-looking, well set up man of his stamp was bound to have had. Yet the image of this girl had stamped itself upon his mind in a way that the image of no one else had ever been able to do for years; since what he pleasantly liked to term to himself—his salad days. And he did not know what to make of this interest. It was not even budding love—he told himself—only a strong interest in what seemed an interesting character. Yet behind it was an unmistakable longing to see more of her. The feeling rendered him vaguely uncomfortable.

He relit his pipe, and sat back to think. There came a tap at the door and his clerk entered, bringing some official letters to be signed.

“Anything new. Prior?” he asked carelessly, when this process had been accomplished.

“There is, sir. Teliso has come back, and there’s been an infernal rascally Ethiopian preacher stirring up Babatyana’s location. He’s gone on to Nteseni’s.”

“I know. I captured that information from two fellows I was talking with this morning. I’ll see Teliso directly. But what can you do—at this stage of affairs? I’m keeping my eyes open, but you mustn’t be too zealous in our Service, Prior, or you’re bound to come out bottom dog. The chap I want particularly looked after is this Manamandhla. He’s a crafty swine and not over here for any good. I had a talk with him the other day and he’s as slippery as the proverbial eel.”

“Did you, sir? Well, I can tell you something about him. He’s gone to squat on old Thornhill’s farm.”

“To squat?”

“Yes, so they say. It seems fishy, to say the least of it.”

“How so?”

“Why he’s a biggish man over on the other side. What should he want to come and squat here for?”

“What do you mean by ‘squatting,’ Prior? I should say Thornhill was not the sort of man to allow squatters on his place.”

“Well, sir, that’s what I’ve got at through the people. Anyway it simplifies the watching part of the business, for we’ve got Manamandhla bang under our noses.”

Elvesdon sat meditatively, burning his middle finger into the bowl of his lighted pipe. More and more was it brought home to him how anything concerning the house of Thornhill spelt interest to him, even vivid interest, he could not but own to himself. And Thornhill was rather a mysterious personality, and his daughter even more out of the commonplace. What did it all mean—what the very deuce did it all mean? Then he said:

“I don’t quite know what to make of it just now, Prior. Things are shaping out. But you keep your ears open. You were born and bred on this frontier, and you know these chaps and their ways a good deal better than I do. You can grip things that I should probably miss entirely. So don’t let anything pass.”

It was just by such frank and hearty appreciation of their capabilities that Elvesdon endeared himself to his subordinates, hence this one’s dictum upon him to Thornhill on a former occasion.

“You may rely upon me, sir,” answered Prior, intensely gratified. “I’ll do my very best—all along the line.”

“And that will be a very good kind of best, Prior, judging from my short experience of you. Hullo! Come in.”

This in response to another knock at the door. It was opened and there entered a native constable.

“*Nkose*! The chief has arrived. The chief, Zavula. He would have a word with *Nkose*.”

“Admit him,” said Elvesdon, cramming a fresh fill into his pipe.

There was a sound of light footsteps, made by bare feet, outside, and old Zavula appeared in the doorway. His right hand was uplifted, and he poured forth words of *sibongo* in the liquid Zulu. Elvesdon arose and shook the old man by the hand. He was always especially courteous to men of rank among the natives—a fact which they fully appreciated.

“Greeting, my father. I am glad to see you,” he said. “Sit. Here is snuff. It is a good accompaniment for a talk.”

Zavula subsided on to the floor—a native of course would be supremely uncomfortable on a chair. Prior, with ready tact, had withdrawn. There were those who said that Elvesdon was too free and easy with natives, that he allowed them too much equality. Well, he had never found his official dignity suffer by the line he took, but that line he knew where to draw, and occasionally did—with effect. But Zavula was one of Nature’s gentlemen.

The old chief, having spent two or three minutes filling up his nostrils with snuff, began—

“It is good to see *Nkose* again. I have seen him but once when he first arrived here, and could see that the Government had sent us a man—one who could understand us—and my heart felt good. Now I see him again.”

“Those who rule over the people are always welcome, my father,” returned Elvesdon. “What is the news?”

“News? *Au*! I know not, Ntwezi. Is this a time for news? Or a time for quiet? I am old, very old, and my sons are in the land of the Great Unknown. You, who are young, of the age they would be were they still here, to you comes news from all the world.”

The old man’s eyes shone with a kindly twinkle. He had used Elvesdon’s native nickname—not in itself an uncomplimentary one—instead of the respectful ‘*Nkose*’ such as he should have used when addressing his magistrate, yet the latter thoroughly appreciated the difference. There was no fear of the old chief encroaching upon his official dignity by this momentary lapse into speaking of him in the same breath as his dead sons.

They talked a little on commonplaces—yet not altogether, for both were fencing up to more serious import. Elvesdon, with his knowledge of native ways, did not hurry his visitor. He knew, instinctively, that the latter had come to see him on some subject of more or less importance: how much so he had yet to learn. He noticed, too, that Zavula had brought in with him a bundle—an ordinary looking bundle of no size, done up in a dingy rag. His quick, deductive instinct had taken this in, where most white men would have overlooked it completely—especially if hide-bound by officialism. A chief of Zavula’s standing did not carry his own loads, however small. Elvesdon’s curiosity was aroused, and grew, with regard to that bundle.

It, now, Zavula proceeded to untie. From the wrapper he produced an ordinary drinking bowl of black, porous clay. It was not a clean bowl either for the inside showed thick smears of dried up *tywala*. This he placed carefully upon the ground before him. Elvesdon watched this development with growing curiosity.

"*Nkose*," said the old man, looking up. "Where is Udokotela?"

This, which was a mere corruption of the English word 'doctor,' referred to the District Surgeon.

"You will have far to go to find him, Zavula. Are you then sick?"

"*Whau*! My heart is sick, for there are some who think I have lived too long. It may be that they are right. And—they are of my children too."

There was infinite pathos in the tone, as the speaker dropped his glance sorrowfully down to the object before him. Elvesdon's interest kindled vividly. He began to see through the situation now.

"There is death in this," went on the old chief touching the bowl. "I would like Udokotela to examine it."

"Leave it with me, Zavula, and I will take care that he does. It will be safe here."

He unlocked a cupboard and stowed away the vessel carefully. "Now—who is it that thinks their chief has lived too long, Zavula?"

"*Au*! That will become known. But the time is not yet. What I have shown *Nkose* is between him and Udokotela."

Elvesdon promised to respect his confidence and the old man got up to leave. Would he not eat and drink? No. The sun would have dropped before he reached his kraal, and he liked not being abroad in the dark hours. Perhaps he was too old, he added with a whimsical smile. Another day, when he should come over to hear the word of Udokotela as to the hidden *múti* then he would have more time.

Elvesdon and the clerk stood watching the forms of the old chief and his one scarcely less aged attendant, as they receded up the valley.

"That's a grand old boy, Prior," said the former. "A dear old boy. If we had a few more of his sort around here we needn't have bothered ourselves about the lively times that any fool can see are sticking out ahead of us."

The two old men held steadily on their way, walking with an ease and elasticity that many a youth might have envied—over rough ground and smooth—now and again sitting down to take snuff, which is far too serious an operation to be performed during the process of locomotion. As nearly as possible they travelled in a direct line, accomplishing this by taking short cuts through the bush by tracks known to themselves, but to a mounted man quite, impracticable, and so faint that a white man would get hopelessly lost.

Following one of these, they were about to come out upon opener ground. The sun had dropped, and in the black gloom of forest trees it would be night in a very few minutes. In front however showed a temporary lightening where the foliage thinned. Overhanging this opener ground was a tumble of rocks and boulders rising to no great height.

"I would fain have been earlier, brother," murmured Zavula. "My eyes are over old to see in the dark, and—"

He did not finish his words; instead he dropped to the earth, felled by the murderous blow which had crashed upon his unsuspecting head from behind. His companion sprang aside just in time to dodge a like blow aimed at him, and raising his stick leaped furiously at the foremost assailant, determined that one should die at any rate. It was a futile resistance, for what could an old man with nothing but an ordinary stick do against half a dozen armed miscreants. These sprang at him at once, yet even then so energetic was his defence that they drew back for a moment.

"Have done!" growled a voice from behind these. "Make an end. No—no blood," as one fiend was poising an assegai for a throw. "Make an end, fools, make an end."

"It is Nxala who hounds on these cowardly dogs," jeered this brave old man, recognising the voice out of the darkness. "*Whau*! Nxala!"

It was his last utterance. A heavy knobstick, hurled with tremendous force, struck him full between the eyes, and he, too, dropped.

The murderers were upon him at once, battering his skull to atoms with their knobsticks, in the fury of their savagery forgetting their instigator's warning as to the shedding of blood.

While this was happening old Zavula had half raised himself.

"Dog's son, Nxala," he exclaimed. "I have found my end. Thine shall be the white man's rope."

These were his last words. The murderous fiends, springing upon him, completed their atrocious work—this time effectually. A slight quiver, and the old chief's body lay still and lifeless.

The tumble of rocks and stones contained, from the very nature of its formation, several holes and caves, and to these now were the bodies dragged. To fling them in, and cover the apertures with stones, was the work of a very short time.

"*Hlala-gahle*, Zavula! Good night, Zavula!" cried Nxala, raising a hand in mockery. "Rest peacefully. *Whau*! Our father has left us. We will depart and cry the *sibongo* to Babatyana the new chief."

"*Yeh-bo*! Babatyana the new chief."

And the cowardly murderers departed from the scene of their abominable deed, and the darkness of black night fell suddenly upon the graves of these two old men, thus barbarously and treacherously done to death; heathen savages both, but estimable and useful according to their lights. And it might well be that the mocking aspiration of the cowardly instigator of their destruction was from that moment to be fulfilled.

Chapter Twelve.

Two Letters.

"How much longer is that man going to hang about here?" said Edala, gazing, somewhat frowningly, from the window of her father's book room, which looked out upon the cattle-kraals and the group of huts, occupied by the native servants, which stood adjacent thereto.

"Who? Oh, Manamandhla! Not for long, I should think. Do you know, child, he's rather an interesting chap to talk to and has become quite civil. He asked me to let him stop on here a bit, and he'd help with the cattle now we're short-handed."

"Well, we shall be more so soon, for old Patolo can't stand him. He'll be clearing next, you'll see."

"Not he. They'll strike it off all right. Patolo has been cattle-herd-in-chief to me nearly all your life, and knows where he's well off. And Manamandhla may prove useful in other ways."

The object of their talk, and the girl's animadversion, had just emerged from one of the huts. For a moment he stood gazing at the weather, then drawing his ample green blanket close around his tall form, he strode away over the veldt.

"Why have you got such a down on him, child? He's respectful and civil enough to you, isn't he?"

"Oh yes—at least for the present."

"Why should he not continue to be?" went on her father.

"I don't know. No, I don't. I suppose it's—instinct."

She still stood gazing out of the window, and her face was troubled, even resentful. She could not forget the expression that had come upon her father's face, fleeting as it had been, when they had first met this man yonder on the summit of Sipazi mountain. It was not his first meeting either, for he had brought home the story of the Zulu's insolence on that other occasion. She felt puzzled—even suspicious, and therefore resentful.

It was a grey, drizzling afternoon, and the splendour of forest and mountain, lovely in the sparkle of blue sky and dazzling sun, was blotted out by rain and mist, with dreary and depressing effect. Low clouds swept along the base of the heights, whirling back now and then to display some great krantz such as the face of Sipazi, its altitude, multiplied by the dimness, looming up in awful grandeur, to fade again into the murk.

Instinct! Thornhill did not like that word, and it was no mere flash in the pan either. The child was so confoundedly sharp at leaping to conclusions; generally accurate ones too, and that with nothing to go upon. He had tried to assume his normal unconcern of speech and manner, in talking on this subject—for this was not the first time it had been brought up—and could only wonder if he had succeeded.

"Are you afraid of him, then?" he said at last.

"Afraid? No. But I don't like him, and I wish he'd clear. I don't believe he's up to any good at all here."

"Now, dear, aren't you just a trifle unreasonable as to this particular 'bee' of yours?" said her father, somewhat annoyed. "You say you're not afraid of him, and I've told you the man is useful to me in ways. Now am I to run this farm or are you? That's the question."

"I don't want to run the place, of course. I'm only afraid this paragon of yours is aiming at doing that. What a perfectly beastly afternoon," she broke off, turning away from the window.

"Ah well, we can do with rain," he answered. "Another night's downpour 'll make all the difference in the world. Getting hipped, eh? Go and thump the keyboard a bit—you never get tired of that—and forget the existence of the obnoxious Manamandhla."

"If I shan't disturb you."

"You know, dear, *you* never do disturb me," he answered, tenderly.

The girl passed into the other room, and sat down at her piano.

"What a little beast I am to him," she was thinking—"and yet—and yet! It all seems too awful. How I wish he would let me go away, as I wanted to."

The notes came gurgling out under her deft touch, but for once her mind was not in her art. But for the rain she would have taken refuge in some outdoor pursuit; anything, even if it were to climb up to what she called her 'aerial throne'—dangling between earth and heaven; anything for movement. But the steady rain came down in monotonous drip—drip; moreover, it was a cold rain, and under no circumstance was out-of-doors inviting.

Thornhill sat in his library, and took down book after book, but somehow he, too, could not settle down to his favourite pastime. His thoughts were of this child whom he had always idolised, and still did; yet she repaid him by consistently turning away from him. Perhaps if he had affected a like indifference it might have told—women being what they were. Yet, in this case, he could hardly think so; knowing the nature of the cloud that hung between them; even the

venom from beyond the grave, and the effects of which he had hoped that time would dim. But time had not done so.

Then his thoughts took another turn—towards his surviving son, to wit; and, in the result, a great longing to see him again. He, at any rate, did not share Edala's attitude. His faith in his father was full, frank and perfect; and he made no secret of the fact. Why should he not come down on a visit. These stock-broking chaps at the Rand nearly always hunted in couples like other predatory professionals. Hyland would be sure to have a partner, or someone who could take charge of his job while he was away. He would write to him, and by Jove, this was post day—in fact the boy who rode post over from Elvesdon's was almost due, only was usually late. However, it didn't matter: he could be detained.

Thornhill got out sheets of paper. Edala, at the present moment, seemed to be literally obeying his injunctions to 'thump the keyboard,' for she was in full swing in the middle of a fine lilting song, to a somewhat thunderous accompaniment, in the other room.

"My dear Hyland," he began:

"Don't you feel like a change of air and scene after your ten months of labour in the City of Gold—dust; and that dust all and entirely in the air, save when it's in the larynxes and lungs of its eighty odd thousand inhabitants—mostly Hebrews? If so, I should think you could get your brother—shark—to take on your share and his own too, of the process of fleecing the child-like and unwary investor—even as you did—between you—of late, in the matter of a certain ancient relative of one of the firm—who shall be nameless—and that on the ground that there were not sufficient Heathen Chinee-s on the mines. Well then, do so, and load up on board the train as soon as you like after receipt of this, and *trek* down here for as long as you like. Edala is getting a bit hipped. I'm not sure the same doesn't hold good a little of her—and your—unrespected parent.

"Things here are much the same, except that we've got a new man at Kwabulazi in the room of old Carston transferred, as the official letters say—a chap named Elvesdon, an exceedingly wide awake, smart chap, and devilish good company. You're sure to like him. Old Tongwana often asks after you. We've also got a new man here—black—named Mana—"

Thornhill stopped, then carefully erased the last phrase—he did not know why, perhaps it was due to what Edala had called 'instinct.' Then he went on—

"There are rows and rumours of rows about possible bother among the people here, mainly over the new poll-tax, as, by the way, you will of course have heard—since all the doings of the known world are known at that hub of the Universe, Johannesburg, about forty-eight hours sooner than they are known—say in London. But it will probably end in smoke. If it doesn't, such a fire eater as yourself will be more in your element here than there, I should think, after your experiences in Matabeleland, and of the pom-poms of Brother Boer.

"Well, load yourself up on the first train you can capture, old chap, and hasten to smoke the pipe of peace under the welcoming roof of—

"Your old Governor."

This characteristic letter Thornhill read over, with a chuckle or two, stuck down the envelope and directed it.

Hyland Thornhill, Esq.
P.O. Box Something or other,
Johannesburg.

Just then Edala came in.

"Hullo. What's that you're sending, father?"

"Never you mind," throwing it on the blotting pad, face downwards. "It's a secret—another secret," he could not refrain from adding, maliciously.

"But I will see," she returned, making a playful, but tolerably determined snatch at the envelope. "Is it to Hyland? Is it?" as a brown and iron hand effectually baffled her attempt. "You are telling him to come—are you? Are you?"

"Ah-ah! Curiosity, thy name is woman!"

She had got him by the shoulders, and was shaking him, quite child-like and boisterous. He loved this mood.

"There are more people in the world than Hyland," he said. "Why should I bother about an impudent neglectful rascal who hardly ever takes the trouble to communicate with the author of his being, let alone to come in person and ascertain whether that worthy is dead or not?"

"It *is* to Hyland. I know it is. And you are telling him to come. You are, father? Say you are. Do you hear? Say you are."

"Oh, keep cool," ironically, for she was still shaking him by the shoulders. "Learn to trust in—the fulness of time."

It may be that the double meaning was not lost on her. But at that moment there befel an interruption. The dogs at the back of the house had sprung up and were barking furiously.

"Post, I suppose?" said Thornhill going to the window.

"There! I thought it was to Hyland!" cried Edala, who took the opportunity of snatching up the letter, which lay face downward on the table, and reading the address. "You are telling him to come, aren't you?"

"Time will show," he answered teasingly. "But telling him's one thing, whether he'll do as he's told is another. A lifelong experience of him, and, incidentally, of his sister, would move me to bet on the latter contingency."

A trampling of hoofs and then the postboy appeared, mounted on an undersized pony and clad in a long military surtout of ancient date. The rain was dripping from the ragged brim of his battered hat, but this affected him not at all, for his black shining face split into a dazzling white grin as he raised his hand in salute. The dogs, who knew him, had retreated, muttering, as though resenting being done out of hostilities; though even now they were sniffing around his utterly indifferent legs, not altogether reassuringly, as having dismounted he came to the door.

"Well Gomfu—what is the news?" said Thornhill, taking the leather bag.

"News? *Au! Nkose* will find all his news in there."

"But nearer than that. Here, I mean."

The boy grinned slyly.

"U Jobo is preaching around the locations. *Whau*! but he is telling news to the people—great news."

This, as we have said, was the native name of that estimable Ethiopian apostle the Rev. Job Magwegwe. Thornhill had heard of him.

"Why does not the Government send the police after him, *Nkose*?" went on the other. "Or are the ears of the Government stopped? Or those of Ntwezi?"

Thornhill laughed.

"You are not a kolwa (Christian native) then, Gomfu?"

The other clicked contemptuously.

"I am not a fool, *Nkose*, The *Abafundisi* (Missionaries) preach to us what they do not believe themselves. They say that their God made all men equal, black and white, but what is that but childishness? Equal? *Nkose*—who ever heard of a white man becoming the servant of a native, but it would take years to count the natives in all the land who are the servants of white men. Equal? *Whau*!"

"That is so, Gomfu."

"*Nkose*. Again. What if the son of—I do not say a common man but of a chief such as Tongwana, or Zavula, were to send *lobola* for the daughter of an *umfundisi*, and many of them have daughters—what would be the answer? Would it not be anger at a native presuming to dream of marriage with the daughter of a white man?—of a white man who preaches that black and white are all equal? Certainly it would, and rightly. And we natives who are not fools know this. We want no *Abafundisi* telling as childishness, particularly Amafengu, such as U Jobo. Equal! *Hau*!"

"*Nkosazana*!"

The latter in salutation of Edala, who appeared at the door.

"Father, when you've quite done trying to make Gomfu a worse heathen than he is already, and, incidentally, than you are yourself, it might occur to you to bring in the post-bag," she said.

"Gomfu's quaint theology has the merit of being logical, eke simple," he answered coming back into the room. "Here's the bag. Where's the key? Now then," he went on, having unlocked the bag and turned out its contents. "*Graphic. Country Life. Natal Witness. Eastern Province Herald*—that's enough journalism. Letters? None for you. M-m. One, two, three—all business Four—no. Number 4 isn't biz, but—yes it is—it's English. They make our stamps and the English ones so much alike now that there's no telling the difference. Now I wonder who that can be from," scrutinising the direction narrowly. "There's no one in England likely to write to me."

"Father. Look again. You must be getting blind. Why it is one of our stamps after all, and the postmark is Durban—or what's left of it."

"Has Durban, then, met with nearly total destruction?" he inquired, tranquilly.

"Now, don't be absurd. You know I meant the postmark."

"Oh, the postmark? Small wonder I was in doubt, for the sole use of the average postmark is to throw a hopeless blind on both the locality and the date of posting."

"Well the best way of solving the mystery, and the shortest, would be to open the letter and look at the signature."

"Ah! Ah! A woman's way of reading a novel—looking at the end first."

"Father, are you going to open that letter or are you not? If you have no curiosity on the subject of an unknown hand I have. And—it's a feminine hand too."

Chapter Thirteen.

Manamandhla's Beef.

"Yes, it's a feminine hand," he echoed, gazing critically on the envelope. "There's character in it too. Now I wonder who the deuce it can be from."

"Father, *will* you open it? Can't you see I am dying with curiosity?"

“Now, I’m not—not one little bit,” he answered, delighted to tease her. “In fact I wouldn’t mind postponing the further investigation of this mysterious missive for at least a week. Letters in unknown hands are generally of that character. For the matter of that, only too often so are those in known ones.”

For answer she suddenly snatched the letter from his hand and tore it open. “There now. Will you read it?” she said, giving it back.

“Certainly.” Then as the name at the end caught his eyes, a whistle of surprise escaped him. His fun sobered down while he read:

“The Royal Hotel,

“Durban.

“My dear distant Relative,

“We are related, but I believe distantly, at any rate poor mother always gave me to understand so, and latterly she talked a great deal of you. You may or may not have heard that we lost her between five or six months ago; but towards the last, when she was talking about you so often, she made me promise that I would find you out, and renew our acquaintance; though I don’t know about the ‘renewing’ part of it, for I was much too small in those days to remember anything of you now. However she gave me your address, and though it is an address of ever so many years ago it may still hold good, or at any rate be the means of finding you out eventually.”

Thornhill paused in his reading, and frowned. The reference to an address of ‘ever so many years ago’ awoke unpleasant memories. His address at that time was fairly public property, and it was the same one that he owned now.

“I have not been many days here,” the letter went on, “but it seems a delightful country, and I should like to see more of it. Can you take me in for a little while, and if so, please write or wire how I can get to you, and when. I have always heard that colonial ways are unconventional, and colonial houses ‘elastic,’ which sounds perfectly delightful, and emboldens me to sink ceremony. Hoping this will find you,

“Yours very truly,

“Evelyn Carden.”

“Read that, and tell me what you think of it, Edala,” said Thornhill, handing over the letter.

The girl took it eagerly.

“I don’t know,” she said, when she was through with it. “It sounds as if she might be nice. I see she writes from the Royal in Durban. But—when? She gives no date.”

“Of course not—being a female. Nor does the postmark help any, as I said before.”

“Well, the postmark is neither designed nor executed by ‘females’,” retorted Edala.

“True, O Queen. You have me there. Well? What do you think of it?”

“Wire her to come, by all means. I like her free and easy style. She ought to be nice. But what’s she like, and who is she, when all’s said and done?”

“First for the wire. Gomfu is waiting as it is. Then we can enter into explanations.”

He got out a telegraph form and wrote:

“Miss Carden Royal Hotel Durban Train to Telani will meet you there only give a day or two for reply wire very welcome address Care of Elvesdon Kwabulazi: Thornhill.”

“Wa Gomfu!” he hailed.

“*Nkose*!”

The boy was round in a moment.

“Here. See that this goes directly you get back. Have they given you coffee in the kitchen, for the night is cold?”

“*Nkose* is my father. Ramasam is a very induna of the fire. Never have I met such coffee as his.”

“Well, here is *gwai*,” handing him a span of Boer tobacco. “Now go—and here is yet a letter to take.”

“*Nkose*!”

The boy disappeared and soon the retreating hoofs of his undersized pony could be heard splashing through the sludgy surface of the saturated veldt. The dogs growled again, presumably because having seen the same postboy appear regularly twice a week and go away again those sagacious animals must needs sustain their world-wide reputation for sagacity by doing something, though quite unnecessary—or possibly to vary the monotony of a wet and very dismal day. Anyhow they growled.

“You wanted to know about this new and distant relative,” said Thornhill, coming back into the room. “Well, I can’t tell you anything about her personally, because, as she says, she was too much of a kid to remember me, and I, for my part, just remember her as an ordinary kid, usually smeared with jam or some other sticky form of nastiness. Just that and nothing more.”

“But this mother she talks about—who was she?” went on Edala.

“Poor Mary Carden. Oh, we got rather friendly. She was a bit older than me though. I had something to do with the settling up of her affairs when she was left a widow—not that there was much to settle up, poor thing. By the bye, and yet this girl writes in rather an independent way, and dates from the Royal at Durban. Well, you know, hotels in this country aren’t cheap, and the Royal isn’t one of the cheapest by any means, although it’s good. They may have had a windfall since I knew them; probably have, since she seems to be out here for fun.”

“How old would she be, father?”

“Let me think now. Let me think back. She must be some years older than you, child. But it’ll be a good thing for you to have a companion for a time, who isn’t an old fogey. Of course we are both talking round our hats, as neither of us have the ghost of a notion what she’s like, and won’t have till we see her.”

“Well, we’ll chance it,” said Edala.

“That’s the best way. And now I think I’ll get on a horse and take a turn round. Old Patolo may be letting his cattle stray in this mist.”

Manamandhla the Zulu strode over the sopping veldt quite indifferent to the rain which beat down upon his bare head, and strove to permeate the thick folds of his green blanket, and while he walked he was thinking out a plan.

The subject of his thoughts was not tragical, not even weighty except as regarded his own immediate wants. He was tired of goat, he wanted beef and plenty of it. How should he get it? He thought he knew.

He could not expect Thornhill to kill a full grown beast, or any kind, even for him. But beef he hankered for, and have it he must. So now he held straight on over the veldt to where he knew he should find the cattle.

The mist was all in his favour, in fact it had suggested his plan, which was an ingenious one. He ascended the nearest ridge of the Sipazi mountain, his ears open. Presently both sound and scent told him he had come upon the object of his quest. In a moment more the forms of grazing cattle all round him, told that he was in the middle of the herd.

Some of the beasts snuffed and started, showing a tendency to canter away; others merely raised their heads and went on grazing as though nothing had happened. But this was not how he proposed to obtain beef. He had a broad assegai beneath his blanket, but he would not use it—not yet.

He crooned a milking song in a low tone as he went through the herd This had the effect of keeping quiet any of the wilder animals which might have been disposed to panic and stampede at the suddenness of his appearance in their midst. But he kept on edging more and more to the left; with the result that the animals on that side gave way more and more in the same direction, as he intended they should.

The cloud wreaths on this side took the form of spiral twirls, and a fresh, cold draught struck Manamandhla on the left ear. This was as it should be. Here the ground ended and the cliff began.

It was not the great overhanging cliff at the summit of the mountain, but the beginning of the same, and might have meant a sixty or seventy feet drop. But between the apparent brow of the krantz and the actual one was about ten feet of grass slope—a slope so steep as to be well-nigh precipitous, and in weather like this, deadly slippery. Now, as Manamandhla uttered a quick bark, at the same time flapping his blanket, the suddenly terrified animals between him and the brow, started at a run, plunging wildly, some this way, some that, to gallop off in wild panic. Not all though—all save one—and that a nearly full grown call It, he saw disappear over the brow, instinctively seeking safety upon the precipitous slope.

The Zulu chuckled. Crouching low, he was upon the brink in a moment, and peering over. There stood the poor stupid beast—a white one—its head down, and with difficulty keeping its footing. Manamandhla sprang up suddenly, again uttering a bark and flapping his blanket downwards. The poor animal, frenzied now with panic, made a wild frantic plunge, lost its footing and slid over the brink of the sheer cliff. Manamandhla had obtained his beef.

He emitted a chuckle of glee as the dull thud of the fallen carcase came up from below, then turned—to find himself face to face with—Thornhill.

The latter was standing some twelve or fifteen yards away, his right hand in his right pocket. Ever quick of perception, the Zulu grasped this fact and its significance. Instinctively he dropped into a half crouching attitude—the attitude of a wild beast preparing for its spring—and the grip of the broad assegai beneath his blanket tightened.

“No use, Manamandhla. You would be dead before you had taken five steps.”

The Zulu knew this. Even were it otherwise he had no wish for the other’s death—not just yet, at any rate. It was more profitable to himself to keep him alive. But for the moment he felt like a cornered animal, quick, desperate, dangerous.

“One of the beasts has gone over, Inqoto,” he said. “I would have prevented it, but when I tried to drive it back I drove it over instead. It is a pity.”

“It is. You were in want of beef, I think, Manamandhla,” was the answer, faintly mocking.

“*Whau*! Inqoto has not a very open hand, and I was tired of goat. There are ‘mouths’ on this mountain that do not return that which—those whom—they swallow. But there is one which can be got into by men with long lines. And—what would they find? Ah—ah! What would they find?”

The Zulu felt secure now, and yet, had he only known it, he had never stood in more deadly peril in his life. Thornhill had been waiting for some such chance as this and now it had come. For, from the moment he had arrived unobserved upon the scene all its opportunities had flashed upon his mind. The Zulu had deliberately driven one of his cattle over the

krantz, and on being detected in the act had rushed upon him with an assegai; for he could pretty shrewdly guess what the other held concealed beneath the blanket. He had shot his assailant dead, in self defence, as he had no other alternative than to do. Thus he would be rid of this incubus, this blackmailer, and once more would be at peace. The time and opportunity had come.

Manamandhla must have read his thoughts. Hard and desperately, yet with the quickness of lightning, he was calculating his chances. A sudden zig-zagging spring might cause his enemy to miss, and he would be upon him before he had time to fire again. The two—the white man and the dark man—thus stood fronting each other in the spectral wreaths of the drear mist, each resolved that one or other of them should not leave that spot alive. Thornhill spoke again.

"I am tired of you, Manamandhla. You can leave this place, do you hear? and it will not be well for you to come near it again. You are of no further use to me. So you may go. *Hamba gahle*."

But these last words of farewell, which the speaker intended should signal Manamandhla's departure in a very different sense, were scarcely uttered. A dark form, the form of a man, immediately behind the Zulu, and in a direct line with him, loomed through the mist; and the voice of old Patolo, the cattle-herd, was raised in greeting to his master. The latter knew that his opportunity had passed. He could not shoot Manamandhla in the presence of a witness, and of course the could not shoot old Patolo at all.

"*Nkose*," said the latter. "I fear that the cattle will be difficult to collect in the thickness of this cloud. But those that remain out will not stray far, and we can collect them in the morning."

"One has fallen over this cliff, Patolo," said Manamandhla, as calmly as though no deadly tragedy had been averted by a mere moment of time. Then to Thornhill: "*Nkose*, had I not better go over to the location and collect some boys to skin and cut up the beef? It may be that there is some of it yet uninjured and good enough for the Great House."

"That you had better do, Manamandhla," answered Thornhill, with equal *sang-froid*. "And lose no time, before it grows dark."

And, turning, he left them, to go back to where he had left his horse.

This was how Manamandhla obtained the beef he hankered after—and plenty of it.

Chapter Fourteen.

Manamandhla's Strategy.

A week went by, and Thornhill got an answer to his letter. His son could not possibly get away just then. His partner was seriously ill, and as for business—why, if not as brisk as might be wished, there was quite enough of it to keep one man's hands full. He was awfully sorry, but would take a run down as soon as ever he could break away. So wrote Hyland.

Thornhill was bitterly disappointed. He seemed to feel it far more than he had thought it possible for him to do. He would have given much at that juncture to have had the boy at his side, he told himself. He felt very isolated, very much alone. Edala, though now and then she broke out into fits of playfulness—and these, he suspected, were, more often than not, forced—yet kept up a sort of dutiful reserve towards him. There was no spontaneity in her affection, even when any sign of possession of any such sentiment did appear. Well, ingratitude was ingrained in the female. No one had better reason to realise that than himself.

And this unknown relative who had written to announce her being—nothing more had been heard of—or from—her. He had expected a wire by return notifying her start, but a week had gone by, ten days, then a fortnight and no wire, not even a letter. Did every member of the feminine persuasion imagine that the universe was built for her sole convenience? was his comment upon the omission to Edala.

The latter suggested that the telegram might have been twisted into a wrong meaning by some chuckle-headed operator; would it not be as well to send another? But her father was in no mood for doing anything of the kind.

"I don't believe in that theory," he said. "Here's a feminine person who writes to know if I can take her in. I reply post haste that I can and welcome, and I hear no more about it. Well, she can stop away if she prefers it. I'm not going routing around to beseech her to come."

Edala answered that she didn't care either way. As a matter of fact though enthusiastic enough on the arrival of the unknown's letter the thing had hung fire. And then, deep down in her innermost mind lay another reason. She would not have admitted it even to herself, but it was there for all that and—it spelt Elvesdon.

The latter had been a good deal over at Sipazi. He was an excellent and astute official, but somehow, while neglecting none of his duties, he had found time and opportunity to make frequent visits, and he was always welcome. Thornhill and his daughter treated him, in fact, as if they had known him all their lives, which caused him intense satisfaction.

He was interested in this girl—indeed by that time powerfully attracted. The fair refined face, the straight fearless eyes, the smile that would light up the whole expression, the merry peal of spontaneous laughter—all this had an effect upon him that was inexpressibly bewitching. He had never seen anyone like her before—no, not in the least like her. That picture of her, standing erect, wide-eyed and fearless, waiting to be of use in the struggle with the monster serpent, had never even begun to fade in his mind. She was grand.

Towards himself Edala for her part was undoubtedly attracted. She looked forward to his visits, and greeted him with unfeigned pleasure when he appeared. He talked so well, and never failed to interest and amuse her. He had been about and had seen so much, and moreover there was a subtle suggestion of strength about him that appealed to her vividly. To most of her male acquaintance Edala assumed a sort of unconscious attitude of stiffening up. The youthful side of it represented to her so many puppies whose eyes had yet to open; the more mature side so many prigs who bored or patronised her. This man did neither. He neither talked up to her, nor down—she would have despised him for the first

and resented him for the second. He simply treated her as a rational being with a full share of intelligence and ideas—and no surer road could he have taken towards her approval.

Having said so much it is not surprising that Edala's feelings as regarded her new relative's proposed visit should, by this time, have undergone some degree of modification. This stranger—of whose very outward appearance she was entirely ignorant—might conceivably prove one too many, the more so that the stranger was what her father had just described as "a member of the feminine persuasion." She was not in the least in love with Elvesdon; she was far too evenly balanced to let herself go like that at such short notice. But she felt a strong proprietary interest in him as a friend worth having; wherefore in the background lurked that cloud of half unconscious jealousy. Yet that very jealousy itself ought to have warned her.

Thornhill, watching developments, was anything but displeased. As a Civil servant Elvesdon was not likely to amass wealth, but he was a good official and likely to get on. His personal opinion of the man we have already set forth, and it he had seen no reason to modify. If the present excellent understanding between him and Edala came to anything more permanent, why so much the better.

A fortnight had gone by since Manamandhla's craving for beef had so nearly brought that enterprising savage to an untimely end: and the Zulu had been comfortably dwelling on the place ever since and showed not the smallest symptom of moving. He made a show of helping here and there, as an excuse for drawing his—plentiful—rations, nor was he ever out of snuff, and he frequently enjoyed other luxuries. But for all this he knew he was living on a volcano.

Thornhill was getting desperate. For hours he would lie awake at night devising some scheme for ridding himself of his oppressor. If only that plan had been carried out on the mountain that day! If only old Patolo had arrived upon the scene half a minute later! It was no murder, he decided. A blackmailer was a pest to the human race. Extermination was only the just fate of such. This one was robbing him of his peace, therefore his destruction was as nothing to the price he had paid to purchase that peace. One day Manamandhla said:

"*Nkose*, my brother's son is paying *lobola* for a girl, over there, in Zululand. He still needs two cows to complete the price, but the son of a richer man has offered one cow and a goat beyond the price he can pay. Shall he not therefore have the two cows—as *Nkose* has known me so long and is as our father?"

The outrageous impudence of this demand hardly surprised Thornhill, who, of course, was fully aware that the needs of the 'brother's son' did not exist. He gazed fixedly at the Zulu for some moments and the faces of both men were like stone.

"I think I will give you the two cows, Manamandhla, but you can take them away yourself and—not come back. Do you hear—not come back?"

The speaker's expression was savage and threatening. He felt cornered.

"*Au*! Not come back?" repeated the Zulu, softly.

"Not come back. Go all over the world, but this place is the most deadly dangerous spot in it—for you. I solemnly advise you not to return to it. This evening I will give you the two cows—for your brother's son's *lobola*"—he interpolated with a sneer, "and you can go back to Zululand and stay there."

"*Nkose*!"

This conversation took place at the back of the house and the concluding remarks were overheard by Edala. She had never heard her father's voice raised in that tone for many years, and now as she connected the circumstance a dreadful suspicion came into her mind. This Zulu knew too much, and now he was being bribed and threatened in about equal proportions in order in induce him to make himself scarce. Her father's reply that the man was useful, had struck her as hollow and half-hearted at the time it was made.

"I have a bit of good news for you, child," said Thornhill that evening. "Your aversion, Manamandhla, is going—if he hasn't already gone."

"A good thing too," answered the girl, to whom it was no news. "I hope you won't let him come back."

"I think not," said Thornhill, with a dry laugh. "We have had enough of each other."

Edala had been observing the change in her father of late, and now she studied him more closely than ever. The harassed, worried look that had been upon him had suddenly dropped off; simultaneously with the departure of Manamandhla—she did not fail to observe. He became his old calm, even-minded self. But a week later the Zulu returned.

"I would like to serve *Nkose* a little longer," was his tranquil explanation, when tackled by Thornhill. The latter looked at him in silence for a few minutes. To the Zulu this deliberation gave no anxiety.

"You can stay then," was the reply, uttered grimly.

"*Nkose* is my father. He will care for me. Were I dead there are two others, two of my own blood, who know that there are 'mouths' on Sipazi which swallow up men—who know which one it is that gives not back that which it swallows—but yet that which it swallows could be brought back with long lines. And I—*whau*, I know of one of these 'mouths' which gives back that which it swallows, but gives them back lame for the rest of life."

Here was a contingency that had clean escaped Thornhill's calculations. However, he showed no sign of being perturbed by the statement. Was it true? A little reflection convinced him that in all probability it was not. Manamandhla would never be such a fool as to share a momentous secret—a, to him, valuable secret—with another, let alone with two others. But he would pretend to believe it, all the same; so would the blackmailer be thrown the more off his guard.

"Did your brother's son succeed with the additional two cows, Manamandhla?" he said, airily, taking no notice of the Zulu's last remark.

“Nearly. Not quite. It is in the air still. *Nkose*, two more would complete the *lobola*, for the girl is fine and much sought after, and her father—*whau*! he is miserly and loves cattle much.”

“Yet I think one more will content him. We will talk further about it.” And Thornhill laughing to himself turned away.

“So we have got that beast back again? I thought he had gone for good,” said Edala, her straight, clear glance full on her father’s face.

“Meaning Manamandhla? So did I, but I don’t think he’ll stay long—no, not long.”

Still she kept her glance upon him, and though the words were spoken easily, naturally, and without any outward intonation of significance, it seemed to Thornhill that the girl read his thoughts, his intent. She, like himself, could school her face, yet not altogether. Its expression now seemed to reveal horror, loathing, repulsion—yet not for Manamandhla. Reading it, something moved him to say:

“I have been thinking things over, Edala, and perhaps, after all, I can see my way towards letting you carry out your cherished wish—that of going to Europe to study art seriously. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

She made no answer. He had expected her to brighten up at the suggestion.

“You are not happy here, and I—well perhaps I am getting more than a little tired of living in an atmosphere of chronic suspicion and repulse. And yet, child, the time may come—and come too late—when you will bitterly regret the care of a father who has been to you as very few fathers within my experience have ever been to their children—in fact, I can hardly recall the case of one. But there—ingratitude is only to be expected, in fact nothing else could be under all the circumstances.”

This with intense bitterness. His self control had momentarily broken down. The girl, who had begun to soften, grew hard again.

“I don’t know that I’ve anything to be so thankful and appreciative over—under all the circumstances,” she said, with a scathing emphasis on the echo of his words. He looked at her fixedly, sadly.

“Not now, but that will come. That will come—perhaps when it is too late.”

His tone was quiet, and there was a sad conviction of prophecy in the words that again softened her—almost frightened her—as he turned away. In a moment a huge impulse moved her to go after him and declare that she had no wish whatever to leave him; that she would give no thought in the world to any consideration but himself; that she had been horribly hard and ungrateful and selfish; but assuredly some demoniacal influence was floating in the air just then, for the impulse passed. And her father, too, was striving to harden his heart. Why not? A man never ceased to gain in experience of life and human nature even if he lived to a hundred; and he himself was only in his prime. Why then break his heart over that which was only to have been expected?

By an effort he dismissed the subject from his mind. The latter then reverted to the subject of Manamandhla, and the result of his meditations boded no good to that ill-advised Zulu.

Chapter Fifteen.

A Revelation—with a Vengeance.

“Then, it wouldn’t have killed him, Vine?”

“I think not. I could not quite locate the stuff. You see I have had no opportunity of making a study of these native drugs. They take precious good care we shan’t,” answered the District Surgeon.

Elvesdon was conscious of a sense of relief at this verdict. It would save complications at any rate. He would not now be obliged to open up a serious enquiry at a time when the native pulse had to be fingered very carefully.

“But why the deuce should they give him the stuff if it wasn’t to get him out of the way?” he said.

“Well, you see, a drug, even of a poisonous nature, may have other uses than to cause death. It may be administered in sufficiently small proportions to cause a sort of waking stupefaction, a semi-consciousness in which the will power lies torpid, and the recipient may be made to do or say anything which others may choose to make him do or say. Now Zavula is an important chief—a very important chief—and respected as a singularly able and level-headed one, consequently his ‘word’ once uttered would carry more weight than that of upstarts like Babatyana and half a dozen others put together. See?”

“Yes. In other words he’d be of more use to them alive than dead?”

“That’s it. But—by the way, Elvesdon, it’s a pity I didn’t have that bowl a bit sooner. You know traces of some poisons are easier located if investigated early.”

“Yes, but we were both of us so infernally busy. And perhaps neither of us took the thing sufficiently seriously.”

The two were seated in Elvesdon’s inner office, and were, so to say, holding an inquest on the District Surgeon’s investigation of old Zavula’s drinking bowl. The doctor was a sturdy, thick-set man, of anything from fifty onwards but probably much more; grizzled and red-faced; very downright in manner, but genial and well-liked. He and the new magistrate had taken to each other at once.

“Think there’ll be trouble Elvesdon—over the new tax for instance?” said the doctor.

“The Lord only knows, and He won’t tell. I’m doing all I can, but this business of Zavula’s looks more than a bit ugly. I don’t mind telling you. Babatyana’s an infernal scoundrel, and he’s practically chief of the Amahluzi. Poor old Zavula is for all practical purposes only a sleeping partner, I’m afraid.”

“M-m,” said the other.

“Well I think, as you can’t certify that this stuff was enough to constitute an attempt on old Zavula’s life, there’s nothing to be gained by stirring up any mud over the job. He’s cute enough, and obviously able to take care of himself. The jolly old boy sent me quite an affectionate message only the day before yesterday—no—it was the day before that.”

The grisly side to this statement lay in the fact that on the day named the said ‘jolly old boy’ was lying in his unknown grave in the rock cleft—had been for some time—and the whole of the Amahluzi tribe was in a simmering state of incipient rebellion.

“You see a good deal of the Thornhills, don’t you, Elvesdon?” said the doctor, changing the subject.

“Yes. I like them too. It’s a jolly lucky thing, I reckon, to find a man like Thornhill at one’s elbow in a place like this. He’s such a rational, level-headed chap—cultured too, and rattling good company.”

“And the girl—what do you think of her?”

“She’s charming—so unconventional, and high bred to the finger tips, as the French say, or, to put it literally, ‘to the ends of the nails.’ I don’t mind telling you, Vine, that she’s clean outside my experience.”

The older man smiled queerly.

“Yes. She’s a nice girl,” he said, “but—peculiar.”

Now Elvesdon had just reached that stage with regard to Edala that this damning of her with faint praise rather jarred upon him.

“Well but—isn’t she?” he retorted, unwittingly sharply. “Nice—I mean.”

“I said so,” answered the other.

Still Elvesdon was not satisfied. There was something infernally, provokingly, shut-up-like-an-oyster about the tone. He felt moved to ‘draw’ the utterer.

“Peculiar, you said,” he went on. “Yes, that I can believe. Do you know, Vine, the first Sunday I went over there, I had a queer experience. You know that big mountain on their place just opposite the house— Sipazi it is called?” The doctor nodded. “Well then, they took me up there in the afternoon to show me the view. You’ll remember that tremendous krantz that literally overhangs the valley?” Again the other nodded. “Well there’s a beast of a tree that grows out from its brink, horizontally at first, then upwards. There’s just room for one—fool, I was nearly saying—or one and a half, to sit on it. Well what does the young lady do but climb down and sit on it as if she was in an armchair on the stoep at home. It turned me nearly sick to see her do it, I can tell you.”

“I daresay.”

“That’s not all. She skipped up again, and—invited me to do the same.”

“And did you?”

“Well I had to. It was in the nature of a challenge, you see. I tell you squarely and as man to man, I would willingly have forfeited a year’s pay to have got out of it—when I got on to the beastly log, I believe I would have forfeited five. But how could I have backed out of doing a thing a girl had just done, and thought nothing of? Ugh! it gives me the cold shivers all down the back even now, to look back on those few moments when I sat, hung out in mid-air, over that ghastly height. And, you must remember the krantz slopes away *inwards* from the top just there. Ugh!”

Vine sat back in his chair and chuckled. Elvesdon was obviously an imaginative chap, he was saying to himself. Why, as he told the story he was going through the experience again, and part of its horror had taken hold on him.

“Well, what did she say when you came back?” he said.

“That I was the only one besides herself who had ever done it. She had asked several, and they had all cried off. I don’t say it to brag, mind—in proof whereof I don’t mind adding that she said she could see I was in a beastly funk all the time, because my hand on the branch of the infernal tree shook, and, by the Lord, it did.”

“Reminds one of the old yam about the lady and the knight and the jay’s nest on the castle wall,” said the doctor. “Never mind, Elvesdon. I’m one of those who funked going on it. She asked me to once.”

“The devil she did.”

“Yes. I told her straight I was much too old and fat to launch out in those circus experiments. But that excuse wouldn’t do with an athletic young ’un like you.”

“Well, several other ‘athletic young ’uns’ seem to have shied at it anyway. Here, I seem to be bragging again but I don’t mean to. Of course a man’s a fool to try and do a thing of that sort if he knows he can’t. Still, I thought I could—at a pinch.” And again the listener chuckled.

“By the way, Vine,” said Elvesdon tentatively, “you’ve been here a long time and I’m only a new broom. Did you know Thornhill’s wife?”

“Yes.”

“What was she like. You know I’ve been over at their place several times, and have never seen any portrait of her of any kind. Nor have I ever heard her alluded to in any way.”

“No. You wouldn’t be likely to.”

Elvesdon nodded.

“I see,” he said.

“No—not that. You’re on the wrong track. Look here, Elvesdon,” went on the doctor, gravely. “You’d better have the real position from me, since you’re sure to have it sooner or later from somebody else, and then probably more or less inaccurately given. The wonder to me is that you’ve heard nothing about it already, but I suppose the few people round here, seeing you were rather thick with Thornhill, concluded to keep their heads shut.”

“But, Vine, what *is* the mystery? What the devil *is* the mystery? Let’s have it.”

He was speaking quickly, excitedly. For the life of him he could not help it.

“Thornhill is supposed to have murdered his wife,” answered Vine.

“Good God!”

Elvesdon had started up in his chair, as if he had suddenly realised the presence of a pin in the cushion, and then sat back, staring at the other; and indeed his amazement was little to be wondered at, for to be suddenly told that a man for whom he had conceived a sincere liking and regard, and a growing friendship, was a probable murderer, was disconcerting, to say the least of it.

“‘Supposed’? Exactly. But it was never proved against him?” he said, recovering himself and feeling somewhat relieved. “As, of course it couldn’t have been or he wouldn’t be where he is now. What were the facts?”

“Mrs Thornhill disappeared.”

“How and where?”

“‘How’ is just what nobody knows. ‘Where’—on their own place, same place they’re living on now.”

“What would the motive have been?” Elvesdon had collected himself. He was vividly interested but was becoming magisterial again.

“Motive? Plenty of that; in fact that’s what made things look sultry against Thornhill. She led him the devil of a life. To put it briefly, Thornhill’s version was that she rushed out of the house one night after a more than ordinarily violent ‘breeze,’ making all sorts of insane announcements. He did not follow her immediately, as he said at the time, partly because he wanted to give her time to come to her senses, partly because—and here he was injudiciously frank, in that he supplied motive and turned public opinion against himself—he honestly did not care what happened to her, so sick was he of the life she had been leading him. He said nothing about her disappearance at first, explaining that he expected her back at any minute, in which case he would have made a fool of himself all about nothing.”

“Couldn’t he have taken up her spoor?” said Elvesdon.

“Not much. There had been a succession of violent thunder-storms, and the face of the veldt was washed smooth by torrential rains. No spoor to be taken up.”

“By Jove, it’s a mysterious affair,” said Elvesdon. “How long ago was it, by the way?”

“Eighteen or nineteen years. He was arrested and kept in the *tronk* for some weeks, while every hole and corner of his farm was searched. They even dug up the cattle-kraals in search of remains—you know, Elvesdon, like that Moat Farm business in England a year or two ago—only of course in this case they found nothing. Thornhill half laughed when he was told of this, only saying that he had never for a moment imagined they would. Well of course, there was only one way out; for no one knows better than yourself that a man can’t be put upon his trial for murder until it is proved that a murder has been committed, which in this case it seemed impossible to do. So our friend was turned loose again.”

“Of course. But what of the general opinion. Was it believed he’d done it?”

“That’s just how it was. Not a man Jack or woman Jill but was firmly convinced of it, and for a long time he was practically boycotted. For the matter of that, even now they don’t get many visitors you may have noticed.”

“Yes. That has occurred to me. By the way. Vine, what about the children. How did the suspicion affect them as they grew up? Did they believe it?”

“The boys didn’t, but the strange and sad part of it is that the girl did, and does still.”

Elvesdon started.

“And—does still?” he echoed. “I see.”

Now the situation stood explained. Edala’s strange behaviour, the cold aloofness with which she treated her father, except at rare intervals. Heavens, what a ghastly shadow to lie between them! Yet, as it did so he, perhaps her behaviour was not altogether unnatural.

“The boys didn’t believe it?” he repeated.

"No—never. They grew up firmly refusing to believe it. They were fine youngsters. Jim, poor chap, was killed in the Matopos in '96. He was the eldest. Hyland is broking at the Rand. By the way, Thornhill was telling me the other day that he expected him down on a visit."

"Yes, I know. There was someone else he was expecting, an English relative. She wrote to him from Durban, inviting herself, and he wired her back to roll up as soon as she liked. Then he heard nothing more about her. By the *Lord*, I wonder," he broke off. "I wonder if she got hold of this yam about him, and concluded to stop away. It might be."

"So it might. But what I wonder at, Elvesdon, is that this affair should be all news to you. Why it caused some considerable kick up at the time."

"At the time. That's just it. It must have been during the couple of years I was over in England and the States.—Come in," as a knock came at the door.

"Please sir," said the native constable, who was proud of airing his English, "dere's one lady—like see *Nkose*."

"One lady? Look here Isaac. Do you mean a 'lady' or some *bywoner vrouw*, come for a summons against somebody?"

"Dis one lady, sir. She ask for Mr Elvesdon, not for de magistrate."

"Oh, show her in. Don't go, doctor, till we see what she wants."

Chapter Sixteen.

The New Arrival.

The native constable was holding open the door. There was a soft rustle of feminine attire as its wearer crossed the empty Court room, and the newcomer entered.

"Mr Elvesdon, I believe?" she said, after a rapid glance at both men, and easily identifying the right one. "I must introduce myself. My name is Carden—Evelyn Carden—and you may have heard of me from Mr Thornhill. He lives near here, does he not?"

"Yes. About two hours. Sit down, Miss Carden," handing her a chair. "As a matter of fact I have heard of you. The Thornhills have been wondering that they did not—after your letter."

The newcomer's eyebrows went up in surprise.

"The Thornhills not heard!" she exclaimed wonderingly. "But they must have. Why I wired from Durban here, just as I was directed; but it was to put off coming just then. And they never received it?"

"No. I can answer for that. Er—by the way, did you send it yourself, Miss Carden?"

"Well, no. The fact is I didn't. I gave it, the wire, and also a letter, to a coolie porter at a station just this side of Pinetown—I forget the name—to send for me."

Elvesdon smiled.

"That accounts for the whole trouble," he said.

All this time he had been taking stock of the newcomer. She was of fair height, and plainly but unmistakably well dressed. She had straight features and a reposeful expression, an abundance of light brown hair, and clear grey eyes. She had just missed being exactly pretty, yet the face was an attractive one, and there was an atmosphere of refinement and *savoir faire* about her that left no room for doubt as to her standing in the social scale. She seemed about two or three and thirty in point of age—in reality she was not more than twenty-eight. All this he summed up in a flash, as he went through the above preliminary formalities.

"This is Dr Vine, our District Surgeon, Miss Carden," he said in introduction. "Are you travelling alone, may I ask?"

"Yes. This time I thought I'd spring a surprise on my unknown relative, so of course I was obliged to hire a cart at Telani—the driver is such a disagreeable old man, by the bye. And the horses are wretched beasts. Why I had to stop the night at a most abominable roadside place—an accommodation house, I think they called it—presumably because 'accommodation' in every sense, was the very last thing they had to offer." She laughed, so did the two men.

"Then there was a monster centipede kept appearing and disappearing on the wall above my bed, so that I had to keep the light going all night, and hardly got any sleep at all. And now one of the horses is dead lame, and I am wondering how I am going to get on to Mr Thornhill's—unless you can help me, Mr Elvesdon."

There was a something in the tone of this tail-off that conveyed to the listeners the impression that she was very much accustomed to being 'helped'—in things great as well as small—and made no scruple about requisitioning such help.

"Certainly I can, Miss Carden," answered Elvesdon. "If you will allow me I shall be delighted to drive you out to Thornhill's this afternoon. Meanwhile it is just lunch time—if you will give me the pleasure of your company—you too, doctor? Very well then, we may as well adjourn at once."

During lunch Elvesdon was somewhat silent. He had directed his native servants when to inspan his spider and to transfer the visitor's baggage to that useful vehicle—further, he had arranged matters with the driver of the hired cart, an unprepossessing specimen of what would be defined in the Southern States as 'mean white,' and while doing so, the astounding revelation made to him by Vine had come back to him with all its full force. He did not know what to think. Thornhill seemed to him the last man in the world to commit a cold-blooded murder—and that the murder of a woman—

but—what if it was a hot-blooded one? Looking back upon his observation of this new found friend he recalled a certain something that contained the possibilities of such—goaded by the weight of an intolerable incubus. And his sons believed in him and his daughter did not? Well, Elvesdon leaned to the opinion of the sons, and all his official instinct weighed on that side. There was absolutely no evidence that any crime had been effected at all, and did not the legal text-books teem with instances of disappearance for which innocent people had been executed in the 'good old times'? Why of course. No. He at any rate was going to keep an open mind, and turn into fact the time-worn legal fiction that the accused was innocent until he was proved guilty.

So he was rather silent during lunch. The weight of Vine's revelation was still on him; but the newcomer was quite at her ease and chatted away with Prior and the doctor.

But later, when they were bowling away merrily behind a fresh, well trotting pair of horses bound for Sipazi, he was obliged to put this new train of thought out of his head, for the new arrival plied him with all sorts of questions, as to the country and its natives, and other things; then got on to the subject of Thornhill.

"I have never seen him, you know, Mr Elvesdon, since I was ever so small. I don't know anything really about him beyond what my poor mother told me. By the way—did he marry again?"

Elvesdon started unconsciously. In his present train of thought he was wondering how much she knew as to the matter about which he had only just heard.

"No. He has one girl at home now, and a boy away at the Rand."

"Oh. That's nice. Tell me. What is the girl like?"

"Charming. She's like no other girl I've ever seen."

The reply was made in a perfectly even tone, without any perceptible enthusiasm. The other was interested at once.

"What's her name?"

"Edala. Peculiar name isn't it?"

"Rather. Do you think we shall get on?"

Elvesdon burst out laughing.

"I should think it highly probable that you would. She is very unconventional—and you—well if you don't mind my saying so, Miss Carden, I should think the same held good as regards yourself."

"Of course I don't mind your saying so; and it happens to be true. I like being talked to rationally, and not talked down to—as you men are too given to talking to us women. You know—a sort of humouring us, as if we were a lot of spoilt children."

"But you must remember that if we don't humour you, 'you women,' or at any rate the majority of you, vote us disagreeable if not rude; a favourite word with 'you women' by the way. It has such a fine, sonorous, roll-round-the-tongue flavour, you know."

Evelyn Carden laughed—and laughed merrily. Elvesdon noticed that her laugh was light, open, free-hearted. There was no affectation, or posing, about it.

"I like that," she said, "the more so that it is absolutely true. I suppose you are often over at the Thornhills', Mr Elvesdon, as you are so near?"

"Oh yes. I put in Sundays with them, and enjoy it. Your relative is a particularly cultured and companionable man, Miss Carden, and in his quiet way, very genial."

"And—Edala?"

This with just a spice of mischief, which the other ignored.

"I have already given you my opinion on that subject," he said.

"How delightful. I am so glad I came up here. I only put it off because some people whose acquaintance I made on board ship asked me out to stay with them at their place near Malvern. I do hope, though, that Mr Thornhill won't be offended with me about the non-delivery of the wire, but it really wasn't my fault."

Here Elvesdon did not entirely agree. He thought she ought to have made more sure. But he said:

"You need have no uneasiness on that score. Thornhill is a man with a large up-country experience, and I know of no better training for teaching a man to take things as they come."

"Better and better," she pronounced. "Why, how interesting he will be. But, you yourself, Mr Elvesdon—you must have some strange experiences too?"

"Well, you see, one can't go through an official life like mine without. But, for the most part, they are experiences of queer and out of the way phases of human nature. I haven't had any serious adventures if that's what you mean."

"No?"

"No. Never mind. I'm used to that note of disappointment. When I was over in England on leave three years and a half ago, I was always being asked how many lions I'd shot—the impression apparently being that one strolled out after

office hours and bagged a few brace—and I answered frankly that I'd never seen a lion outside a cage—though I've heard them, by the way, at a long and respectful distance—I went down like a shot in general estimation. At last I began to feel like Clive, when hauled up over the looting business, 'astonished at my own moderation,' and thought it time to invent a lion lie or two. But it was too late then."

Again she laughed—heartily, merrily. She turned a glance of unmitigated approval upon the man beside her. He, too, seemed rather unlike other people, with his easy, unconventional flow of talk and ideas; yet whether his life had been spent outside the sphere of adventure or not, she felt certain that given an emergency he would prove the strong, capable official, ready and able to deal with it at the critical or perilous moment.

Elvesdon's mind, too, was running upon her and he was speculating as to the effect her presence would have upon those among whom her lot was to be cast for a time. She was bright, lively, natural; just the very companion for Edala, though somewhat older. Thornhill, too, wanted livening up; and now, seen in the light of the revelation he had heard that morning, Elvesdon thoroughly understood the restraint which had lain upon that household of two. This stranger from the outside world was just the one to take both out of themselves.

They left the more open rolling country, where the road suddenly dived down into the bosky ruggedness of a long winding valley, and here Evelyn grew enthusiastic over the romantic grandeur of the black forest-clad rifts sloping down from a great row of castellated crags. Here, too, bird and animal life seemed suddenly to blossom into being. Troops of monkeys skipped whimsically among the tree-tops chattering at the wayfarers, and the piping of bright spreuws flashing from frond to frond among the thorn bushes, and the call of the hoepoe, and the mellow cooing of doves making multitudinous melody throughout the broad valley into which they were descending, together with the quaint, grating duet of the yellow thrush—then, too, the deep boom of great hornbills stalking among the grass and stones, yonder, down the slope—all blended harmoniously in the unclouded evening calm, for the sun was near his rest now, and the stupendous krantz fronting the Sipazi mountain shone like fire.

"Why, it is glorious," declared the newcomer gazing around. "What a lovely country this is."

"There's our destination," said Elvesdon, pointing to the homestead lying on the farther side of the valley beneath, whence already the dogs were announcing their arrival in deep-mouthed clamour. "And there are your relatives," he added, as two figures could be seen coming down from the front stoep, "and they are already taking stock of us through binoculars."

Thornhill's greeting was quiet but cordial.

"Welcome to Sipazi," he said. "We had about given you up, but better late than never. I am afraid you'll find it dull here, but after all, it'll be a new experience I should think."

"Of course it will, Mr Thornhill, and a delightful one. So this is—Edala." And the two girls kissed each other.

"How did you know my name?" said Edala, with a laugh.

"Why you don't suppose I haven't been 'pumping' Mr Elvesdon all about you during our most delightful drive out here, do you? Of course I have." And then she began entering upon explanations as to the seeming silence in answer to the telegram.

"Oh well, no matter. You're here now, anyhow," answered Thornhill characteristically. And Evelyn Carden, looking up into the strong, bearded, rather melancholy face, was deciding that she was going to like its owner very much indeed; and Elvesdon superintending the process of outspanning, was wondering whether these two girls were going to take to each other; and Edala was thinking that they were.

But—somehow, with the faintest possible twinge of uneasiness, the emphasis on those words 'our most delightful drive' jarred on her.

Chapter Seventeen.

A Trap—and a Tragedy.

Four men were seated together within a hut. This hut was one of half a dozen which constituted a small kraal, standing at the foot of a smooth perpendicular cliff.

Two of these four we have already seen and two we have not. The former were Babatyana and Nxala; of the latter, one was Nteseni, an influential chief whose kraals adjoined those of Babatyana, while the fourth was Zisiso, a witch-doctor of great, though secret repute. As was to be expected they were plotting. It was night, and the other inhabitants of the kraal, if such there were, slept.

"So my *múti* was not strong enough, Nxala?" the witch-doctor was saying. "*Au*! I have never known it like that before."

"He who is gone was old, my father, and his hand shook," was the answer. "Who, then, may say as to the strength of the *múti* when scattered upon the floor of a hut? And now Ntwezi has the vessel that contained it."

"That should have broken in pieces," murmured Zisiso.

"Yet it did not, for it reached not the ground."

"Ntwezi is ever suspicious," commented the old man.

"Ever suspicious. But there is one who serves him who would serve him no longer. He will be here to-night."

“That is well. We will hear him.”

This witch-doctor, Zisiso, was a mild, pleasant, genial-mannered old man, to all outward appearance, especially when he came in contact with Europeans. Then, there was no limit to the gentle, self-deprecating plausibility with which he alluded to himself. Elvesdon, for one, had been completely taken in by him, and was, in fact, rather partial to him. More than one missionary had taken him in hand; with conspicuous success from the point of view of the missionary. But he never attended their services or meetings. He was too old, he said. Still he was glad to have heard such a good ‘word.’ He would welcome death now, because he was longing to see all the beautiful things which the *Abafundisi* had told him were coming after.

The witch-doctor’s trade is forbidden by the laws of the Colony, but it is carried on for all that. The good old custom of ‘smelling out’ has of course disappeared, but what may not be done impressively and in the light of day can be done just as effectively without making any fuss. Someone obnoxious dies or disappears, there are plenty of ways of accounting for his absence. He has gone away to the mines to earn money, or he has trodden on a nail, and contracted tetanus, or his cows gave diseased milk—and so forth. For old Zisiso was a past master on the subject of both external and internal poisons.

It may readily be imagined in what respectful dread he was held among the tribes. Even influential chiefs, such as these here assembled, dared not incur his ill-will, otherwise it is probable that he would have met with a violent and mysterious death long before; besides they never knew when they might not be glad to turn his services to their own account. Even the educated, semi-civilised natives dared not for their lives have done anything to arouse his hostility.

The new Ethiopian movement was to Zisiso utterly laughable, and such exponents of it as the Rev. Job Magwegwe too contemptible for words. But he was too polite to make public his views. A considerable section of the people had thrown themselves into it, and the movement seemed spreading. As an *isanusi* all his instincts were to make a study of it lest haply he might turn it to account.

Old Zisiso’s professional instincts were not in themselves ignoble, in that they were not dictated by lust of gain, or cupidity, beyond a certain ingrained acquisitiveness common to all savages. Thanks to his wide and mysterious powers, to which allusion has been made, he was already rich in possessions beyond his needs, for he was too old to *lobola* for more wives. No, it was sheer pride in his profession, similar to that which might prompt the civilised man of science to welcome and investigate any new departure in scientific discovery. But of course the aim towards which Magwegwe and his associates and employers were supposed to be working, was, in the shrewd eyes of this old sorcerer, the veriest humbug.

Personally he had no particular desire to see the whites ‘driven into the sea’; an eventuality he was far too astute to believe for a moment possible. He was old enough to remember how, under former kings in Zululand, those of his craft, no matter how eminent and skilled, held their lives and possessions on precarious tenure. Dingane and Mpande, for instance, expected a great deal—a great deal too much—from their sorcerers. Cetywayo, to be sure, did not bother his head about them, to speak of. But there, under the rule of the *Amangisi*, he and his brother witch-doctors could practise unhindered, always provided they did so with due care and secrecy. What, then, was to be gained by trying to upset the existing state of things?

These considerations should, on every ground of reason and self-interest, have ranged old Zisiso on the side of law and order, yet they did not. The South African native is a strangely complex animal, and there are times when it is impossible to tell what line he may or may not adopt, no matter how powerfully self-interest ought to move him in a given direction, and such was the case with this one. Most probably he was actuated by the sheer love of plotting which had characterised his profession from time immemorial; which in fact, was absolutely essential to the keeping-up of its very existence.

“He who comes this night,” went on Nxala, “he who comes this night, will bring back the drinking bowl of him who is gone. He has put another in its place, and when the white doctor sees it, *au*! he will pronounce that an *isanusi* of the standing of Zisiso does not know what *múti* is,” he added quizzically.

“I trust not this dog of Ntwezi’s,” said Nteseni, gruffly. This chief had a strong and heavy face, and though large of frame, unlike most of his rank his size was not due to obesity—the result of a great indulgence in *tywala* and very little exercise. On the contrary he was a savage of weight and muscle, and would have proved an uncommonly tough customer even to a more than average white man if once they got to close grips.

“Nobody trusts anybody, brother,” murmured the old witch-doctor, pleasantly. “Yet we will hear what he has to say.”

“We will hear,” echoed Babatyana, getting out his snuff-box, and passing it round. Nxala prodded the fire with a stick, and the embers flared up. There was silence as the four sat, taking snuff, the firelight glinting on the shine of their headrings. Suddenly the raucous yaps of a superannuated cur were heard outside.

“Here is the man from Ntwezi’s, brother,” said Babatyana turning to Nxala. “Go out to him or he may be afraid.”

He addressed obeyed. Those within the hut could hear the murmur of deep tones. Then Nxala reappeared, followed by the stranger.

The latter was clad in European attire. As he stooped through the low, arched doorway Nteseni gave the fire a vigorous kick. It flared up anew in a sudden bright light. Nteseni had seen something—a something which he had expected to see.

The newcomer saluted the chiefs, nor was his greeting of old Zisiso any less respectful. The latter handed him snuff—then added humorously:

“*Ou*! I am old, I am forgetting. Those who are young, and who dwell among the whites, take their *gwai* in the form of smoke. Here is some, my son,” searching for a bag, “and doubtless thou hast a pipe. Fill it then, and we will talk.”

The other murmured a word of acknowledgment, and did as he was told. Then, from the packet of his jacket—which bulged—he drew forth a bundle. This he proceeded to undo, revealing many fragments of baked clay, in short the fragments of a black drinking bowl.

“Here is what I promised my father,” he said, addressing the witch-doctor. “*Whau*! I put another in its place, and now I think the *Dokotela* will believe that Ntwezi is laughing at him.”

“Yet it were better to have brought it whole,” said Nteseni.

“That could I not do,” answered the visitor, who was no other than Elvesdon’s native detective, Teliso. “The shape would have betrayed it.”

“M-m!” hummed the listeners.

Now Nteseni took the fragments and with extraordinary ingenuity and patience began piecing them together. As to the latter—well they had the whole night before them!

“There is not a piece missing,” he pronounced, “no, not even a small piece. To have left such would have been dangerous.”

“Would it not, my father? But I desire the ruin of Ntwezi. He has reduced my pay, and I would be revenged. Further, he has promised to thrash me. I will not go back to him.”

“No, thou wilt not,” returned Nteseni, heavily. “I think thy place is better here among thine own people.”

“*Eh hé*! That is true, my father. Among my own people.”

Nteseni nodded and went out of the hut. There was nothing extraordinary in this, and the new arrival sat there, letting his tongue go freely, uttering, for the most part, sheer inventions—plausible inventions. The while, he would never fail to pause so as to draw forth the comments of his hearers. These, on their side, met him upon his own ground; whether he was taken in or not they could not tell, but by that time it was to them a matter of sheer indifference either way. Nteseni, who had long since re-entered, was, for him, the most communicative.

Now Teliso was a brave man, even braver than those of his race who had distinguished themselves on the battlefield, in that he took risks as a matter of business and in cold blood, such as they would never have dreamed of taking. But such risks, great as some of them had been, especially of late, were as nothing to that which he was taking now. And—all of a sudden he knew it.

His hand dropped carelessly to the right hand pocket of his coat—he had acquired European ways so there was nothing extraordinary about this move. Yet there was nothing whatever to have excited any suspicion on his part. Not a sound had arisen outside. His entertainers sat as before; no weapons were even visible. Old Zisiso seemed half drowsy, and the same held good of Nteseni, while the other two, Babatyana and Nxala were pursuing the conversation in an even, interested tone of voice. No—it was hard to say where any suggestion of peril might have come in, unless it was that wondrous, well-nigh supernatural intuition characteristic of the savage. Yet at that moment Teliso, realised that he had never been in deadlier peril in his life; no, not even when as a very young *umfana* he had raced, with bursting heart, and stumbling steps, and labouring lungs, with the flying Native Contingent, for the roaring, flooded passage of Umzinyati river, driven like dust before the wind by Cetywayo’s pursuing victorious destroyers at Isandhlwana.

At this moment he realised that he had one chance, but a desperate one. He must shoot down, and that with lightning rapidity, at least two out of these four, and one of the two must be Nteseni, but—what a responsibility! Then too, he was but imperfectly skilled in the handling of the weapon which he had instinctively brought for his own protection. He hesitated, and—was lost.

“What is that, brother?” said Nteseni, seizing, with a grip of iron, the wrist of the hand which held the butt of the concealed revolver. At the same time, Nxala who was seated on the other side had pinioned his arms. Both were powerful men, and against them Teliso had not the ghost of a chance, even if Babatyana had not taken the opportunity of slipping the noose of a hitherto concealed thong round his ankles, and drawing it tight. Clearly it was useless to struggle, and in a moment he was securely bound.

“Was this needed among ‘thine own people,’ dog of Ntwezi?” said Nteseni, holding up the revolver which he had drawn from the prisoner’s pocket.

“No longer am! Ntwezi’s dog,” answered the latter.

“And was it not wisdom to bring away a useful weapon against when the time comes?”

“Ah—ah! ‘When the time comes.’ But the time has come—for thee, dog of Ntwezi,” sneered the chief. “There are those who talk with the tongue of the Amangisi who heard Ntwezi himself tell another of thine errand here to-night.”

“And that other?” queried the prisoner.

“I answer no questions,” was the contemptuous reply. “Thy treachery deserves a slow and lingering death, yet we will be merciful.”

He called through the doorway in a low tone, and immediately there entered two men.

“Take him away,” said Nteseni.

A wooden gag was thrust into the unfortunate man’s mouth and he was dragged outside, the three chiefs following. The old witch-doctor remained behind.

Teliso knew that doom awaited him, but now he could not even expostulate. The thong which bound his feet was relaxed sufficiently to admit of his taking short steps and thus he was hurried along—whither he had not the remotest idea.

A red moon, appropriately like a huge globe of blood, was rising over the great cliff which dominated the kraal. On the brink, silhouetted against it, a hyena stood and howled.

“He scents meat,” said Nxala grimly. “Well he will soon have plenty.”

For about half an hour thus they proceeded, their way lighted by the lurid glow of the blood moon. Then they halted.

They had come to the brink of a high cliff which overhung a wild desolate ravine.

“I had intended thee to be slaughtered like a goat, Teliso,” said Nteseni. “The death of the spear is not for such as thee.”

With a desperate effort the prisoner had managed to slip his gag.

“The *Amangisi* have many ropes,” he said. “Even chiefs will hang by some of them before long.” Nteseni laughed.

“I think not,” he answered. “Will yonder moon tell what it has seen? Well, a high leap in the air is before thee, Teliso. Now—take it.”

The unfortunate man hesitated. Those who held him stood aside.

“What? Is it then better to be slaughtered like a goat,” said the chief jeeringly. “Well then, Isazi,” to one of the young men, “thy knife.”

But the threat was enough. The doomed man closed his eyes, tottered, then flung himself forward. A crash and a thud came up to the ears of the listeners.

“You two,” went on the chief, “go down yonder and take off the thongs; his clothing was thick so they will leave no trace. And—I think Ntwezi will need a new dog.”

The redness of the blood moon lightened. Its globe grew golden.

Chapter Eighteen.

Venatorial.

“Father, I think we must take out Evelyn and show her how we shoot bushbucks.”

Thus Edala, one lovely morning at breakfast time.

“I don’t mind. What do you say, Evelyn?”

“That it would be delightful. But shouldn’t I be in your way?”

“Not if you keep quiet, and do as you are told,” said Edala. “Oh, and by the way, don’t wear any colours. It’s astonishing how you miss chances that way.”

“What have I got? Oh I know. I’ve got an old khaki coloured dress. At the time of the Boer war, you know, some of us took on a fit of idiocy in the way of khaki fever. It didn’t last, of course, but I brought the thing out here with me under a sort of vague impression it might be useful in the veldt for knocking-about purposes.”

“The very thing,” cried Edala. “Now go and put it on, and I’ll get into my ‘Robin Hood’ outfit. Father, you see about the horses.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes—and the guns.”

“But—but,” protested the visitor, “I’ve never fired a gun in my life.”

“You’ll soon learn,” returned Edala, tranquilly. “To-day, though, you need only look on.”

“What an Amazon the child is,” laughed Evelyn. “Why I should never learn. I’m much too nervous. Guns—kick—and all that sort of thing, don’t they?”

“Not if you hold them properly. But, that’s where the ‘learning’ part of it comes in. Well, let’s go and get our toggery on.”

Thornhill did not immediately set to work to make arrangements for the coming sport, instead he lit a pipe and sat thinking. Evelyn Carden had been a guest under his roof for nearly three weeks now, and he was ready to own that she had proved a very great acquisition indeed. She had adapted herself so wholeheartedly to their way of life, and she and Edala had taken to each other wonderfully. It was good for Edala to have the companionship of someone approximately near her own age; the difficulty hitherto had been to obtain such companionship for her. And as regarded himself, why her demeanour was perfection. She could talk brilliantly and well upon all his favourite topics, without ever becoming contradictious or argumentative, as is the way of her sex. She forestalled his every want, yet in such a tactful unobtrusive way; and while perfectly frank and unconstrained, she always managed to bring into her intercourse with him just that little scarcely perceptible touch of deference which the difference between their ages rendered so charming. It had more than once occurred to him that Edala might become jealous, but with a certain grim sadness he had recognised that it might not be altogether a bad thing if Edala did.

Now the said Edala reappeared, clad in what she termed her ‘Robin Hood suit,’ which by the way did not denote ‘bloomers’ or any such atrocity, but was merely an exceedingly workman-like blouse and skirt of sage green, an excellent hue for blending with the prevailing tints of the surrounding bush country. Her golden head was crowned by a soft felt

hat, without any adornment whatever.

“Father!” she cried, “you haven’t done anything towards getting up the horses, or getting things ready. And *we* are ready.”

“I don’t see ‘we’ all the same,” he laughed. “I only see one. And the day has hardly begun. Hullo! What’s all that about?”

‘That’ was represented by an abominable and riotous clamour suddenly raised by the dogs, who were lying outside. They had sprung up and were pouring forth hideous defiance to the world at large. Quickly each had seized the binoculars lying always handy for the scrutiny of new arrivals or passers-by in the distance—and were out on the stoep.

“Why it’s Elvesdon and—Prior,” said Thornhill, lowering the glasses. “And they’ve both brought guns. You didn’t send word, did you, that you were plotting this hunt?”

“No, and it’s a beastly bore they’ve turned up just now,” she answered pettishly. “Now I can’t take my gun.”

“Why not?”

“You know I never shoot when there’s a crowd.”

“Oh well. We know Elvesdon well enough by this time, and Prior’s only a young ’un. I wouldn’t let that count.”

Edala did not want much persuading.

“We had better make a whole day of it then,” she said. “I’ll tell Ramasam to put up lunch, and it had better be taken down to Bees’ Nest Kloof by one o’clock.”

“All right, dear. Do that,” said Thornhill rising.

By this time the new arrivals were riding up to the open space in front of the stables; the dogs squirming and leaping around them and uttering a perfectly frantic clamour. But it was an amicable riot this time, for the guns carried by the two officials told those intelligent quadrupeds that sport was afoot, wherefore they were simply beside themselves with delight.

“Well, Elvesdon, how are you—how are you. Prior?” said Thornhill, meeting the pair as they dismounted. “Why this is a case of the veriest telepathy. Edala had just suggested we should show Miss Carden some sport in the kloofs, and here you turn up, just in the very nick of time.”

“That so?” laughed Elvesdon. “Well, there was nothing particular doing to-day, so this fellow here suggested we should invade you with an eye to a buck or two.”

“Glad of it. Come on in. Had breakfast?”

“Oh yes, before we left.”

“Well, you’d better off-saddle for half an hour. We’re not quite ready ourselves.”

Then the two girls came out. If Elvesdon, who was a sportsman to the finger tips, had any misgiving that under the circumstances of two women in the field the bag was likely to prove nothing very great, he decided in his own mind, as he shook hands with Edala, that there were compensations. The very plainness of her attire, the slight flush of expectation in the flower-like face, the eager light in the clear blue eyes, rendered the girl, in his sight, inexpressibly sweet and winning. He thought he would contrive to keep her near him throughout the day, even to the sacrifice, if need be, of his own share of the sport; which, upon those terms, would be no sacrifice at all.

“And you, Miss Carden, are you a Diana too?” he laughed.

“No, no. I’m only going as a spectator.”

“This little girl was shy about taking out a gun when she saw you coming,” said Thornhill, dropping a hand on to Edala’s shoulder. “I told her you wouldn’t be hard on her if she misses.”

“Er—I’m sure Miss Thornhill never misses,” blurted out Prior, immediately thinking himself an ass, an opinion in which Edala at the moment freely shared.

“Well come on in, and have something after your ride,” said Thornhill, as a couple of boys came up to take the horses.

They were all very jolly and merry, chatting and making plans for the day. Suddenly a tall figure appeared at the foot of the steps of the stoep. The sight of it brought a queer look, though a momentary one to Elvesdon’s face.

“Oh, you’ve still got that chap, Thornhill,” he said carelessly.

“Yes. I find him useful, and at times, rather interesting. I’ll just go out and see what he wants.”

What Manamandhla wanted was this. The *Amakosi*, he perceived, were about to have a hunt. Might not he come too, and help drive out the bush? He loved to see a hunt, and could make himself of use.

Thornhill’s thoughts on hearing this request were known to himself and his Maker—incidentally, they may have been more than guessed at by the Zulu—as he answered equably that the other could do so if he wished. He was thinking how easy it was to mistake a man for a buck in thick bush—and that a charge of Treble A at close quarters— And the laughter and joking of those within came loud through the open windows; for tragedy and mirth, are they not always more or less

closely allied, and running on parallel rails?

“I say, Miss Thornhill, do let me carry your gun for you,” said Prior, eagerly, as he ranged his horse alongside. This was a new experience to him. He had never seen a girl taking part in a hunt before, though of course he had heard of this one doing so.

“Thanks, Mr Prior, but there’s no necessity. Would you like to hold it for me while I shoot? I am even capable of turning a door-handle for myself at a pinch.”

Elvesdon smiled, and Thornhill chuckled. Evelyn Carden did neither. She was fond of being waltzed around, and generally thurificated.

Poor Prior dropped back snubbed. Five was an awkward number and the track was narrow. He remembered too that he had come very near ‘riding out’ his chief. But the latter seemed not in any way perturbed.

Down the valley their way ran. At length they came to a neck, overlooking a downward sweep of dense bush, intersected by a dry watercourse. The dogs, all of a quiver with suppressed excitement, squirmed and whined, yet ever in wholesome dread of their master’s whip. Thornhill proceeded to dispose the guns.

“Elvesdon, you go to the very bottom of the kloof—see, where those two tree ferns stand,” pointing out a spot about three quarters of a mile away. “Prior, you take the other side, and both of you stand about seventy yards from the *sluit*, and keep well up on the rise till you get to your places. Edala, you take Evelyn with you. The usual place, you know—by the red slab. There ought to be enough to keep all hands lively to-day, we haven’t hunted this kloof for half a year. I’ll drive down, with Manamandhla and Mlamvu. Give you all twenty minutes before we start,” getting out his watch.

“Right,” cried Elvesdon. “Come along, Prior.”

Their way lay together up to a certain point. Then Edala and Evelyn plunged down through a straggling, gappy opening between the thicker recesses of the bush.

“This looks as if it was going to be exciting,” said the latter, none too much at her ease among this kind of rather rough riding.

“By Jove, and it is,” returned Edala, who in moments of animation was apt to be unconventional in her speech. “We’ll leave the horses here,” she went on, sliding from her saddle, and giving her companion—who although a good ‘seat’ in the Row, was not quite so ready at getting on and off as one who scarcely remembered when she could not ride—a helping hand to doing likewise.

“Now, come along,” she said, starting downwards among the loose stones, yet hardly disturbing one of them, “and don’t make any more row than you can help.”

A very few minutes of this descent brought them to a place where the bush forked away into a comparatively open space. Below, the dry watercourse ran, some sixty yards distant. About half that distance a low, broad, flat rock of a reddish tint lay like a huge table.

“You always get a shot here,” whispered Edala. “The bucks always scoot along the same track, just the other side of the red slab. I pull off on them at five yards this side of it, then, if I miss, I get them with the second barrel when they show up beyond it.”

“Shall we—shall you—get a chance to-day?” whispered the other, who had caught her companion’s excitement.

“Rather. You’ll see. But get back a little more. You’re showing too much. An old bushbuck ram is no end of a *slim* beast. The least sight of you, and he’ll double back. Ah! Now they’re starting.”

“Are these bucks dangerous?” asked Evelyn, her excitement for the moment somewhat clouded by the feminine instinct of scare. It would have been different, of course, had she been beside one of the men—her host or Elvesdon for instance—but when her only bulwark was merely another girl, why the thing seemed to take on a different aspect.

“Dangerous? Good Lord, no. But a wounded ram, who’s still got the use of his legs, well it doesn’t do to go up to him. They’ve got beastly horns, and I’ve twice seen a dog stuck through and through.”

The English-bred girl looked at the Colonial one, with some curiosity, a touch of increased respect and a great deal of admiration. The flush of excitement which had come into Edala’s cheeks, the sparkle in her fearless blue eyes, rendered the face surpassingly beautiful.

“Oh, I’m not afraid with you, dear,” rejoined Evelyn. “Only—you must bear with an ignoramus.”

“Ssh!” said Edala, holding up a hand. “No more talking now.”

Chapter Nineteen.

“Diane Chasseresse.”

For, from above, came a clamour of sound. Thornhill was riding along the upper side of the kloof, Manamandhla was beating down the centre, where the watercourse ran, and Mlamvu, the other native, was making daylight hideous with the wild whoops and yells that marked his progress. The dogs, questing to and fro, filled the air with their deep-mouthed ravings.

This racket faint at first, drew nearer and nearer, where the two girls stood, behind their cover of bush and stone. There came a sound of crashing through the bushes, making straight towards them. Edala held her gun in right business-

like fashion—no mere toy-gun but an up-to-date Number 12 hammerless—ready to bring to her shoulder. The other was in a very whirl of excitement. Then the sound ceased.

"It has gone back," she whispered. "Never mind. Father will get it."

Even as she spoke the clamour of the dogs was renewed, and, with it, a distant shot, away up on the hillside behind. But at the same time another sound of disturbance, not so violent, but much nearer, and—this too was coming straight towards them.

Edala set her lips. Her gaze was concentrated on a point where the more open ground seemed to triangle into the thicker bush. Then, something leaped into the open, and crossed in leisurely bounds in front of them. It was a magnificent bushbuck ram—whose spiral horns, almost straight, looked of record length. Edala's gun was at her shoulder and the report rang out. The full charge of Treble A ripped through the dark, chocolate coloured hide, and the beast fell, as though knocked over by a stone, kicking and rolling, and uttering a raucous, agonised bellow.

"Oh, well done! well done!" cried Evelyn, clapping her hands and springing forward.

"Keep back—keep back," warned Edala, restraining her. "Didn't I tell you they could be dangerous? And this one has a kick left in him yet."

He certainly had, for although the charge had crippled him it had been planted rather far back, and now the buck rose on his forelegs, still bellowing savagely and shaking his needle pointed horns.

"I'll give him another shot," said Edala. "Wait now."

But before she had quite got her aim on, the dogs rushed out of the bush and flung themselves open-mouthed on the wounded quarry. Snarling and leaping, they avoided the formidable horns, and, making their attack carefully from the rear, in a moment had pulled down the stricken animal, not, however, before one of them had received an ugly gash along the ribs.

"Well done, little one," sang out Thornhill, who was coming down the slope towards them. "You've opened the day well, anyhow. What do you think, Evelyn?"

"Oh, it was splendid. But I don't know. It's a little different to pheasant shooting," she added, with a look at the copious effusion of blood, which the dogs were eagerly lapping.

"Yes, of course. Oh well, you needn't look at this part of it,"—as Manamandhla, who had come up, was setting to work on the butchering side of the sport. "We'll drive on now and give those other two chaps a show. By the way, I got another up there. It was only a half grown ram, and rather far, so I downed him with a bullet."

"Come on, Evelyn. We'll help drive," cried Edala.

"No—no," struck in her father. "You girls would get torn to pieces down there, with your skirts. You go along outside where the bush ends. Very likely something'll jump out there."

But nothing did. They heard the sudden clamour raised by the dogs in full cry, and could mark the course of the quarry by the tremble of the bush fronds as it crashed through—then, far down the kloof, a shot rang out from where Prior was posted. Suddenly there was a strange squawking call, and two large reddish birds rose into the air.

"Vaal koorhaan, by Jingo!" ejaculated Edala, reining in her mount. It was an old shooting pony and stood like a stone. Up went her gun—and with the report one of the birds swerved violently while a cloud of feathers puffed from its side; then it fell heavily to the ground. Its mate still uttering the same squawking cry, was fast disappearing into space.

"That's splendid," cried the girl sliding from her horse to pick up the bird; which had been killed clean, and lay with outspread wings. "Fifty paces or very near it. You know, Evelyn, vaal koorhaan are not common, and you can hardly ever get within shot range of them. You can 'down' them with a rifle of course, but not often, for they're precious *slim*. Lovely feathers too. You shall have them for a hat, in memento of your first hunt."

"Thanks. That will be jolly," stroking the beautiful red-brown and pearl-grey plumage. "And they're so soft. What sort of bird is it, Edala?"

"Kind of little bustard," answered Edala, who was tying it on the 'D' of her saddle. "Ripping good skoff they are, too. I say—there's a bombardment going on down there. Wonder what they've got."

For below, in the near distance, two double reports had rung out, then a single one. The yelling of the dogs, and the whooping of the beaters had arrived at a climax of clamour, then suddenly ceased.

"Look out," exclaimed Edala excitedly and in a low tone, as she slid from her horse. "There's something coming out here. No. It has broken back, whatever it is—" noting the tremulous line among the branches beneath and an occasional faint thud as of hoofs. "Well, let's go down and see what they've got."

On reaching the spot, where all now had foregathered, it transpired that Prior had turned over two bushbuck ewes, while Elvesdon pleaded guilty to shamefully missing a ram with both barrels.

"Never mind, we've not done so badly," pronounced Thornhill. "Four bucks to four guns out of one kloof isn't altogether rotten. Edala, what have you got there? A vaal koorhaan, by the living Jingo. Sitting or on the wing?"

"As if I should answer that!" was the reply, in scathing accents.

"She shot it from the saddle too," put in Evelyn.

"From the saddle did she? Well done, little girl. Well, that is something like."

Prior gave a loud whistle.

“By Jingo, I should think it was! Why, it’s a record, Miss Thornhill.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Old Witvoet is very steady,” said the girl. “It’s like shooting from an armchair.”

They talked and laughed, and compared notes, while Manamandhla and the two other natives—for one more had overtaken them according to instructions—were engaged in gralloching the quarry; to them a congenial task, for many a tid-bit in the shape of liver and heart found its way surreptitiously into their mouths. The dogs pounced hungrily upon the refuse that was thrown them.

“Not a nice sight, Miss Carden,” said Elvesdon, who had noticed a slight grimace of disgust. “Well, don’t look at it. These are the little unpleasantnesses inseparable from this kind of sport, you know.”

“Oh of course. Why it was foolish of me to even seem to mind. I won’t again.”

Then the word was given to move on. The quarry was placed in trees, where it could be collected after the day’s doings were over, and they began on the next kloof. But it proved a blank, except for an ugly bloated puff adder which Prior cut in two with a charge of shot on the way to take up his position, and by the time they had beaten out the bush, the sun and a fine healthy appetite owned to on the part of all hands, warned that it was high time for something substantial in the way of refreshment.

“Here we are,” cried Edala, as they topped a rise, “and here comes the skoff,” as the figures of two native women, each with a substantial basket on her head could be seen approaching by a narrow bush path. “This is Bees’ Nest Kloof, Evelyn. I’ve never brought you here yet. Look. Half way up that krantz there’s a good sized cleft which holds the bees’ nest, and it’s always there because no one can possibly get at it to take it out. If you get them against the sun you can see the bees going in and out.”

“So they are,” said Evelyn shading her eyes. The krantz was a small one, about fifty or sixty feet high, and in its shade they all dismounted. In a trice the baskets were unpacked—knives and forks, enamelled plates and cups, and several substantial looking parcels being laid out on a rug. Thornhill extracted a comfortable looking bottle.

“Elvesdon, help yourself. Prior, have a glass of grog. We’ve all earned it at any rate.”

The while the boys had got together a fire and as by magic a boiling kettle of coffee was before the party. And the cold viands were done very ample justice to, for the open air in South Africa is the finest appetiser in the world, and have we not said that Ramasam was an exceptionally good cook?

“Well, this is the very jolliest kind of picnic,” pronounced Elvesdon, as he lay in cool comfort on the sward, after they had lunched, filling his pipe.

“Hear hear!” cried Prior emphatically, beginning to perform a like operation. “I say, sir. Give us a fill from yours. My *gwai* has all run to dust.” Elvesdon chucked him his pouch.

The two girls were busy putting away the things. They had rejected offers of help.

“We know where to pack the things and you don’t,” Edala had said. “You sit still and smoke, then you’ll shoot all the better for it.”

“Thanks, Miss Thornhill,” answered Elvesdon, remembering his double miss.

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything, really I didn’t. Never mind. There’ll be plenty of chances of retrieving your character.”

“Won’t you come and stand near me at the next *voer-ly*?” he said. “Then you’ll have all the fun of being an eye-witness.”

She laughed.

“Yes, you’d have to be on your mettle then. Well I’ll come and encourage you. I don’t think I’ll shoot just yet, myself. I believe I’ve ever so slight a touch of headache. Later, perhaps—when it gets cooler.”

Then Prior had begun to express unbounded concern. Why of course Miss Thornhill ought to keep quiet, and as much out of the sun as possible. A headache! Fancy that! and no wonder, since it had been so jolly hot—and so on, and so on—till his official chief experienced a savage desire to kick him soundly, in that the blundering idiot was drawing attention to a little arrangement he was wanting to bring off quite unostentatiously.

However, that had soon passed, and now Elvesdon lay there, puffing out smoke, and in full enjoyment of life and this situation therein. He was not overmuch inclined to talk, either; a deficiency for which his subordinate seemed abundantly inclined to make up. He was watching the girl, as she moved about; the erect poise of the gold-crowned head, the swift play of the thick lashes, the straight glance of the clear blue eyes, the full throat, the mellow, clear, whole-hearted laugh. Everything about her, every movement, so natural and unstudied; the flash of each smile which lighted up her face—ah, all this had had too large a share in his dreaming and waking hours of late.

Then he found himself comparing her with Evelyn Carden. The latter—sweet, gracious, reposeful—would have appealed—appealed powerfully to many men; but there was no comparison between the two, decided this one. He looked at Thornhill, now as he had done since the doctor’s revelation, in a new light. How could it be true? How could such a man as this have been by any means led into the committal of a cold-blooded murder. No. The idea could not be entertained—not for one single moment could it, he decided. And yet—!

The place where they rested was an ideal of sylvan loveliness, the green glade overhung by the rugged face of the cliff, from whose ledges and interstices jutted here and there the spider-like spikiness of sprouting aloes, or the slender stiff stem of the Kafir bean. Away on three sides swept the tumbled masses of bush verdure; here a ridge, there a rift; in whose cool, shaded depths the melody of bird voices made music without ceasing. Beyond, a towering mountain cone, its

steep sides shimmering in the mid-day heat against the deep blue of an unclouded sky, and the splendid air, warm yet invigorating, hummed to the music of harvesting-bees. Even the group of natives, squatted a little distance off, lent a picturesque feature as they talked in a drowsy undertone, and the great, rough-haired dogs lying on their sides panting in the shade bore their part in the picture. And the day was but half through—and there was that gold-crowned head dazzling his glance as though he were gazing at the sun—and life was very well worth living indeed—and there, not so very many miles away, in just such a sweet and restful spot as this, lay the mangled body of dead Teliso; for so do the tragic and the idyllic run side by side on parallel rails. By and bye these might be destined to converge.

Chapter Twenty.

Manamandhla's Escape.

The horses were caught and saddled up. As they rode forth from their resting place, Edala was exchanging banter with Elvesdon, and in the ring of her dear merry laugh there was no suggestion of a sufferer from headache.

"Now then," said Thornhill, reining in at the head of a long, deep, wild ravine. "We must arrange our strategy." And he looked from the one to the other.

"I'll go and see Mr Elvesdon miss," said Edala, unhesitatingly. "I know exactly where to place him, and he'll have the best chances of missing he's ever had in his life."

There was a laugh at this, led by the victim himself.

"Then who'll take care of Miss Carden?"

Prior looked up eagerly, but before he could say anything, Evelyn remarked quietly:—

"Do let me ride with you, Mr Thornhill. It will be just as interesting to see how the things are driven out, as to see how they are shot."

"But, I'm going down into the thick of the kloof this time. How about skirts?"

"Oh, that's all right. I'll keep behind you when it gets thick."

"Very well then if you do that. There's a tolerable attempt at a path down there. Prior, you keep along the top, on the right—hundred yards in front of us, or a little more."

Thornhill was pleased. He was glad to have Evelyn with him. There was something about her that was both congenial and restful. And then she was so tactful and considerate. As a matter of fact he had been meditating whether to ask her to accompany him, but had decided not to. Why should she be bored with an old fogey, while there were young ones in the party? And she—well she must have read his thoughts, and of her own initiative had offered to accompany him. This was the sort of thing that Edala never did. Time had been, when as a child she had adored him, when his every word was law, when she would give up anything and everything to be with him. Now, all this was reversed. In these days she never thought of consulting his wishes, let alone of forestalling them; and the change had caused him many an hour of bitter reflection and disappointment.

"We can start now," he pronounced. "Those two will have had time to get into position."

They moved forward and downward, keeping near the bottom of the kloof, while the three natives, spread out on each side, whooped and rapped with their sticks. The way lay now through growth of some denseness, now beneath overhanging trees, or a cliff in miniature, its brow lined with a row of straight stemmed euphorbia. It was hot down here in the kloof, in spite of the abundant shade.

But Evelyn Carden's thoughts were all upon the man riding in front of her, and she had all but lost sight of the object of their being there at all, sport to wit. This new relative of hers was clean outside all her experience. She admired his strength, his decisive downrightness, his easy refinement of speech and thought; and that in the teeth of the fact that his earlier life had been rough and hard, and, not infrequently perilous. Yet, throughout, those instincts of culture had not only been retained but had developed, and she was forced to own to herself that he was the most delightful companion she had ever met.

And Edala? She was fond of the girl—very—yet there were times when she could not but feel secretly angry with her; she had too much *savoir faire*, however, to let any trace of it appear. Edala did not appreciate her father in the least: on the contrary she treated him with coldness, even bordering upon repulsion. Of course, of any actuating cause underlying such behaviour she was absolutely ignorant, for they saw no neighbours except perhaps Elvesdon; nor even had they, it is certain that to a stranger and a relative of those concerned, nothing would have been whispered. Besides, was not the whole thing now matter of ancient history?

As they rode along in the bosky shadiness of the deep kloof bottom, the shouts of the beaters on either side, the sudden clangour of the dogs as they struck the spoor of a recently alarmed buck, then the crack of a shot down at the farther end, it seemed to Evelyn Carden that the experience was wholly delightful and exhilarating. She could hardly have told why—but it was so. She was not so very young, and she had had some experiences of life. Perhaps she preferred not to tell herself the 'why.'

Thornhill, on his part, was not thinking of her at all by this time, or if so it was only to wish she had elected to accompany someone else, which at first sight seems blackly ungrateful of him. Still less was he thinking of the sport, unless in a mechanical way. But Manamandhla, moving parallel with himself some forty yards distant through the thick, high bush; Manamandhla visible to himself, but both invisible to the rest of the on-driving line, how easy to have mistaken him for a buck—to have *mistaken* him. It would be rather the act of a Johnny Raw, but then, men of ripe judgment and lifelong experience had been known to make similar mistakes. Surely such a chance would not occur again. If only Evelyn had not volunteered to accompany him.

A fell, lurid obsession had seized upon this man's mind, yet not so as to obscure his judgment, only to do away

utterly with all sense of ruth or compunction. This calm, patient savage, who had reappeared—had risen, as it were, from the very dead, to blood-suck him—to batten upon him for the rest of his natural life—had got upon even his strong nerves. He was ageing, he told himself, and all through this. Again the Zulu's broad back presented a magnificent mark for a charge of Treble A. There would be an end of the incubus, and '*accidents will happen*.' But then—there was Evelyn riding immediately behind him.

"Well, Mr Thornhill. We seem to have drawn this fairly blank, too," said her cheerful, pleasing voice, as the bush thinned out in front of them. "Let's see what they've got There was a shot in front, wasn't there?"

Elvesdon and Edala were standing, waiting for them. On the ground lay a dead bushbuck ewe.

"'*Diane chasseresse*' again," cried the former, gaily. "Neat shot too. Going like the wind."

"Well, you made me do it, you know," protested Edala. "I said I didn't want to shoot any more just yet."

"Of course," laughed Elvesdon. "It was the first opportunity I've had of witnessing your prowess, and I preferred that to your witnessing my lack of it."

As a matter of fact the speaker was a first-rate shot, but there were days when he was 'off'—and this was one of them, he said.

"Well, it's better than nothing," pronounced Thornhill. "Still, we ought to have got more out of there. We'll take the next kloof down, then sweep round for home."

"All right," cried Edala. "Now Mr Elvesdon, we'll lay *voer* again, and this time I'm really going to see you miss."

"That'll be a new and delightful experience," said Elvesdon with his usual imperturbability. As a matter of fact he meant every word he said. He would have this girl to himself for the best part of another hour, in the sweet sunshine of the golden afternoon. What did he care for the business of the day. He could always get sport—but this—no.

So the pair started off once more by a circuitous way, to reach the bottom of the kloof where they should conceal themselves. Thornhill, watching them, felt well satisfied. Things were going just as he would have them. Things sometimes went that way, and when they did there was no point in interfering with them, or hurrying them from outside. At any rate such was his philosophy.

"Now, Evelyn, I daresay Prior will take care of you," he said. "This kloof is confoundedly tangled and difficult. There are *klompies* of *haakdorrn* too, here and there, which would tear that pretty skirt of yours into tatters."

"But—are you going to drive on again? You don't ever get a shot down there in that thick bush," she urged, half reproachfully.

"Oh, don't I? I've an idea I shall this time. You get up along the top side with Prior."

The fell significance of his words was apparent only to his own mind, as indeed how should it be otherwise? Evelyn obeyed the order unquestioningly. She only said, in a half undertone, "You take care that everybody else gets the lion's share of the fun, anyhow."

The foremost pair were hurrying along the ridge, now cantering, now walking. At length they reached their allotted station at the bottom of the kloof. The latter was steep, like the other, only the bush was less thick.

"I don't care for this end at all," said Edala, when they had dismounted, and having hidden the horses, returned to take up their position. "Look. I'm sure we'll be better up there," pointing to a spot about a hundred yards higher up. "Let's stand there."

"Won't it be a bit risky? You see, your father will expect us to be here, and supposing he were to fire at anything just at that point on the strength of it?"

"That's not likely. Everything will have run out too far ahead of him by the time he gets there. Come."

"Oh, all right."

They dived into the bush, penetrating it higher up into the kloof. By the time they halted it was not the hundred yards it looked, but over two.

"This will do," she said. "Now you're not to miss."

Their position was a little plateau, whence they could see without being seen. First-rate shots could be obtained of everything that ran out—and everything that did run out would pass within easy range, by reason of the narrowness of the way. Above, too, they would have ample warning of anything coming, for the bush though just thick enough, was not too dense.

"*Diane chasseresse*, you are splendid to-day," whispered Elvesdon as they took up their position. She looked straight into his face, and on hers came a half resentful expression.

"Oh now, now. That'll do," she answered, half pettishly. "I suppose you think because I'm a girl I've no business in this sort of thing at all. I know I'm about the only one who goes in for it—except in England. There you get the Duchess of this and the Countess of that, and Lady Tom Noddy and all the rest of them placarded in the illustrated weeklies in shooting costume, with their guns, and so on; but here—oh no, the ordinary she-mortal mustn't touch sport, just because she is a she. What?"

"Nothing. Don't be so petulant."

"Ah—ah! That's what you were thinking. I know it."

“Don’t crow now. You’re not a thought-reader. And,”—he added to himself, “I sometimes wish you were.”

She made an impatient movement—something, we believe, of the nature of that which our grandmothers called a ‘flounce.’

“Why shouldn’t I shoot bushbucks?” she said, defiantly. “Tell me.”

“When you have told me when I said you shouldn’t. Now why on earth have you raised all this bother about nothing in the world? Tell me.”

She looked at him for a moment as though not knowing whether to be angry or not. But the insidious imitation of her tone in the last two words was too much, and she burst out laughing.

“Ssh!” he said, reprovingly. “We mustn’t make such a row, or Prior will get all the shots. Nothing will come our way.”

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the dogs burst into cry again. But the sound did not come their way, whatever had been roused had broken away at right angles. Then away back and above there rang out a shot.

“Prior again,” whispered Elvesdon. “What did I tell you?”

They waited in silence. Then Edala whispered:

“Poor chance now. There’s Manamandhla just underneath. The drive is nearly over.”

The Zulu was, as she had said, just beneath. He had halted, and bending down seemed to be trying to get a thorn out of his foot. At the same time Thornhill appeared in sight riding slowly down the other side. Suddenly he caught sight of Manamandhla.

He was barely a hundred yards away. The very expression of his face, the quick, stealthy manner in which he had dismounted—was apparent to the two watchers—and then—Thornhill was taking deliberate aim at the unconscious Zulu. At that short distance he could not miss.

The sharp, warning cry that escaped the pair came too late—yet not, for the bullet just grazed its intended mark, and glancing off a rock hummed away right over Edala’s head, so near, indeed, that she involuntarily ducked.

“Father. It’s Manamandhla,” she cried. “You nearly shot him.”

“Did I. Serve him right if I had,” came back the answer. “What’s the fool doing stalking on all fours instead of keeping on his hind legs? That’s the way to get shot by mistake in thick bush.”

Edala and her companion had exchanged glances. Neither had meant to do so, wherefore the glance of each was quick, furtive, involuntary. And the glance of each revealed to the other that both knew that that shot had not been fired by mistake at all.

“You nearly shot me too, father,” Edala said, as he joined them, and there was an unconscious coldness in her tone. Thornhill’s face lost colour.

“You had no business to be where you are,” was all he said whatever he may have felt. “Your position was quite two hundred yards further down. Nothing brings about shooting accidents so much as people changing the positions they arranged to take up.”

“Lucky we did or Manamandhla would have been shot,” she returned, and felt angry with herself for being unable to restrain a certain significance in her tone.

“That he most assuredly would. You sang out just too late to keep me from firing but not too late to spoil my aim.”

But the man most concerned, was the least concerned of all. Manamandhla himself to wit. From his demeanour he need not have just experienced the narrowest shave he was ever likely to have in his life. When Thornhill rated him he merely smiled and said nothing.

“Well, we can reckon the day as over,” said Thornhill, as Prior and Evelyn joined them at the bottom of the kloof—the latter had bagged what had been driven out in front of him, a duiker ram to wit. “We might have done better, and we might have done worse. Five bushbucks and a duiker among four guns—”

“And a vaal koorhaan,” put in Elvesdon. “Don’t forget the vaal koorhaan, Thornhill. *Diane chasseresse* has the honours of the day.”

“Hear, hear!” cried Prior.

Thornhill laughed—easily, carelessly. He instinctively felt that both his daughter and Elvesdon were aware that if his last shot had been successful Manamandhla would have met his death by no accident at all. But he was not the man to give himself away.

“Sorry for your ill luck, Elvesdon,” he said. “We may get another chance on the way home, even now.”

“Oh that’s all right. I’m a bit ‘off’ to-day, I suppose. Better luck next time.”

Chapter Twenty One.

Peace—and Potentialities.

“If I had had such a father as yours, Edala, I should simply have worshipped him.”

“I daresay. In fact it strikes me that that’s just about what you’re doing with regard to mine.”

The retort was crisp, not to say scathing. Evelyn Carden was angry with herself for changing colour slightly, the while those clear blue eyes were pitilessly searching her face. But she was not going to quarrel with Edala, so she answered conciliatorily:—

“Now dear, you know I never meant to offend you. Why should I? We have got on so well together. What I said was for your own happiness; that and nothing else. Of course I’ve no earthly right to even seem to ‘lecture’ you.”

“Not yet,” was the still more scathing retort which arose to the other girl’s lips. Fortunately she checked it. She looked up, as though waiting for more.

“I am not a gushing person, Edala dear, but I have grown very fond of you since I have been here. I would not have said anything about this estrangement but that it suddenly struck me—and struck me with horror—that I might have been the unconscious cause of deepening it, or at any rate that you thought I had been. So I think I will find some excuse and—move on.”

Edala softened. She was really fond of the other, and did not, in her heart of hearts, wish to see the last of her.

“No, you won’t, Evelyn,” she answered with characteristic decisiveness. “You’ll stay where you are. Never mind me. If I said anything beastly I’m more than sorry.”

What Thornhill had half welcomed in advance had come about. Edala was jealous. All that she might have done for her father, and had neglected to do, was done by their visitor. Did he want anything found for him—from some article mislaid, to some quotation in the course of his recreative studies—Evelyn was the one to do it, not Edala. Or did he want a companion in his semi-professional rides about the farm, Evelyn never by any chance refused or made excuse, but Edala often did, not only of late but when they had been alone together. In short, at every turn he met with far more consideration from this stranger than from his own child.

The incident which had led to the present discussion had occurred the day before, and was of just such a nature. Edala did not care to go out; it was too hot; besides, she had something else to do. But Evelyn had made no such excuse.

“I’m afraid I’m straining your good nature to cracking point,” Thornhill had more than once remarked on such occasions. “It’s rather more cheerful having some one with you than not, but I believe you never say ‘No’ because you think it a duty not to.”

“In that case a duty becomes a pleasure,” she had answered with a laugh.

Now of late Edala had been set thinking, and as the result of her searchings of heart a certain soreness had set in. Their visitor seemed to be taking her place, and yet she could not blame the visitor. If she would not do things for her father herself she could not fairly blame another person for doing them instead; yet none the less did she feel sore.

But since the incident at the wind-up of the bushbuck hunt the estrangement had widened. That her father had intended to shoot Manamandhla dead, she entertained not the slightest doubt. In the first place a man of his judgment could by no possibility be guilty of such a clumsy blunder as mistaking a human being for a buck under any circumstances whatever. In the next place the expression of his countenance had told its own tale, not only to herself but to the other witness, Elvesdon. What was it, then, but an act of cold-blooded, deliberate murder—in intent? Clearly there existed the strongest reasons for silencing the Zulu? And then a ghastly thought came into her mind. Could it be that he had been an accomplice in that terrible tragedy whose shadow had so early darkened her young life? Her first repulsion for the Zulu—which had begun to give way to a reaction in his favour since his narrow escape from death—returned a hundredfold with this new idea. Should she question him, she asked herself? What was the use? He would tell her nothing.

“Don’t think any more about it, dear,” Evelyn now rejoined. “It was only that I can see how bitterly your father feels your attitude towards him that moved me to refer to a matter which you have every right to tell me is no business of mine at all.”

Edala hardened again.

“Has he been—complaining then?” she said, with a return of bitterness.

“Is it likely? Is he that sort of man, do you think? Ah child, you don’t know what you are doing when you are throwing away the affection of such a father as yours, and repelling and wounding him at every turn. And some day, when it is too late, you may—”

She stopped. The other had put out a hand and stopped her. Those were just her father’s own words, and now, for the first time, they struck her as horribly prophetic. Her eyes filled.

“I’m several years older than you, Edala, and I’ve seen a very great deal of life from all its sides. Mind, I’m not saying this to patronise or talk down to you, only to emphasise what an appallingly scarce thing real affection is. And I can’t bear to go away without having made some effort towards making you realise it too. That’s all that lies at the bottom of my ‘beastly interference,’ as you are calling it within your own mind,” she added with a smile.

“‘To go away’!” repeated Edala, with scornful emphasis, and dropping a hand upon that of the other. “But you’re not going away, so don’t let’s hear any more about it.”

“I’ve not come to live here, you know,” was the laughing rejoinder. “Well then, we won’t talk any more about parting company just yet since you’re not quite so anxious to get rid of me as I thought. Do you know, Edala, I have hardly any friends, almost none—acquaintances, yes,”—in reply to the look of astonishment evoked by the statement—“plenty of them. I am not exactly poor either—not in these days, though I have known the meaning of cruel straits—and can do what I like and go where I like, within modest limits. But I have been very happy here—I don’t know when I have enjoyed any time so much.”

“I should have thought you’d have found it beastly slow,” said Edala, wonderingly, and speaking in the light of her own unsatisfied aspirations. Her new relative was a great enigma to her. Why, for instance, with all her advantages had she never married? though this to her was nothing very wonderful, for she herself, given the same advantages, would have thought of that time-honoured institution as so remote a contingency as not to be worth consideration. Again she seldom said much about her people, or her earlier life, except in a vague and generalising sort of way.

“Anything but that,” answered Evelyn. “Why I feel in twice the form I was in when I came.”

“You look it too.”

This was bare fact. The joyous, healthy, outdoor life in a splendid and genial climate, had set its mark upon Evelyn Carden; had heightened her outward attractions, at the first not inconsiderable, as we have shown.

“You know,” went on Edala, “there are precious few places in this country where they five the life we live—I mean as far as we womenkind are concerned. Anywhere else you’d have been stuck down to read, and play the piano, and talk gossip—with an occasional ride or drive to some similar and neighbouring place to go through the same exercises within the limit of a day. They wouldn’t have stuck you on a horse, and romped you about over all sorts of rough country, bushbuck hunting and all that. Why they’d be horrified at the bare idea—though, I forgot—we haven’t been able to teach you to shoot, yet.”

Evelyn laughed.

“I’m sorry to say you haven’t, and I’m sadly afraid now that you never will. I suppose I haven’t been caught young enough.”

Both Edala and her father had done all they knew how to impart that instruction. They had assured. Evelyn that within a week at the outside she would be able to turn over her first bushbuck. But it was of no use. She got plenty of chances, but when the rushing, frightened antelope broke covert and bounded by like the wind, her nerve played her tricks, and she would blindly lash off both barrels at anything or nothing. And then, too, the gun would kick, as even the best gun will do if badly held; and after a bruised cheekbone, and a badly aching shoulder she had decided that that form of sport was not at all in her line. They had, however, taught her how to handle a revolver, though she was very far indeed from being able to make prize shooting with the same.

The two were seated in the shade of the tall fig-trees during the hot hours of the forenoon when this conversation had taken place—this conversation which had opened with every sign of storm, and had drifted into calm haven of peace. Edala, for her part, felt all her new born jealousy allayed. She felt compunctious, even inclined to act on the other’s warning and advice. It was in quite a softened mood that she turned to her father, who now joined them, looking hot and tired.

“Here, get into this chair,” she cried, jumping up and pushing him into hers. “You look fagged. I’m going in to get you something to drink. I’m sure you want it.”

“Yes do, darling,” he answered seizing her for a moment to press a kiss on the shining aureole of her gold-crowned head. “Well, what have you two been talking about?” as he subsided thankfully into the comfortable seat.

“Many things more or less interesting. Edala has at last come to the conclusion that I’m a hopelessly bad case because I can’t do anything with that wretched gun. I told her I wasn’t caught young enough.”

“Ho—ho! Not young enough! That’s good.”

“Now don’t you start making compliments, Inqoto, because they aren’t in your line at all,” she answered, placidly. And then Edala reappeared and the golden sparkle in the decanter and the cold gurgle in the porous water ‘monkey’—was grateful sight and sound to a tired and thirsty man. Evelyn often called him by his native name. It was a complimentary one and therefore convenient. They all disliked the prefix of ‘Cousin,’ while if she conferred upon him the brevet rank of uncle why it made him out so old. So this came in handy.

“That’s good!” he cried draining the glass at one pull, and chucking it down in the grass. “You girls look cool and comfy. What have you been doing with yourselves?”

“Taking it easy.”

“So it would seem,” he laughed, looking at them both approvingly. He was thinking how different life had been to him since Evelyn Carden’s arrival. She was so eminently companionable, so tactful and sympathetic. And she looked so soothing and attractive, sitting there opposite him now; and some day she would be going away. The thought was unpleasant. The object of it looked up.

“What is troubling you? You heaved no end of a sigh.”

“Did I, dear? I suppose it was one of contentment. I’m a little tired and I’m resting. That may account for it. Getting old.”

Evelyn laughed pleasantly.

“Don’t fish, Inqoto. I’ve witnessed your prowess at shooting, but never at fishing. I suspect you’d prove as poor a hand at that as you are good at the other.”

“Well, well, if you women won’t take a man seriously, I suppose you won’t. By the way, I fell in with one of Elvesdon’s boys with a *brievje* for me. I took it from him to save him the trouble of coming any further. Elvesdon’s down at Tongwana’s collecting. He’ll have finished to-morrow, and wants us to go down there in the afternoon. Old Tongwana’s going to turn out a lot of his people and give a war-dance in our honour. What do you say?”

“Say? Why yes—of course,” said Edala decisively. “It’ll be no end of fun.”

“Rather,” said Evelyn.

“Well, I thought that would be the verdict, so I sent back a verbal answer on the chance of it.”

“It’s awfully kind of Mr Elvesdon,” went on Evelyn. “What a fine looking man he is, by the way.”

“Rather; and he’s a smart all round chap as well with no nonsense about him. I took to him from the very first,” answered Thornhill. But Edala said nothing, though it may be that she *thought*.

So they chatted on, seated there in the secure peace of the golden morning, little recking that the hours of that peace might be already numbered; that this might be the last of such days for a long and terrible time to come—if not for ever.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The War-Dance at Tongwana’s.

Elvesdon was seated at a table within an open tent, together with his clerk—a table littered with official books and documents. He rose quickly at the sound of horse-hoofs and went forth to welcome the party.

“Thornhill—how are you? Miss Carden—you are taking on a fine healthy sunburn—and as for *Diane chasseresse*—why words fail.”

He had taken to so nicknaming Edala since the bushbuck hunt and she seemed rather to like it. They laughed, and after a little more banter Thornhill said:

“Had any bother with the people, Elvesdon?”

“Not a grain. They’ve all paid up right willingly. It’s when we get to Babatyana’s place that we may find trouble.”

“Where is the dance to be held, Mr Elvesdon?” said Evelyn. “Here?”

“Why not? It’s as good a place as any. I’ll ask Tongwana.”

He called to the old chief, who was seated on the ground among a small group a little way off. Tongwana came forward, and saluted Thornhill, and there was a lot of talk and banter.

“I have not seen thee since the day of the ‘king of serpents’ my father,” the latter was saying.

“*Whau*! that was a great day, and a great snake,” chuckled the old man.

“So that’s the big chief?” commented Evelyn. “He doesn’t look particularly dignified.”

“He’s very old,” explained Elvesdon. “But whatever he looks he’s all right. He and Zavula are the best men in authority we’ve got.” Then turning again to the old chief, “What has become of Zavula, my father? Three times have I sent for him, and it is said that he is lying sick.”

“I had not heard that, *Nkose*. But I am growing old. The young men toss the news about from one to the other; but we old ones—*au*! It is good night.”

“It’s rather a rum thing, Thornhill, but I’m not quite easy in my mind about old Zavula. He came to the office to tell me a very queer story the last time I saw him, and every time I ask after him they say he is sick.”

“H’m!” said Thornhill, drily.

“He’s such a straight old chap too. Now I think we can shut up shop—you ladies would like tea, I know, before the fun begins.”

It was the middle of the afternoon, blue and cloudless. The camp was pitched upon a slight eminence, the ground falling away, grassy and open, on either side. Crowning another eminence less than a mile away stood Tongwana’s kraal—its numerous huts forming a circle after the Zulu fashion, though not surrounded by a ring fence, and near it, along a bushy ridge, stood several lesser kraals. In the clear stillness of the air the voices of their denizens and the occasional barking of dogs is distinctly borne hither.

“You’ll see something now, Evelyn,” said Edala. “A Kafir dance is no end exciting. I always long to join in.”

“How many will take part in it?”

“Oh I daresay Tongwana can turn us out a couple of hundred at a pinch,” said Elvesdon. “Perhaps more.”

Already dark forms converging in groups upon the chief’s kraal seemed, by their numbers, to give colour to the last statement.

“More, I hope,” pronounced Edala.

The police escort, who, with Prior, were to convey back the proceeds of the collecting, had saddled up and were all ready to march, when one trooper stepped forward, and saluting Elvesdon begged to be allowed to remain and witness the dancing. He was a fresh-faced intelligent looking young fellow, probably not long out from home. The magistrate could see at a glance that he was a ‘gentleman ranker.’ He seemed so eager and earnest about it that Elvesdon said:

“Very well, Parry. You can stay. Any objection, sergeant?”

“No, sir.”

The boy’s face flushed with delight. He had read plentifully about this sort of thing—in fact such reading had had largely to do with bringing him out to the country at all. Now he was going to see it—to see the real thing.

Soon arose from Tongwana’s kraal a weird, long-drawn cry. By this time the chief and every native in the immediate neighbourhood of the camp—except Elvesdon’s servants—had disappeared. The cry was echoed, then taken up by many voices till it tailed off into a kind of strophe-like chant. Then from the distant kraal a broad dark stream was issuing, its blackness relieved as it drew nearer, by many a patch of white. Suddenly the chant changed to a lower key, and its sombre thunder-notes harmonised to the measured tread of the marching warriors.

These, for their parts, offered a perfect spectacle of wild picturesqueness. Each and all had discarded any article of European clothing, and were arrayed in the fantastic, if spare adornments of native apparel; the *mútya* of cat-tails and cow-hide, beads and bangles, jackal teeth necklaces, flowing tufts of cow-hair, and other gimcrackery of the kind. Then too, the points of bright assegais gleamed wickedly in the sunshine, and the variegated faces of broad shields, lent colour to the wild array.

The column advanced, marching four deep. The rapping of assegai hafts against shield sticks, beat a weird accompaniment to the war-song, which, now risen to a deafening roar, ceased, with a suddenness that was almost startling, as the whole array spreading out into crescent formation, halted, and flinging the right hand aloft, shouted, as one man:

“Amakosi!” (“Chiefs!”)

“They ought to have given the *Bayéte*, to a representative of Government—confound their cheek!” murmured Elvesdon, who was filling his pipe. “That’s the salute royal, you know, Miss Carden.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” was the answer. “They look grand—grand, but a little alarming. Still I’m so glad we came.”

“Don’t know about a couple of hundred,” remarked Thornhill. “More like six or seven.”

Now again the song and dance was renewed. So catching was the latter that the European spectators found themselves beating time with their feet. The stamping of the excited warriors shook the earth, sending up long streams of yellow dust into the sunlit air. Young warriors would dart from the ranks, and leaping nearly their own height from the ground volley forth a torrent of words as they went through an imaginary pantomime of their prowess, their eyeballs white and rolling, seeming to burst from their faces, the flash of their bright blades like zig-zagged lightning. Then, with an appalling roar, the crescent extended itself on either side, and charged full speed up to the spectators hemming them now in a complete circle. Evelyn Carden gave a little cry of alarm and she felt herself growing pale.

“It’s all right. It’s part of the show,” said Elvesdon reassuringly, puffing at his pipe.

“Is it? Well, it’s rather startling,” she answered, reassured however, by the fact that the rest of the party, including Edala, remained unmoved.

There certainly was something horribly real about it. Six or seven hundred frantic savages, worked up to the wildest stage of excitement, hemming you in in a dense impenetrable circle of dark musky bodies and waving blades, roaring like wild beasts and vociferating that the said blades should shine white no longer, but red—red, may easily become a situation somewhat trying to the nerves, especially to those of the other sex. Then, suddenly, as if by magic, the uproar ceased. The warriors saluted again, then crooning a low toned, rather plaintive sounding chant, dropped back to their original position. Here they were harangued by an orator, his periods being greeted by an expressive hum. When he ceased, the whole body gathered up its weapons, and moved swiftly away over the veldt—this time in silence.

“Curtain on Act One,” said Elvesdon. “We’ll stroll up now to yonder ridge. We are going to see a sham fight, or rather a surprise. They are about to attack and capture somebody’s kraal—I couldn’t catch his name—over the other side, and make it as much like the real thing as possible. I and old Tongwana arranged it all this morning. The last harangue was with the object of bucking up the fighting men. So let’s get on.”

“It’s a splendid sight, sir,” said the young police trooper diffidently, as they walked. “I’m no end grateful to you for letting me see it.”

Elvesdon turned to him good naturedly.

“Yes, it’s an interesting show, isn’t it, Parry? By the way, you might add to your pay by knocking up a description of it for one of the home magazines—or even two. The native question is likely to come very prominently before the British public soon.”

The young fellow flushed.

“I had thought of doing something of the kind,” he said.

“All right. And if you want any information in addition I’ll give it you—of course if it’s a kind I can give,” added Elvesdon, with a meaning laugh.

On reaching the ridge they looked down upon another kraal in front of them. Its inhabitants were loafing about over their usual avocations or lack of such, in apparent ignorance of the black destruction that was about to overwhelm them. But of the assailants there was as yet no sign.

Elvesdon who had been chatting a little further with the young Police trooper was somewhat behind the party. Then he became aware of the presence of a native—an old man—who, squatted under a bush, was apparently hailing him. He stopped. The old man with shaking fingers, was fumbling in his bag, to produce therefrom—a letter.

Such a letter, dirty, greasy, enclosed in a common looking envelope, addressed moreover, to himself, in a sprawling, uneducated hand.

“Who gave you this?” he asked.

“That I know not, *Nkose*. One of the people.”

Elvesdon was about to open it—but just then there were signs of renewed activity below. The attacking impi was getting into position. He thrust the envelope into his pocket. It would keep. It was only some ill-spelt scrawl written by some half—educated native making excuses for not coming to pay his taxes. He was often the recipient of such. Of course it would keep. Then he rejoined the party.

“Come along, Mr Elvesdon,” cried Edala, excitedly. “They are going to begin.”

“They won’t really kill each other, will they, Mr Elvesdon?” asked Evelyn, with some real anxiety.

“They seem to get so carried away, you know. What if they should come to blows in real earnest? No, but that could not be, could it?”

He hastened to reassure her on that point. The whole programme was that of a wonderfully dramatic and realistic show got up for their entertainment. If she chose to let her imagination go, why that would only add to the excitement—to her—he appended, with an easy laugh.

He stole a glance at Edala. She was standing a little apart eagerly watching the manoeuvres beneath, a slight flush of excitement in her cheeks, and the expressive eyes wide and interested. He had deliberately come to the conclusion that it would be a difficult and dreary thing to go on living without her, and yet how would she look at it? He knew that she liked him, but he wanted her to do a great deal more than that. In all probability however, she in the brightness of her youth looked upon him as quite an old fogey. Well, he must make some opportunity of putting it to the test. Why not do so this evening, on the way home? Yes, he would; yet it was with some sinking of the heart that he realised that the test would probably break down.

“What can you be thinking about? You look quite worried.”

Edala had turned to him as he joined her, with wonder in her eyes. Here was his chance had they been alone together.

“I am, rather,” he answered in an undertone. For a moment her glance rested full upon him, then turned away.

“They are beginning down there,” she said.

The impi beneath was on the march, and they could trace its course, pouring upward through grass and bushes towards the doomed kraal. Then suddenly its stealthy advance changed into a swift charge, the while its lines extended, throwing out the terrible outflanking ‘horns,’ and with a mighty roar it hurled itself upon its objective.

The kraal was in a state of indescribable confusion; men, women and children pouring forth helter-skelter from the only side left open. In vain. Here, too, those terrible horns closed up, and there ensued a scene of discriminate massacre, to the accompaniment of the most diabolical shouts and hisses. The spectators could scarcely believe it was not real. Evelyn Carden’s face had gone quite white, and even that of Edala looked disturbed.

“What awful creatures!” said the former. “Mr Elvesdon, are you sure it isn’t real? I can hardly believe it.”

“No—no. It’s not real. But it’s marvellously well counterfeited.”

“It’s too dreadful. I don’t think I care to look at it any more.”

“Well, look at this. They are retiring now.”

The impi had formed up, and, raising a mighty song of victory was moving away from the scene of the mock massacre. Down through the valley it poured, with a movement that was partly a march and partly a dance, and the deep-toned thunder-notes of the triumph song rose to a pitch of fell ferocity that was rather terrifying, so realistic had the whole thing been.

Elvesdon suddenly remembered the letter which had been given him; and now that the show was over he thought he might as well investigate it.

But the first glance at the scrawl which he unfolded made him start. This is how it ran:

“Mr Elvesdon, resident Magistrate.

“Sir,

“You are a good man. I not want to see you hurt. I not want to see Christian ladies hurt. I am Christian too. Get your party away so soon as you ever can.

“I not give my name—but—do.

“Remember Mr Hope.”

Chapter Twenty Three.

After the Warning.

Just as he had thought, decided Elvesdon. Clearly the letter was from some half—educated native, but how different its import to that which he had expected. Was it a hoax, he wondered? Anyway its substance was sufficiently disquieting. Surely so tried and trusted a chief as old Tongwana could not be guilty of any such ghastly act of treachery as that hinted at. His people, too, had paid up their taxes without a murmur. The thing looked like a hoax.

It might be well to be on the safe side; to get his party away at once. But then his official *prestige* and influence would be irretrievably wrecked. He would be showing distrust—fear—of those over whom he held authority. But the sting of the whole communication lay in the concluding words, “Remember Mr Hope.”

These referred to a tragedy, which had befallen a little over a quarter of a century back. The victim had been a magistrate in Pondoland, and had been treacherously set upon and murdered, together with his two clerks, while witnessing just such an entertainment as had been provided here to-day.

Elvesdon was a boy at the time but he had since served in Pondoland—as we heard him tell Thornhill—and there at that time the event was still sufficiently fresh. But for those concluding words he would have felt inclined to set the communication down as a practical joke.

Rapidly his clear mind reviewed the position. His camp was quite a mile away; they had strolled that distance in order to gain the point whence they could overlook the mimic attack upon the kraal. The horses were knee-haltered, and grazing under the charge of his two boys, and they were a little beyond, on the other side of the camp. The impi was marching down the valley in a direction which should take it rather away from the camp than towards it. Tongwana’s kraal seemed deserted; even the women had hurried out to see the sham fight.

“We may as well get back to camp now,” he said carelessly. “The show’s about over, and we shan’t be home much before dark as it is.”

But there were two upon whom his carelessness did not altogether impose—Edala and her father. The girl, naturally sharp-witted as she was, had not failed to note the ever so slight involuntary start which had escaped him on the perusal of the missive, while Thornhill took in by instinct that something was wrong. Both, however, forebore to take any outward notice of the fact: for which he was devoutly thankful, for at all costs he must avoid alarming the weaker ones of the party. He would have given much for an opportunity of taking Thornhill into counsel, but this would have had the very effect he was anxious to avoid.

“There’s an official matter I want to get home and look into as soon as I can,” he explained carelessly. “Here, Parry. You can ride on and say I’m coming.”

He took the young Police trooper apart, as they walked.

“Look here,” he said, “and attend carefully. Go down to the camp as fast as you can walk—can *walk*, mind, not run—and get the horses saddled up as soon as you possibly can; ours first, you understand, not the boys’: and see that the girths are tight enough. Then all of you bring them out here to meet us; and every minute you save in doing it is a minute gained. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If anything happens use your own judgment, but we must have the horses as soon as ever we can, yet you must not run or show any sign of hurry. It’ll mean good for you my lad, very good. Now go.”

The young fellow saluted, and started off down the slope at a brisk springy walk which represented nearly four and a half miles an hour. He was radiant with pride. Naturally sharp, he had to a certain extent grasped the situation, and here, after a few months in the force, he found himself entrusted with a real and critical mission, with the promise of the good word of his superior. Visions of unheard of promotion floated upon his mental sight, as he paced downward to the camp, with rapid, elastic step.

Elvesdon strove to talk cheerfully, as they took their way down at a perforce slower pace than that of the young Police trooper—but it was difficult. The ridge was well between them and the impi now, but the latter might at any moment appear over it, or where it ended farther down. Had he been alone, or alone with Thornhill, he would not have felt overmuch concerned. He was as brave a man as ever lived, and endowed with his full share of nerve. He would, if the worst came to the worst, have chanced the moral effect of a display of the confidence of authority and absolute fearlessness. But now, with these two women dependent on them for protection, why it was dreadful. He reproached himself bitterly for having brought them into this peril; for, in the disturbed and simmering state of the native locations, who could be trusted? More bitterly still, perhaps, did he reproach himself for his neglect to open the communication handed to him by the old man. Then there would have been time for them to have acted upon the warning conveyed therein, and to have withdrawn while the attention of the savages was engaged by the mimic surprise of the kraal. Now it was in all probability too late.

Now he began to revolve in his mind what should be done in the event of Parry being unable to fulfil his instructions in time. He had a fight revolver in his pocket, and he suspected Thornhill was not unarmed. But of what use were they against an overwhelming crowd, all heavily armed, and right out in the open? They might shoot down a few, but would not this exasperate the savages into murdering the girls as well? Of course it would.

The wide landscape slept in the golden sunshine, the rolling plains unfolding out into misty dimness, on the one hand; on the other the outlines of distant heights softened against the clear blue. From Tongwana’s kraal, crowning the adjacent eminence, a smoke reek rose lazily upon the still air. An idea suggested itself to Elvesdon. Why not take the bull by the horns and go straight to Tongwana’s kraal? Surely there, under, figuratively speaking, the roof of the old chief, they would be safe. But just then he could see his emissary in the act of faithfully fulfilling the duty laid upon him. Down at the camp the horses were being led in. They might find safety at Tongwana’s kraal, but the Police trooper, caught alone, would certainly be murdered, if things were as desperate as the warning embodied in the letter seemed to convey. But—if only Parry would hurry up!

Now some inkling of danger seemed to have come over the weaker side of the party. Elvesdon’s silence had told—it was impossible for him to keep up his attempts at manufactured conversation under the weight of responsibility which lay upon him. They, too, were reduced to silence, and, he became aware, were looking at him curiously and furtively.

“I don’t know that I want to see one of these native performances again,” said Evelyn Carden. “Don’t think me

unappreciative, Mr Elvesdon, but really this has given me the creeps. It all seemed so fearfully natural."

"Ah, well. It isn't musical comedy, you know," he answered with forced lightness.

"Old Tongwana ought to have figured in a swallow-tailed coat and a top hat and a *mútya*" said Thornhill. "That might have given a Gilbert and Sullivan smack to it."

The laugh that greeted this was feeble. But now Elvesdon noted with intense relief that the horses had been saddled up at last—they themselves had more than halved the distance to the camp by that time, and of coarse could see everything that was going on there all the way.

Too late.

A burst of voices on the right front, and then the impi appeared, pouring over the ridge, forming a dense black line between them and the camp and, of course the horses. Then, extending, the warriors executed the surround manoeuvre and having thus completely hemmed in their guests—or their victims—they recommenced the war-dance.

"Oh for Heaven's sake, Mr Elvesdon, tell them to stop and go away," said Evelyn Carden. "This is horrible, hateful."

Elvesdon called out to more than one whom he knew by name but if they heard him they pretended not to. If the first performance had been terrifying to the uninitiated this one was infinitely more so: the roaring and the stamping, the sea of dreadful faces and gleaming bared teeth, the forest of waving blades, and the animal-like musky odour—as the frenzied circle tightened, its dense ranks drawing nearer and nearer. It was of no use for both men to shout at the top of their voices that they had had enough of the show, and that the ladies were getting frightened. The roaring only increased and the foremost of the frenzied performers shook their blades right in their faces. Elvesdon was convinced that his last moment had come. This was exactly the Hope programme repeated. It was hard to be butchered unresisting, but any resistance would certainly involve the massacre of the girls as well.

A sort of gasp from Evelyn made him turn. She was sinking to the ground.

"I feel rather faint," she murmured.

Elvesdon bent down to help her, and as he did so he was suddenly seized from behind by several powerful hands, most effectively pinioning him. At the same time half a dozen assegai blades were held against his chest. And precisely the same thing had happened to Thornhill.

"Resist not, either of you," said an authoritative voice. "Any resistance and all shall die—all, all of you."

"What does it mean?" asked Elvesdon, shortly.

"This, Ntwezi. For you two we have a use. For your women we have none. They may go home. But, only if you make no resistance."

"We agree," said Thornhill. "But let us *see* them—see them with our own eyes, depart in safety. There are their horses."

Parry, although he was going into certain death, had ridden as near as he could to the tumult. With some difficulty he was leading two horses, and both of these were under side saddles.

"Kill him—kill him," began to be cried. "He is Only a common policeman. He is of no use."

"But he is of use," shouted Elvesdon, who began now to see his way, hearing this. "No common man is he. He is only playing at police."

This was effective. Three hostages were better than two. Parry's life was saved—for the present, but he was ordered to dismount, and by the advice of his superior he complied. His revolver was taken from him—Thornhill and Elvesdon had been similarly disarmed—and he was immediately hemmed in by a ring of blades.

"Now tell your women to go," said the man who appeared to be exercising chief authority. "I will send men with them to see them safe to their home."

"May I not bid my daughter farewell?" said Thornhill, with something of a tremor in his voice, and instinctively taking a step forward. Instantly a line of blades barred his way.

"Be content, be content," answered the chief. "You are still alive, and your women are safe. Now walk."

"To Tongwana?"

No reply was made to this, but there was no help for it. Hemmed closely in by the huge armed force, they were marched along over the very ground which they had traversed so light-heartedly barely an hour before. No indignity was offered them, but they knew that escape was as impossible as though they had been bound with thongs—at any rate just then.

They had this consolation however. The chief had kept his word. Looking backward just before they plunged over the ridge they could make out the mounted figures of the two girls away over the plain, the armed escort, keeping pace, distributed on either side—and they were making for home, not for Kwabulazi.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Unprotected.

“What—will happen to—them?”

It was Evelyn who jerked this forth. For some time the two had ridden in silence, neither daring to trust herself to speak. Perhaps the same thought was in both their minds; they must not break down and display weakness before these savages. Certainly it was in that of Edala—who, raised among them, fully recognised the advisability of keeping-up a show of dignity towards an inferior race.

“They will not be harmed,” she answered, with a confidence she was far from feeling. There might be some among their escort who understood English, and it would never do to let an impression get abroad that such a thing as offering harm to such men as Thornhill and the magistrate, could even come within the bounds of possibility. “Who would dare to lift a hand against them? Why it would mean the hanging of every chief concerned, and a good many of the people as well.”

“Then you think they are safe—you who know these people so well?”

The question was put in a quick eager tone. Edala’s brows wrinkled.

“Don’t talk so loud, Evelyn,” she said, speaking quickly and, of design rather indistinctly. “There may be some here who understand. Better not talk about it at all, perhaps, until we’re alone. Oh, hang it—we must keep up,” she broke off roughly, as she felt her eyes brimming. “Can’t give away the show. D’you hear? We *must* keep up.”

The other murmured assent. The escort, stepping along at a quick walk so as to keep pace with the horses, was somewhat puzzled at the demeanour of the pair, and the warriors were talking among themselves in rapid undertones, as is the way of natives when they wish to disguise their conversation. Edala was adapting their method to English.

“I can’t make it out, Evelyn,” she said, purposely talking through closed teeth so as to be the more unintelligible to outside listeners. “None of these here are our people. In fact I hardly saw one, during the dancing, that was. I believe these are from—beyond the border.”

“What? Real Zulus?”

“Don’t mention names. That’s what I think they are,” purposely avoiding even the enunciation of the word ‘yes,’ for reasons given above. “For instance, look at those two ringed men. Their rings are differently sewn on to those on this side. You wouldn’t notice it but I do. That looks as if this was going to be a big affair, and had been carefully planned. Oh, you think I’m taking it all remarkably coolly, Evelyn—” she broke off, in the gusty voice she used in moments of excitement. “But—we must keep up—we must keep up.”

“Yes—yes,” came the quick answer.

“There’s just this I go upon,” went on Edala. “If there are two men in the world who could be reckoned on to keep their wits about them and do the right thing at the right time, those two are father and Mr Elvesdon. See my meaning?”

The other nodded.

“So we must hope for the best.”

One thing that troubled Edala was that she could get no explanation whatever from their escort. The head-ringed men had kept carefully on the outskirts of the same, and when applied to to come over and talk had ignored the appeal. After this she would not question the common or unringed ‘boy,’ so was obliged to practise patience and await developments.

By the time they arrived at Sipazi it was nearly dark. Edala had more than half-expected to find the homestead a mass of smouldering ruins—but no. There it stood, yet there was a something that suggested the unusual. There was no sign of life about the place for instance—no smoke rising either from the kitchen chimney or from the huts of the native servants. Could it be that the latter—together with the Indian cook—had all been murdered? Edala drew rein, and addressed the escort.

“There is our home and now we are safe. If you would return you have fulfilled your mission. If you would rest, there is food and drink yonder.”

They looked at each other and laughed queerly.

“Ride on, Nkosazana,” said one of the ringed men.

Now there was sign of life with a vengeance, for the four great dogs came charging down upon the new arrivals, open-mouthed, barking and snarling savagely.

“Don’t kill them, *amadoda*,” said Edala, as assegais were detached, and held with suggestive readiness. “They will not hurt.”

But the savages were not going to be done out of their fun. A number of them rushed forward. Assegais showered through the air, and the unfortunate beasts lay transfixed by several of them, apiece, kicking feebly in their death throes.

“I—jji! I—jji!” went up the death hiss from their slayers, together with great hoarse shouts of laughter.

“The cruel wretches,” murmured Evelyn, in shuddering disgust. Edala’s lips tightened, but she restrained herself. Their own lives were none too secure, and this she knew.

Meanwhile the savages having tasted blood, even though only that of animals, began questing inside the deserted huts, but found no one. No cattle was in the kraals, either, or anything about the house, except a few fowls, which they promptly assegaied.

Edala said nothing now. To have offered them hospitality after this outrage would have been to have shown that she

feared them. The two girls slid from their saddles, and entered the house. Both were sick with apprehension. It was growing dusk now, and here they were at the mercy of these barbarians. Edala went to her room, and seizing her revolver slipped it into her blouse. But no one followed. Through the window they could see that the side saddles had been flung from the horses, to be replaced by a couple of ordinary ones which had been found in in the stable. Then two of the ringed men having mounted, the whole crowd moved off without another word.

The two girls looked after them, then at each other.

“No—no,” said Edala, shaking a warning finger, as she saw the other on the verge of a breakdown—her own eyes were dimming suspiciously. “We haven’t got to do that, you know. We’ve got to prove to ourselves that the old libel—only it isn’t a libel—that the first thing women do in a difficulty is to howl, has its exceptions.”

“Yes—yes. You are wonderful, Edala. I could not have believed that any girl could show the coolness and pluck you have shown. What’s the next thing to do?”

“Do? Anything—everything rather than sit still and think. To-morrow early, we’ll start for Kwabulazi.”

“Yes. Let’s. But now—do you think any of those horrible brutes will come here again to-night?”

“No—I don’t. Those weren’t our own people, you know, Evelyn, as I told you. I’m not sure, quite, what to do. If we weren’t safe at Tongwana’s I don’t know where we shall be. So well start early so as to get there before it’s hot. But—I forgot. Can you walk? It’s thirteen miles every inch, and all our horses are gone.”

“Yes. I think I can. At any rate I shall have to.”

“Well we’ll shut the shutters so that no light will leak out if there are any wandering gangs about. Come along and help me, Evelyn. We can’t walk thirteen miles—we two feeble females—on nothing, you know.”

The other saw the drift. Both were to be kept busy. There must be no time for thinking. It may be that each saw into the other’s mind.

Soon a fire was started in the kitchen, and coffee brewed.

“I wonder what has become of Ramasam,” said Edala, when they sat down to their meal. “He’s an awful coward, and must have bolted with the others. Yet, I wonder how they first got the alarm. If it wasn’t that old Patolo is as reliable as death I should have thought that he had cleared out all the cattle and goats, for decidedly someone has.”

Evelyn had not noticed this little detail in the excitement and apprehension attendant on their strange home-coming. More and more she wondered at the other’s strength, her almost awful coolness.

But in spite of their efforts real cheerfulness would not prevail. Neither cared to open her heart to the other.

“I think we’d better get some sleep,” said Edala presently. “We shall have to start soon after midnight.”

“Hark! What’s that?” The speaker’s face had gone white, and under the circumstances, with her nerves all strung to high tension, even Edala had started.

A low, indescribably hideous, moaning noise had arisen. It came from the back of the house.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she answered. “Come and see.”

They went to the kitchen window, which looked out on the back. The moon had risen, and the ghostly light revealed the form of a large bull. He stood stamping and pawing the ground, uttering the while his hideous uncanny moanings.

“Oh, I’ll soon scoot him,” said Edala, returning to the passage to take down a raw-hide whip. “Only it’s not much use. The brute’ll be sure to come back.”

“Edala! You’re never going out to face that dreadful beast!” cried Evelyn, laying a detaining hand on her arm. Edala laughed shortly.

“You’ll see him run directly.”

But before she could reach the door the animal was seen suddenly to run forward, and disappear behind the cattle-kraal, where his moaning, in various keys, recommenced. Then he trotted back, tail in the air, emitting a shrill, half terrified bellow. To one, at any rate, of those who witnessed this performance the effect was indescribably weird.

“What does it mean?” she said.

“Nothing. The cattle often come round and make that row around the place where the goats are killed. It’s the blood, you know.”

Then she suddenly stopped, for it flashed upon her that the spot at which the moaning of the bull was at its highest and most excited pitch was not that whereon the goats were killed.

“Anyhow, I’ll just go out and scoot him. You stop here.”

Evelyn watched her go outside. At sight of her the bull paused in his stamping and scrapings and threw up his head, snuffing the air. Edala swirled the whip-lash as she advanced towards him—she would not crack it, for fear the sound might reach other ears. Then the beast lowered his head as if to charge her—backed a few paces—then thought better of it, and, turning, galloped madly away, uttering that—as it sounded in the silent and ghostly moonlight—shrill unearthly bellow.

Edala looked after the retreating beast. Her weaker instincts were all to return inside and bolt and bar the door. But some stronger motive to investigate took hold upon her—leading her steps to the spot where the beast had been most moved to his weird and mysterious rumblings.

As she turned the corner of the cattle-kraal her heart beat quicker, and her hand stole by sheer mechanical instinct to the butt of the revolver inside her blouse, not that it would be of any use against that which she expected to see and—did see.

There, in the moonlight, just out from the fence, lay a form—a human form; and it did not require two glances to determine that it was a dead human form. Mastering her overpowering horror the girl advanced. The body was ripped right open, and in the dead face, its sightless eyeballs upturned to the moon, she recognised that of the faithful old cattle-herd Patolo.

What was this? Old Patolo! Dear old Patolo, who had known her from her childhood! Never a time that she could not remember old Patolo. And now here he lay, barbarously murdered! A rush of tears came to her eyes, and with a fierce longing for revenge upon his brutal slayers, she unconsciously gripped the butt of her revolver, and perhaps it was as well, or the shock of the awful sight might have had disastrous effects.

“Oh—hh!”

Edala turned quickly, at the shuddering exclamation, uttered as it was in accents of the most indescribable horror. Evelyn, dreading to be alone, even for a moment, had followed her out.

“Go back!” she cried. “You need not see this.”

But Evelyn had seen it. Her face wore a set, stony stare.

“Come in. Come in,” said Edala, in her most brusque commanding tone, taking the other by the arm. And then that hideous moaning sound arose just behind them, together with the stamp of feet. The great bull had returned, and stood, not ten yards from them, his massive head, grim and formidable looking to the last degree in the moonlight. Evelyn collapsed. She slid to the ground in a dead faint.

Chapter Twenty Five.

“The Perils and Dangers of this Night.”

What was to be done? The great, grisly brute stood there pawing and scraping, keeping up the while his gruesome moanings, his shrill bellow. But there was now a note of savagery in these: whether it was that the smell of blood, and a great deal of it, had worked him up, together with the fact of finding himself all alone, so far as his kind went—his voice took on that strange growling note which enraged cattle take on at times, and then—look out for mischief. And the girl stood, absolutely unprotected, the prostrate form of her friend lying there at her feet, helpless. Had any been there to see it her face wore the same look that it had worn as she stood holding the big stone ready to throw, what time Elvesdon came between her and the great snake.

She let go the whip-lash with a resounding crack in the direction of the menacing beast. He was of the large homed kind that would have been the delight of a *Plaza de Toros*, and looked horribly formidable, tossing his white sharp horns in the moonlight. Then he charged.

Edala did not yield an inch as she stood over the body of her friend. She calculated her distance to a nicety, and as coolly as if she had been fly-fishing, she sent out the whip-lash again. Fortunately the charge was a half-hearted one, and the cutting *voerslag*, catching the enemy full in the eyes, brought him up as sharp as though the cruel *banderillas* had suddenly been stuck in his withers in the *plaza* in old Spain. She gave him no law. Twice in rapid succession again she gave him the *voerslag*, and the blinded beast, mad with pain, backed, then trotted unsteadily away.

Edala’s breathing came in spasmodic gasps as she watched him out of sight, and the reaction made her knees tremble beneath her. Oh hang it! She must keep up, she told herself. She could not afford to follow Evelyn’s example, or what would become of them both? So this girl, with the glorious gold-crowned head, alone there under circumstances of peril and horror, started to work out the situation for the safety of both.

“Come Evelyn. Pull yourself together, and get up!” she cried, half carrying, half dragging the other to the house door. “Lord! I shall have to shy a bucket of water over her yet!” she added almost savagely, panting from her exertion.

But this drastic remedy proved unnecessary, for Evelyn opened her eyes, then sat up, staring about her in a dazed kind of way.

“What is it? I’ve been dreaming—something horrible,” she said.

“Yes, you have. Never mind. Buck up now, and come inside. It’s beastly cold out here.”

“Why yes. I feel tottery though. Oh Edala, what a fool you must think me.”

“No. Only, don’t do it again,” was the reply, accompanied by a curious laugh. Edala was thinking—though not resentfully—of how a day or two ago the other was lecturing her: in a way talking down to her, while disclaiming any intent to do so. Now she was the one upon whom everything depended. The situation was in her hands.

They went inside, and Edala mixed a glass of brandy and water.

“You drink this,” she said. “Then go to sleep for an hour or two and we’ll start for Kwabulazi.”

“But I hate spirits—Ugh!” with a shudder.

“So do I; and I hate medicine too; but both are necessary sometimes. Down with it.”

Evelyn obeyed, with more than one additional shudder. But the end justified the means, for, sitting back in a low roomy armchair, she soon felt drowsy and dropped off to sleep.

Edala felt no inclination to follow her example, on the contrary she had never felt more wakeful in her life. She wandered from room to room. There was her father’s library, and his favourite chair and reading lamp. There were his cherished books, and all the surrounding was alive with his presence. She could hardly realise that he was no longer there, but instead was a prisoner—a hostage—in the hands of insurrectionary savages; whose wild mad scheme of rebellion could end in no other way than that utterly disastrous to themselves, and then—?

She looked around the room, and a terrible wave of compunction, or remorse came over her. How hard, how selfish, how unloving she had been towards him. Who was she that she should judge him? Yet she had, and that at every moment of the day.

All the affection and care and consideration he had lavished upon her came back now. It would, when it was too late, he had more than once said in his bitterness—Evelyn too had all unconsciously echoed his words. And it had. Should she ever see him again—ever look upon that loving presence—to whom she had been all in all for the whole of her young life, and whom she had met with ingratitude and repulsion? In the lonely silence of the still midnight the girl who had faced physical danger with a calm front, and rare readiness of resource, broke down.

“Father darling—darling! come back to me,” she moaned. “Only come back to me, to your little one again, and all shall be so different, so different.”

She had dropped upon her knees, her head buried in the chair—his chair. Her heart seemed breaking in her sobs—her great sobs—which hardly relieved it. What if she should never see him again, to tell him how his words had been surely fulfilled—never—never? No, she could not realise it. This room, which more than any other in the house seemed sacred to his presence and—now empty of it. A large portrait of him hung on the wall. Rising she went over and pressed her lips to the cold, not too carefully dusted, glass again and again.

The sound of stirring in the other room now came to her ears. It brought her down to the hard, material side of the situation. She dashed the tears from her eyes, fiercely, determinedly, and went to join her relative. Evelyn was awake again, and was looking around in rather a frightened way.

“Oh, here you are, Edala! Shall we start? I feel ever so much refreshed now. But you, child—have you had some sleep?”

“Yes—no,” was the half-absent reply. “Start? Yes, as soon as you’re ready. Wait though. I’ll go and get some supplies for the way. Later on you’ll find it no joke walking thirteen miles across the veldt on nothing but air.”

She was all material and practical again now. In a marvellously short space of time she returned with a well packed wallet stored with provisions.

“You sling this on,” handing the other a vulcanite water bottle. “I’ll carry the skoff—and the gun. It’s a pity you couldn’t learn to shoot, Evelyn, or you might have carried another. As it is we’ll hide the other two—inside the piano. No Kafir would think of looking for them there.”

This was done, then having carefully extinguished the lights and being well wrapped up, for the nights were fresh; and in dark attire, for safety’s sake, they went forth.

“I wonder if we shall ever see the old house again,” said Edala bitterly. “It’ll probably be burned to the ground, and all father’s treasured books,”—she added, with the catch of a sob. “These brutes—who have known you all your life, and then even they fall away from you! They’ll stick at nothing.”

There was silence then as they started upon their long tramp. The bodies of the poor dogs lay where they had been slain, plainly outlined under the cold moon, whose light glared down too upon that other mangled human relic, which, fortunately they could not see. High in the air invisible plover wheeled and whistled, and down in the blackness of the kloofs, right across their way, the answering bay of hunting jackals, and the deeper voice of the striped hyena, echoed eerily upon the night. Evelyn shuddered.

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Edala. “Nothing to be afraid of there—quite the contrary. It means that our way is clear, or no animal would be kicking up all that row. That’s just what we want. Hallo—here’s our friend back again,” she broke off, as a trample of hoofs, and a quick shrill bellow, told that the bull had returned. Again Evelyn shuddered.

“Will he attack us?” she said.

“I hope not, because this time I shall have to shoot. A charge of Treble A. at ten yards’ll split even his tough skull. But the last thing I want to do is to loose off a shot at all. By the way, that’s old Blue Hump. He must have got cut off from the herd when they drove it off—or cleared on his own. He’s a vicious old brute, anyway.”

The animal was trotting parallel with their course and every now and then they could make out the great branching horns above the bush sprays. But he must have grown tired of it, or feared to come to closer quarters, for presently they Saw no more of him.

“There’s a pathway here that cuts a considerable corner,” said Edala. “Whew! how cold it is.”

It was, and in spite of the exercise and plentiful wrapping up, both girls shivered. There were stealthy rustlings in the darkness of the brake, and once a great ant-bear rushing across the road, looking pale and uncanny in the moonlight, drew a stifled shriek from Evelyn. The other laughed.

“They’re the most harmless things on earth. Hyland and I and poor Jim used to hunt them often at night with assegais.”

Thus they travelled on, and soon Evelyn became accustomed to the unwonted experience of walking all night across wild country in potential peril at every step: fortunately she was in hard physical training by now. Once Edala's quick vision had detected a puff adder lying in the path, but a few stones hurled from a little distance, soon drove the bloated, hissing reptile to seek safety somewhere else. Now and again a great owl would drop down right in front of their faces, and they could see his head turning from side to side as he sailed along on noiseless pinions, uttering his ghostly hoot: or the 'churn' of the nightjar would echo weirdly from beneath some overhanging rock; or again, a tiger-wolf howled, and big beetles in blundering flight, boomed through the air. So the voices of the night were never still.

They had sat down for a brief rest, and some refreshment, then on again. Suddenly Edala grew uneasy. A white mist was settling down upon the land. This was serious; for not only might they run plump into those it was all important to avoid, but there was grave danger of getting 'turned round' and finding themselves back at Sipazi again. The mist deepened, and so did Edala's growing anxiety. It was one of those thick white mists which settle down upon the land in the small hours of the morning, fearfully disconcerting from a wayfarer's point of view, but which melt away as by magic before the sun is an hour high. But that was small comfort to these two. They wanted to be at Kwabulazi before the sun was above the horizon at all. Suddenly Edala started.

"Hark!" she whispered, stopping short.

In front—directly in front—was audible a deep, confused murmur of sound, rolling, as it seemed, from one point to another, and drawing nearer and nearer. And with it came another sound. Those who have heard it can never mistake it, and these two had heard it all too significantly of late. It was the quivering rattle of assegai hafts.

From the sounds, spread out as they were right across their front, it was manifest that a large body of natives was moving towards them in open order. The fact that they were all armed told its own tale. This was a rebel impi, and but for the friendly mist these two would have run right into it.

"Quick, Evelyn! This way!" breathed, rather than whispered, Edala.

Holding her companion's hand she drew her after her. The way she was taking now ascended sharply, but it was the only way. The rime rolled along, now in gusty puffs. This seemed to tell that they were gaining some height. Both were panting from their exertion, but there was no such thing as pausing, for now from the sounds beneath it was evident that the savages had suddenly altered their line of march, and were coming on in the same direction as themselves. Had they heard the sound of their steps, the clinking of a stone—what not? Anyway they could not go down, these two. That was out of the question.

On and upward. A puff of damp air, now nearly in their teeth, showed that they had attained the summit of some height. Suddenly Edala seized her companion's hand in a strong grip and held it—and its owner.

"What is it?" whispered the latter.

"We are on the edge of a big krantz, that's all. Three or four more steps and we should have been over."

It was even as she had said. The ground ended just in front of them, and the blast of air coming up denoted a cliff, and one of considerable height.

But now it was lightening, and they could make out the long smooth edge of the height stretching away on their left front. And—good Heavens! Now the voices sounded from that direction—*advancing* from that direction as though to meet the owners of those coming up behind. These two were in a trap, caught between two fires. It was evident that the savages suspected their presence—the presence of somebody—and were quartering the ground in order to clear up the mystery. And there was nowhere to hide. The mountain top was flat and grassy. Suddenly Edala gave a violent start.

"I know our bearings now," she whispered. "We're on the top of Sipazi. Now Evelyn, there's one chance for us, and one only—if you've the nerve to take it."

"And that?"

"My 'aerial throne.'"

The other gasped. She remembered how her flesh had crept before, when Edala had taken her to see the famous tree, how she had turned away almost faint, as she watched the girl spring out fearlessly on to this dreadful seat—with a careless laugh as though she had just dropped into an armchair. And now she too must sit dangling over the awful height. At that moment she almost preferred to take her chance of the assegais of the savages. But that chance might possibly mean even a worse one, and the thought decided her, as Edala whispered impatiently:—

"It's got to be done. It's our only chance. But you can't fall. I'll take care of that. Come."

The deep voices sounded alarmingly near now. We have said that the brow of the mountain went down by a grass steep that was almost precipitous, to the stump of the tree. Edala let herself down this with cat-like security of footing, keeping ever a firm hold upon her companion—her gun she wedged into the root of a stunted bush growing out from the grass.

"Now we're all right," she whispered, as they sat wedged upon the projecting tree trunk, their feet dangling over space. "You can't possibly fall, you know, as long as you hang on to that root, and I'm holding you. It's a triumph of matter over mind instead of t'other way on, and as long as you forget there's more than six foot of drop between this and the ground why you're as jolly here as in an armchair on the stoep."

And the other was somewhat reassured, although the situation to her was ghastly and horrible in the extreme. But now the voices drew very near indeed, were right overhead. Fortunately the mist had suddenly thickened, and the tree, which was some little way down, was quite blotted out to the vision of those above. To Edala, who understood what was said, the moment was one of awful tensity. Someone had been upon the mountain, of that they were convinced. But where could they be? There was no hiding place. Unless they had fallen over the cliff they would be here now.

Thus the discussion flowed on. Even the vibration of the tread of feet above caused the tree trunk to quiver slightly. At any moment the mist might lift. And it seemed to these two, suspended over awful space, an eternity. Then with

unspeakable relief and thankfulness they heard the footsteps and voices retreating.

"Not yet," breathed Edala. "Not yet. We must let them get clear away first. See. It's getting lighter."

It was. The dawn was at hand; in fact had already begun to break. The outline of the cliff above was visible now, plainly visible, and devoutly thankful did Edala feel that this lightening had been deferred as long as it had.

"My 'aerial throne' has its uses, Evelyn—eh?" she whispered.

Then something moved her to look up again. Her exaltation was dashed, shattered to the ground. On the brink, calmly gazing down upon them, stood the tall figure of a man—a dark man—and the outline of his figure and head-ring stood out against the sickly murk. She recognised Manamandhla. The bitterness of death had come.

For a few moments the Zulu thus stood, his eyes meeting hers. Then, without a word, he turned away and disappeared.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Of a Home-Coming.

The kraal of the chief, Ndabakosi, was in a state of somewhat unusual excitement. Men were passing from hut to hut, but there were few women to be seen. The blue smoke reeks rose to bluer sky, and the odour of kine was in the air. Around, the veldt, dotted with feathery mimosa, lay shimmering in the afternoon heat.

The kraal was a fairly large one, but somewhat of a strain must have been put upon its capacity for accommodation, for a considerable number of people seemed to be gathered here—not all together, for they kept continually passing and re-passing from hut to hut, and hardly ever in the same groups. Quite a number of them too, carried assegais, and, not a few, shields. Clearly something was in the wind.

The horseman, pacing along the dusty track of road, was not in a good humour. We regret to have to record that more than once he swore—swore right heartily too. Nothing is more conducive to such behaviour than the discovery, in the course of a hot and tedious journey, that one's mount has gone lame. This one had just made such a discovery—wherefore—he swore.

Dismounting, he looked again at the defaulting hoof, felt the pastern. Seen thus, he was a tall, broad shouldered young fellow, light-haired, blue-eyed, straight as a dart. He was puzzled. There was nothing to account for this sudden lameness. The steed was not of the best, but it was the best he could hire when he got off the train at Telani, at an early hour that morning, in his impatience to get home. And now it was out of the question that he should reach home that night. The horse was not very lame, certainly; but it was likely to go lamer still with every mile or so.

"It's just possible I might borrow a horse at old Ndabakosi's place," he said to himself, "and that can't be more than a mile further on. Yes there it is," as, topping a rise, he could discern a ring of domed huts crowning a *kopje* a little way off the road in front. "These nigger gees are beastly screws as a rule, but 'needs must, etc.,' and it may get me as far as Kwabulazi to-night at any rate. He's a decent old chap is Ndabakosi, and a long cool pull of *tywala* won't come in badly just now. Gee up, you brute!"

Hyland Thornhill's visions of home-coming were pleasant in spite of the above-detailed *contretemps*. It would be no end jolly to see the old man again—he and his father had always been more like chums than anything else, and the confidence between them was perfect. And little Edala—she was wrong-headed on certain points, but still—what times they would have. And the strange visitor? He wondered what she would be like. Well, the more the merrier—anyway, he was going to have a ripping time of it now he had broken loose at last. He had put up a surprise visit on them, and it would all be great fun.

But between himself and Sipazi there lay—Ndabakosi's kraal.

The latter, for a moment had been unwontedly lively; then it was as dead. When Hyland Thornhill rode up to it, two ringed men stood watching his approach with listless curiosity.

"*Saku bona 'madoda*!" he cried. "And the chief—how is he?"

They returned his greeting.

The chief was asleep, they said. In fact he was getting old, and was not very well.

"*Au*! That is bad news," returned Hyland. "But—we are old friends. I would like to look upon his face once more. Tell him Ugwala is here," giving his native nickname.

The two, whose faces were strange to him, looked at each other. Then one went in the direction of the chief's hut, while the other went in another direction. The while Hyland had not dismounted. Presently the first returned.

The chief was awake, he said, and would see Ugwala presently. Meanwhile would he not dismount?

But a very strange kind of instinct had come over Hyland Thornhill, warning him to do nothing of the kind. It happened that as he sat in the saddle waiting, he had happened to see, by a side glance, the hut which the other man had entered. The doorway, for one brief moment, had been crowded with faces, whose expression there was no mistaking. His glance had also caught the gleam of assegais. All the rumours he had heard on the way down and, especially when he had got off the train at Telani, where in fact he had been seriously warned against taking this journey all alone—came back to him. He remembered, too, that many of the more reliable chiefs were reported to be disaffected.

"I will not wait, then," he answered. "I must reach Kwabulazi to-night. *Hlala-gahle*."

The other grunted a sullen reply. Hyland, as he pushed his lame horse along, did not feel at all easy in his mind. He would have felt less so still had he seen what happened a few minutes afterwards. Hardly was he out of sight of the kraal than a number of armed savages issued from it, racing over the veldt at an angle of forty-five divergent from the direction he was taking. But they knew their own plan. They knew moreover that he was riding a lame horse. And they never intended he should reach Kwabulazi that night—or ever.

As he held on his way his uneasiness took a new turn, and that on behalf of his father and sister. If things were going from bad to worse Sipazi was a lonely place. Surely his father would know better than to remain on there. Perhaps they were already in laager—he had heard that in some parts the farmers were going into laager—and again and again he cursed his luckless mount which had had the unfortunate foolishness to go dead lame just as he wanted him to put his best foot foremost.

Stung by these obtruding apprehensions, Hyland lashed his steed savagely. It sprang forward into a half-hearted canter, and again he lashed it. In front rose a long acclivity, the straight road ribanded out in red dust, in contrast to the green of the veldt. Then began a race—all unconsciously on the part of one competitor, but not so on that of others. Threescore armed savages were straining every muscle to gain the top of that acclivity the first, advancing stealthily through the mimosa bushes and long grass.

Up this the sorry horse cantered half heartedly. But Hyland Thornhill was in a bad temper now, a condition of mind begotten of growing anxiety. What was a mere quadruped to him then? And again the raw-hide lash curled round the animal's ribs. It gave a feeble kick or two, but started off at a fairly respectable pace.

"Get on, you brute!" he growled savagely.

It may grieve the moralist, but it is hard fact that that outburst of bad temper saved the rider's life. For by just the time saved by the enforced acceleration of the horse's pace did he gain the top of the rise first and—became alive to what he had, by such a shave, escaped. The crawling forms were not a hundred yards distant on his right when he sighted them, and on realising that they were discovered, they bounded forward with a roar. But it was downhill work now, and Hyland sent his steed along at its best pace, soon leaving his enemies behind.

"Near thing that, damn it!" he muttered grimly, turning in his saddle to see if he was being pursued.

He was. Dark forms, strung out like a pack of hounds, were sprinting along the road in his rear. He had got a good start, but what if this confounded screw should stumble and fall? Then—good night! And Kwabulazi was not exactly near, either. He had a good, business-like revolver slung round him, concealed by his coat; but what was that against such odds? It would mean selling his life at the price of four or five of theirs, and keeping the last bullet for himself.

He had served in Matabeleland as well as in the Dutch war. He was hardened and resourceful, but among the things he had learned in the former campaign was the accepted fact that it did not do to fall into the power of hostile savages, helpless and unarmed.

But no more did he see of his pursuers, and he felt almost affectionately disposed towards his defaulting mount, as he topped the last neck, and looked down upon Kwabulazi.

What was this? The place was all alive with people. The tents of several waggons showed up white in the evening glow, and as he drew nearer he could see a number of men digging for all they were worth. They were making entrenchments. The place had gone into laager, then. His father and sister would be there, and safe. After his own experience he was filled with unutterable relief and thankfulness as he realised this.

Several of the surrounding farmers had gathered here with their families for mutual defence, and an outlying storekeeper or two, and all hands were turning to with a will to bank up an adequate breastwork. Within this the waggons, together with boxes and bales, should form an inner line of defence. There was a lull in the work as Hyland rode up.

"Dashed if it isn't young Thornhill!" said one—an old man with a bushy grizzled beard.

"Dashed if it isn't old Seth Curtis," responded Hyland, coolly.

"Well that's a damned respectful way to talk to a man old enough to be your father," growled the other.

"Old enough to be, but thank God he isn't. I'm quite content with the one I've got," answered Hyland shortly. He was not inclined to be cordial towards the speaker, or towards anyone there. He resented the attitude the neighbours had taken up towards his father, and didn't care how much they knew it. "Where is he, by the way?"

There was no answer. A sort of blankness came over the group which had gathered. Each looked at the other. Hyland felt his face growing white and cold. His fists instinctively clenched.

"Can't some idiot answer?" he snarled savagely, glaring at the blank faces, with a murderous longing to run 'amok' and dash his fists in to them all. Then a girl's voice sounded forth clear and full.

"Why—it's Hyland."

"Edala—where is he?" was the first question in the midst of a hurried embrace. "Not killed?"

"No—not that."

"What then? Wounded?"

"No. But—they've got him."

"Good God!"

"Come with me and I'll tell you all about it quietly," and she led him to Elvesdon's house where she and Evelyn had

taken up their quarters. The latter's presence he hardly noticed as he acknowledged their introduction mechanically. Then Edala gave him all particulars of the semi-tragic termination to Tongwana's war-dance.

"Why the people have known him all their lives," said Hyland. "What can be their object? I could understand if they had killed him—them—but to keep them prisoners—Oh Lord! Edala, can nothing be done to rescue them? We can't sit down and let things slide."

And he began to pace about the room. Edala shook her head, dejectedly.

"Mr Prior has been doing what he can. He has sent out two of his native detectives to try and find out where they are, and bribe the chiefs to release them. He does not believe that Tongwana had any hand in it. Nteseni might have, or Babatyana. He, by the way, has broken out, and there are rumours that old Zavula has been murdered by him."

"Well, it's quite likely. Yet that paying dodge is about the only chance at present that I can see," said Hyland, gloomily. "We must first find out where they are, and if they're alive I'll get 'em out, or go under myself—even if I have to do it alone, for I don't suppose any of these white livered curs round here would risk their skins to lend me a hand. They're first-rate at snapping at a man's heels though," he ended savagely.

Edala knew to what he was referring, and secretly writhed. The lash was stinging her too.

"Hy, darling—it's a perfect godsend that you have come. Oh, we must do something," she said, her eyes filling. Edala the light-hearted, the careless, the somewhat hard—had softened marvellously since that experience.

Then Prior came in, and Hyland greeted him cordially, for they had been great friends; in fact the magistrate's clerk was one of the very few in the neighbourhood with whom he would exchange much more than a word, for the reasons given above. Now he gave him his experiences at Ndabakosi's kraal, and subsequently.

"If I'd got off that horse I should have been a dead man," he concluded. "So I should be if I hadn't got my shirt out, and quilted that poor lame old crock rather sinfully. Well, you see—you can trust none of these chaps after all. If there's one nigger in all Natal I should have sworn was straight it's old Ndabakosi."

So they talked on. Prior, by reason of his official position, and as the deputy of his absent chief, found himself in a sort of post of command—the detachment of Mounted Police, too, being under his orders, and it looked as if Hyland Thornhill by reason of a masterful force of will was going to share it with him, in the active line at any rate, if they came to blows with the rebels. Than this Prior asked nothing better and said so with unfeigned satisfaction.

We last saw Edala and her companion poised on the dizzy altitude of what the former called her 'aerial throne,' surrounded by peril. Moreover they had just been discovered. Manamandhla had seen them, as to that there could be no doubt. Every moment they had sat there expecting the return of those they had heard above—then death; and every such moment was bitter with the bitterness of death. Yet, when they climbed up nearly an hour later and stood, cramped and shivering, the summit of Sipazi was clear. Sorely was Edala puzzled. Clearly the Zulu had not betrayed their presence. What strange unfathomable motive could he have had in sparing their lives—hers especially, thought Edala, whose father had deliberately attempted to take his? Yet he had done so.

And in the result Prior was astounded to see at about mid-day, instead of his chief returning—for he had taken for granted the latter was spending the night at Thornhill's—two tired and haggard-eyed girls walking up to the place; and more astounded still when he recognised their identity, and learned the strange doings they had to tell of.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Defence of Kwabulazi.

All round the earthwork men were posted, many for the air was keen and biting. The stars, not yet faded, shone frostily, but there was no mist; and for this they were thankful. Each man had a gun of some sort, from an up-to-date Mauser or Lee-Metford, down to a double-barrelled shot-gun.

The first dull red streaks had begun to appear in the eastern sky, and at the sight a thrill of excitement ran along the circle, for such is almost invariably the time chosen by the wily savage for making his murderous rush. These were all prepared to give him a most unhealthy reception.

"Don't light that silly pipe, Jenkins," growled Hyland to his next door neighbour. "D'you hear? What are you doing, man? D'you think we want 'em to know we're anxiously waiting to welcome them?"

The man addressed snarled.

"Who the 'ell are you?" he grunted. "I'm not taking orders from anyone." Still he hardly dared disobey. Hyland Thornhill had a reputation for being a terror with his fists, and he was as strong as an elephant.

"I'll knock it out of your silly jaws if you attempt to light it," was the uncompromising answer. "Hallo!" as he became aware of another presence just behind him. "What are you doing here, Edala? Go in at once."

"I'm going to take a hand in this game," she answered, showing her revolver—her brother had impounded her gun, having none of his own.

"Not if I know it. Clear back in again at once, d'you hear." Then in a tender undertone, "Be sensible, little girl. Go inside, and keep all those women from yelling themselves to death with funk directly. You can do it."

She obeyed, with no further demur.

"'The Lord is King,'" quoted with a sneer, the man just taken to task, to his neighbour on the other side. "But it seems to me that old Thornhill's pup is king over Him."

“Meaning yourself?”

“Oh, you’re so damn funny, Bridson. You’ll bust yourself if you don’t watch it,” rejoined the other resentfully.

Hyland, the while, was occupying himself by drawing a cross-nick with a pocket-knife on the apex of each of his Lee-Metford bullets. The gun was a rifle and smooth bore, and with a heavy charge of Treble A in the shot barrel, was calculated, as he put it, to stop the devil himself at no distance; anyhow many black devils would probably undergo the experiment before the day was an hour older. He had just finished on the last bullet when something caused him to throw up his head, rigid and motionless, listening intently. He had caught the faintest possible suspicion of that unique sound—the quiver of assegai hafts.

“Pass the word round ‘Stand by’,” he whispered to each of his neighbours. One ignored it—he recently rated, to wit. Who the devil was young Thornhill, to come here skippering the whole ship? he wanted to know—to himself.

Hyland was sighting his piece. In the fast lightening dawn his keen vision had detected a tongue of dark figures flitting stealthily out of the mimosa bushes some couple of hundred yards away—and striking out a line which should bring them round to the back of the entrenchment. This was the encircling manoeuvre, he decided. And then he let go.

But the detonation, and the wild yell of more than one stricken savage—for he had fired into them bunched up—was drowned by an appalling roar, as a dense mass sprang up among the low bushes on that front, and, waving shield and assegai, charged straight for the earthwork.

“Aim low—aim low,” was each man’s injunction to his neighbour as the firearms crashed: in the semi-light making a circle of jetting flame. With effect too, for the front rows went down like mown corn.

“Ho-ho-ho! Haw-haw! Hooray!” were the varying forms of hoarse guffaw that went up, and the joke was this. Those immediately behind the fallen ones, pressed on over the bodies of the latter, intending to rush the earthwork before the defenders should have time to reload. But they, too, went down in sheaves, and that before another shot had been fired. They had got into an entanglement of barbed wire, which had been stealthily and quickly fixed round the defences the night before, but *after dark*, lest the watchful eyes of scouts should perceive it and so prepare their countrymen, for this surprise. And now the surprise was complete.

“Give it ’em again!” shouted Hyland, setting the example. This time the fire was not directed upon those who had fallen among the wire entanglement, but on those immediately behind them. The effect was awful. The whole roaring, struggling mass fell back upon itself—then, dropping to the ground, glided away like snakes among the long grass, and many were picked off while doing so. Then, those especially who had shot-guns, played upon those who were trying to extricate themselves from the wires. They could not take prisoners, and they had their families to defend. The odds were tremendous against them: it was necessary to read the enemy a severe lesson, to inflict upon him a stunning loss. Hyland Thornhill for one, the probable fate of his father clouding his brain as with lurid flame, raked the struggling bodies again and again with charges of heavy buckshot. The carnage was ghastly, sickening, but—necessary. The alternative was the massacre of themselves and of their women and children.

The latter had been stowed within the Court house for safety, and now with the lull in the attack the frightened screeches of some of the former, and the unanimous howling of most of the latter were dismally audible. Edala had carried out her brother’s injunction and was trying to reassure and pacify them. Evelyn too was ably seconding her, and soon with some effect. The sight of these two, calm and unconcerned, carried immense weight.

“What’s that you’re saying, Prior?” said Hyland Thornhill, turning his head, for he had not moved from his post. “Not come on again? Won’t they? You’ll see. I’m only wondering what devil’s move they’re up to this time. They’re too many, and we’re too few for them to give up in any such hurry. Pity that infernal wire has been cut or we’d soon have them between two stools.”

This was in allusion to the telegraph, which early in the previous afternoon had been discovered to be not working. The magistrate’s clerk, and some of the older farmers had been holding a hurried council of war.

“Let’s get in one of these shamming cusses and question him,” went on Hyland. “He’s sure to be, but it’ll help pass time. Hey—you!” he called out in the vernacular. “You with the scratched toes. Get up and come over here at once, or I’ll blow twenty holes into your carcase with a very heavy charge of shot. You know me. I’m Ugwala.”

The name was magical. The man addressed, a sturdy muscular fellow who had been shamming death, raised his head and asked to be reassured on the word of Ugwala that his life should be spared. This was done, and he clambered over the earthwork.

“Whose people are these?” began Hyland, who had risen and joined the rest. “Those of Ndabakosi?”

“All people, *Nkose*,” was the reply. “Some of Babatyana, some of Nteseni, some from over the river.”

“Do they expect to take this place?”

“*Au Nkose*! They knew not that Ugwala had come into it,” answered the man, with a somewhat whimsical smile, the inference being intended that had they known of his presence they would not have attempted such a forlorn hope.

“Are you from beyond the river?”

“*E-hé, Nkose*.”

“Who are leading these?”

The man looked at him, and shook his head. But he made no reply. Hyland repeated the question.

“I cannot betray my chiefs,” was the answer.

“Oh then you’ll have your brains blown out,” came the savage rejoinder. But it was not uttered by Hyland. It came

from the man whom he had prevented from lighting a pipe. He had drawn a revolver and was pointing it right into the face of the Zulu. But in a moment Hyland's arm flew up, and the pistol, jerked from the other's grasp, spun away into the air.

"I have the promise of Ugwala," said the savage, calmly, showing no sign whatever of trepidation.

"That's quite right," said Prior emphatically. "Damn it. The fellow's quite right not to give away his chiefs. Hallo—what's up now? Here, sergeant, shove him into the lock-up with leg-irons on. We can't have him escaping just now, anyway."

All possibility of any pursuance of the quarrel on the part of the aggrieved Jenkins was at an end—for the present at any rate. All hands saw that which told that their work was by no means done. They would need all their coolness and energy for the next half hour—after that, things wouldn't much matter either way. The horses were picketed inside, and outside the defences a large enclosure had been hastily constructed of thorn bushes, and into this the trek oxen were driven at night, making quite a respectable herd. Three sides of this kraal were well covered by the fire of the defenders, but the fourth, of course, was not. Losing no time after their first repulse the assailants had, with incredible rapidity, breached this fence and were driving out the whole herd. But not as spoil—no not yet. For them they had another purpose, and grasping its import the defenders realised what new peril threatened.

Away up the valley the oxen had been driven by a number told off for the purpose, and now they were returning. By this time the animals were becoming uneasy and excited—tossing their heads and throwing up their tails, and bellowing wildly as they ran.

"Here, Prior. Is there any paraffin about, or kerosene?" asked Hyland eagerly. "Because I have an idea. Only—sharp's the word."

"Yes. Come along."

They went into the store and in a second Hyland had got off the head of a paraffin tin. There were some old sacks in the corner. Seizing one of these he quickly deluged it with the liquid. He rolled his eyes around impatiently.

"A pole—Prior, damn it! I must have a pole of some sort."

"Here you are," dragging one out from under some rubbish. It was an old pole which had been used for hoisting a flag on occasions of national festivity. Hyland seized a chopper, and having split the thinner end of the pole, inserted the paraffin-soaked sacking in such wise that it should be held gripped within the cleft. Then they went out.

"Now you fellows," he cried. "They're going to drive the oxen bang over us and rush us under cover of them, and I'm going to *split the herd*. Cover me well when I skip back, but don't shoot wild."

A hurried murmur of applause. It was a feat whose daring was about equalled by the quickness of resource which had devised the plan.

The oxen were coming on now at a canter, about a hundred all told. The impi had thrown out 'horns' so that the terrified animals, beset by a leaping, yelling crowd on either side, had no option other than to rush blindly ahead.

Hyland Thornhill leaped over the breastwork, armed with his impromptu torch. Carefully avoiding the wires, he advanced about fifty yards and lighted it. The oxen were about twice that distance from him—rendered frantic by the yells and whistling of the savages urging them on behind. The flame roared up the soaked sacking, and as he waved this about, on a level with the eyes of the animals, Hyland fired off a series of appalling yells worthy of the savages themselves. Would his plan succeed? Those watching it seemed turned to stone. The oxen were almost upon him—they could not stop. Then, as he charged them with the flaming ball, they were suddenly seen to split off into two sections, and in wild mad career to dash through those who would have turned them back, galloping away into distance. Almost before the enemy, coming on behind, could take in this feat its daring perpetrator was back within the defences again. A ringing cheer broke forth. It was answered from the other side.

Usútu! *'Sútu*!

The roar of the terrible black wave as it rolled forward. It was full daylight now, and the tossing shields, and broad blades gripped in each right hand were clearly discernible. The war-shout of the late King told that these were largely made up of those from beyond the river. The defenders had to meet the dreaded Zulu charge.

Would it never be turned? The guns of the defenders grew hot, with the rapidity of the fire. Assegais came whizzing over the breastwork—one, striking a man between the shoulders as he lay at his post, literally pinned him to the earth—but no one had time to notice this. That awful raking of the front ranks, combined with a wholesome dread of the barbed wire, whose disastrous effects they had witnessed, had brought the savages to a halt. Assegais, however were hurled in showers, killing another man and wounding several. For a moment the fate of the day hung by a hair, but the terrible incessant fire, and that from guns that seemed to need no reloading, was too much. The line wavered, then dropping to the ground, the assailants crawled away among the grass and bushes as before.

A sigh of relief that was almost a murmur, escaped the defenders. Grim, haggard-eyed, they looked furtively at each other, and each, in the face of his fellow, saw the reflection of his own. Each and all had been within the Valley of the Shadow. It had seemed not within their power to turn that last charge, but—they had done it. An odd shot or two was fired at long range after the retreating army, and then men found speech, but even then that speech was apt to be a little unsteady.

"I say, Prior!" cried one devil-may-care fellow, who had borne a tiger's share in the fight. "How about 'The Governor of North Carolina'? We must drink Thornhill's health. He saved this blooming camp."

"*Ja-ja*, he did," was the response on all sides.

"Oh damn all that for bosh!" was the half savage, half weary, comment on the part of him named.

There was a laugh—a somewhat nervous laugh—the effect of the strain.

“All right,” said Prior. “Elvesdon has some stuff, but we mustn’t clean him out of it all, you know. Ugh! These dead devils look rather disgusting,” for he was not used to the sight of bloodshed. “We must keep the women from seeing them.”

“Master,” said a timid voice, on the outskirts of the crowd. “I make good dinner now for all gentlemen?”

There was a roar of laughter and a cheer. The voice had proceeded from Ramasam, Thornhill’s Indian cook, who had spent the time of the fight in the kitchen of Elvesdon’s house, green with scare.

“Well done, Ramsammy. So you shall,” cried Prior.

“Zulu nigger all run away now, masters?” queried the Indian. Whereat the roar redoubled—the point of the joke being that the speaker was a very black specimen of a Madrassi, some shades darker than the darkest of those he had defined as “Zulu nigger.”

Chapter Twenty Eight.

“Can the ‘Ethiopian’ Chance his Skin?”

“Well, we’ve managed to run our necks into a nice tight noose, Thornhill,” was Elvesdon’s first remark as he realised that they were virtually prisoners in the hands of insurrectionary savages, which meant that their position would grow more and more dangerous every day.

“The next thing is to get them out of it,” rejoined Thornhill fighting his pipe, and puffing away calmly as he walked.

“What about the ladies—will they be safe?”

“Oh yes. If they’d wanted them they’d have brought them along with us.”

“Sure?”

“Dead cert.”

Elvesdon felt immeasurably relieved. Now, more than ever; now that he was separated from her; might never even see her again; he realised what Edala had become to him. She had fascinated him from the very first, and of late had become part of his life. But it would not do to give way to depression. If Thornhill, who knew these people better than he did, had no anxiety about his daughter’s ultimate safety, why surely he himself need have none.

“You see, this hasn’t come to anything as yet,” went on Thornhill, “whatever it’s going to do. Now they know that to interfere with white women in any way would be to bring about a general bust-up, which as yet, they’re probably not ready for. But likely enough they’ve got wind that there’s an idea of arresting some of the chiefs, and are holding us as sort of hostages. Have you any notion that there’s any such idea on foot?”

“I’ve heard nothing about it officially or in any other capacity. But if such a programme is on the boards we shall get our throats cut if it’s carried out. Is that the meaning?”

The other nodded.

“Well Parry,” went on Elvesdon, cheerfully, “you wanted to see the war-dance but you didn’t bargain for this, eh? I suppose you’ve read about this sort of situation too.”

“Often, sir. But people always manage somehow to get out of it I notice.”

“And so shall we.”

Cheered by the optimistic demeanour of his official superior, and the no less calm one of his other companion in adversity the young Police trooper began to enjoy the situation. What would his people at home say if they could see him now, a prisoner in the hands of armed savages?

It was no end exciting; for of course they would manage to escape. As he had said, people always did—in books. Poor boy!

Those who custodied them, even as those forming the escort for the two girls, were not communicative. To the question as to where was Tongwana the reply was short. The chief had gone away. To that as to where they were bound for it was shorter still. They would see.

It was dark when they reached a large kraal, situated in a wide, bushy valley. The country as they journeyed had become more and more wild and broken. Thornhill declared they couldn’t be far from the Tugela Valley, which seemed to point to an intention on the part of their custodians to rush them over the Zulu border, for the sake of better concealment.

Their arrival seemed to provoke no curiosity, or, at best a languid one; certainly there were not many about to evince it. Thornhill, though not seeming to do so, was keeping a bright look-out. Two or three faces he thought he knew, but the bulk were those of strangers. They were taken to a large hut in the centre of the kraal, and ordered to enter. But when Parry would have followed the other two in he was promptly and roughly stopped. It was in vain that both Thornhill and Elvesdon pleaded that he might not be separated from them. He was only a boy, they represented, and could not talk with their tongue. Let him remain with those who could. One stalwart scoundrel who appeared to be in a position of some authority, bent down and shook a bright, wicked looking blade within the low doorway.

“Keep quiet, *Abelungu*! You are not masters here. If you come forth without orders, that is death.”

"*Abelungu*!" "White men!" That was a pretty insolent sort of way to address a Government official, together with a man of Thornhill's standing. It bore its full significance too. But they were helpless. Two men unarmed against a large armed force! Of course they were helpless.

"Poor boy," said Elvesdon as they were left alone. "I'm afraid he won't find it so exciting now."

"In a way I'm glad we're alone together for a time at any rate," was the answer. "We can talk things over more freely. And we'll not have to do that too loud either, for there's a good sprinkling of these chaps who know English—though they won't let go that they do—thanks to the mischievous idiots who have gone in for educating them."

"If we come through this all right, I'll put in all the good word I can to get that youngster on in the force," said Elvesdon. "He showed pluck and readiness to-day, never lost his head for a single moment."

"More he did. Now I wonder who wrote you that letter."

"Oh don't refer to the beastly thing, Thornhill. If only I had opened it at first—as I ought to have done. No—it won't bear thinking about. Wait—I'll burn it, in case it might compromise the writer, if the worst comes to the worst."

He twisted the letter into a screw and set it alight, kindling his pipe with it. Anyone might come in at any moment, and such a proceeding would, in that event, look less suspicious.

Someone did come in, but it was rather a welcome entry, for it was that of a couple of women, bearing food; roasted mealies and some grilled beef, which latter, however, neither looked nor smelt very tempting.

"What's this? Water?" said Elvesdon, investigating the contents of a bowl. "The stingy swabs might have sent us some *tywala* while they were about it."

Putting it to the women, who were kindling a fire in the round hollow in the middle of the floor, one of them replied that beer was scarce. There were so many men in the kraal—she supposed they must have drunk it all. Elvesdon put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a shilling.

"See if you can find some," he said. "Here. This is for you—for the two of you. You can halve it."

But the recipient, carefully placing the coin in her bag, replied stolidly that she could not halve a gift. Elvesdon laughed and found a similar coin for the other. It proved, however, a bad investment, for no *tywala* was forthcoming.

"This looks more cheerful," he went on, when they were alone again, and were discussing the food. "It was beastly cold, too, without a fire. Wonder where they've put the young 'un. It rather handicaps us being apart from him in case we saw a chance of doing a bunk, for of course we can't leave him behind."

"No, we can't, but we shall get no such chance just yet. Hear that."

All round them was the sound of voices, deep voices. Some were right against the hut which was their prison. A strong odour of roast told that their custodians were enjoying themselves in the most enjoyable way known to savages—feasting, to wit. Once Elvesdon opened the door to look forth. In a moment two savages, armed with assegais, sprang before the entrance and ordered them to keep it shut.

"I've a notion," said Thornhill, "that this is Nteseni's 'great' place, and if so we've fallen into bad hands."

"That bears out what Teliso used to say. He always maintained that Ntesini was a bad egg."

"M-yes. I wonder where the said Teliso is now. You know I hinted to you that he might require a little watching himself."

"He's been away a precious long time. By the way I wonder if he wrote that letter. He could talk some English but I don't know about his ability to write any. He may have been murdered for all we know."

"He *may*, or—he may not."

Elvesdon was impressed. A qualm of misgiving came over him that he might have trusted Teliso too much. What, by the way, if he were at the bottom of their seizure? He might be. There was no trusting anyone. Decidedly there was something suspicious about the length of time Teliso had been away on his mission, and that without sending in any communication whatever.

Poor Teliso! His cracked and whitened bones lying in the lonely ravine beneath the krantz, picked clean by the tiger-wolves and jackals, could not now rise up under the stars to testify whether or not Nteseni was—as Elvesdon had put it—"a bad egg."

The next morning to their intense relief they were allowed some measure of liberty. They could stroll about outside the kraal, for instance, but even then only in the open, and with groups of armed men constantly on their steps. If there was any considerable body gathered at the kraal those composing it must assuredly have kept within the huts; possibly sleeping off the heaviness of the feast the night before. Decidedly it was strange to these two, accustomed as they were when visiting or passing such places to meet with deference at every turn—now to find themselves actually obliged to obey orders from those over whom one of them at any rate had partially ruled. But the ruled now aspired to be the ruling, and, certainly, into far as they themselves were concerned, had succeeded.

They were threading their way among the huts when, from one of them there emerged suddenly a man—a black man—but not blacker than his coat, nor very much blacker than his dingy tie that had once been white. He had crawled through the low doorway, and stood upright before he was aware of their presence. The instant he became aware of it he brought his hand to his mouth with an ejaculation of amazement and dismay, and stood staring, surprised for the moment out of all self-possession. Both looked at him—Elvesdon especially—with an expression of aversion and contempt.

“So!” was all that Elvesdon said.

It seemed difficult to tell on which side the surprise felt was the greatest. In the fat, greasy features both the white men recognised the Rev. Job Magwegwe, the Ethiopian preacher.

“You not get my letter, sir?” said the latter, hurriedly, eagerly.

“Your letter? Oh, I see,” replied Elvesdon.

“I warned you sir; you not take my warning. It not my fault you here, sir.”

“It’s damned well your fault there’s a ‘here’ for us to be in, and the fault of those who sent you, you scoundrel,” returned Elvesdon bitterly, and perhaps a little unjustly. For again the self-reproach in not having taken the warning in time, came uppermost, and here was some one to vent it on.

“I help you sir—now if I can,”—said the Fingo, earnestly. “But—it not easy and—”

“*Whau*! Jobo!” cried a great voice as two hulking Zulus came up. “Here is much white men’s talk—too much. Get back to thy preaching—that is more in thy line. *Whau*!”

They were Zulus from beyond the river, and cared nothing for missionaries and their methods—let alone for a greasy humbug of an inferior black man. The Rev. Job Magwegwe slunk away before their great domineering voices and manner. And the two white men felt immeasurably more drawn to these.

“So that’s the chap who sent the letter!” remarked Elvesdon. “He’s an infernal rascal all the same. ‘Help’! Fat lot of help he’ll give us—even if he could.”

“Don’t you be too cock-sure about that, Elvesdon. I’ve known queerer things in my time than even that. It’s astonishing how things can work round—not when—but *where* you least expect them. It’s something to know we have a friend among the enemy let me tell you. He might be of use to us yet.”

“Well if he is I’ll forgive him—or try to. These swine, though, are responsible for nearly all the mischief. I’d hang the whole ‘Ethiopian Church’ if I had despotic power, or, at any rate, give its infernal mischievous emissaries a hundred apiece with the cat and then disband the whole rotten organisation. But, Thornhill. Do you think this *schelm* really would help us if he could?”

“I sort of do. You see when these chaps get partly civilised, although it deteriorates them as savages it has often the effect of making them all unconsciously cling to the white man. Now this one is a Fingo, and his traditions would make all that way. He no more wants to set up a universal black Power than you or I do; he knows where he, and all his like, would come in under it. At present he’s paid to preach it but I’m perfectly certain he no more believes it possible than you or I do either. So let’s make use of him if we can; though I doubt if we can, for they don’t seem to trust him overmuch here from what we’ve just seen.”

“‘Can the Ethopian change his skin?’” quoted Elvesdon, sourly.

The day wore on. Both men—Elvesdon, especially, being the younger—were wistfully trying to glean from the talk they could overhear, what was going on outside. They tried questioning those around them but without result. They asked too, about their fellow prisoner, the young Police trooper, who had been so arbitrarily separated from them; but beyond the fact that no harm had been done him, they could get no further. The while both were sizing up every chance for effecting an escape, but even had such offered it was out of the question they should have availed themselves of it at the price of abandoning a fellow-countryman—a fellow-countryman, too, who was doubly helpless, in that, being a new comer, he was entirely unversed in the language and ways of those who held him in durance.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

A Devil-Deed.

The third day of their captivity had dawned, and waned. It seemed that those around had grown rather more used to them, for they would chat at times, while dexterously evading any attempts to extract news. But it struck them that there was an atmosphere of tension, of expectation, as though events were expected on the outside. Moreover the number of armed men about the kraal seemed to have diminished by eight-tenths.

With the chief, Nteseni, they could get no speech, although they repeatedly asked to see him. Moreover, did either or both of them catch sight of a face they knew, that face was promptly turned away, and the owner of it never risked the chance of their seeing it again. So far this was a good augury they agreed, for had their deaths been already decided upon it would not matter whose faces they recognised or whose they did not. By this time they had almost got used to the strangeness of the feeling that they were captives in their own land; that where they were accustomed to lord it they were now obliged to obey. Many times, too, and oft, they speculated as to what course would have been adopted by those who had not been required to share their captivity.

“Edala has got her head screwed on the right way,” Thornhill had said, on one of these early occasions. “Depend upon it she will have warned everybody within hail. What d’you think, Elvesdon? Will Prior have had the sense to wire sharp to Police headquarters and laager up your place?”

“Of course he will. We’ve often discussed contingencies, though not such an unlooked-for one as this. Oh, he’ll have made that all right.”

That evening a surprise awaited. There was a sound of voices outside. The wicker-slab that constituted the door of their hut was pushed, and an English voice called out.

“It’s me. Can I come in?”

“Why Parry, of course you can,” cried Elvesdon, promptly undoing the fastenings. “How are you? Glad to have you back again. We’ve been trying all we knew to make them let you come back to us, but for some reason they wouldn’t. Have some skoff. We’re half through ours. Well, it’ll be an invaluable experience to you afterwards.”

“Thanks, Mr Elvesdon. You’re awfully good,” answered the young fellow. “I don’t know. I thought I was afraid of nothing—but somehow these black devils with their beastly spears, threatening to stick you for a couple of days and nights, rather saps your nerves, especially when you’re all alone, and can’t talk to them either. I’ve been in the roughest scrimmages at football and never knew what it was to funk, but somehow now—I don’t know—I’ve expected to be stuck ever since they lugged me away two nights ago.”

“Oh, they won’t do that or they’d have done it before,” answered Elvesdon cheerily, though his cheerfulness was more than half-affected. “Fact is you’ve been reading too much William Charles Scully, and Ernest Glanville, and these other Johnnies who write up the noble savage within an inch of his life. You’ve taken an overdose of them and of him. Here—have some of this *tywala*: I’ve managed to raise some at last: the stingy devils began with us on water. That’s right. Now fall to.”

The boy did so, nothing loath, and soon his spirits revived: he was not more than twenty-one, and accustomed to a gregarious life, wherefore the solitary confinement had told upon him.

“Light your pipe,” said Elvesdon, when they had done. “We needn’t stand on etiquette now. We’re all fellow-prisoners. By George, I’ve sent a good many into that condition in course of duty, but never thought to become a prisoner myself. Funny, isn’t it?”

The boy laughed. Elvesdon could see that his first estimate was correct, that he was a ‘gentleman ranker’ and was not long in drawing from him, with his usual tact and acumen, all his simple family history. He was the son of a country vicar, and had had a great ambition towards the army, but lack of means, as usual, stepped in, and he had turned to a colonial Mounted Police force as many and many another likewise circumstanced had done.

“Well Parry, I shall make it my business to see that you don’t lose anything by your behaviour the other day,” said Elvesdon, “if my word is good for anything. You carried out your orders to the letter, and that as sharp as sharp could be.”

The boy flushed up with pleasure.

“Thanks awfully, Mr Elvesdon,” he said. “I’d like to get on in the force. The dear old dad was always rather against my coming out to join: said it was like enlisting as a private in the Army, and so on—and that I’d much better try for a clerkship—a lot of good I’d have been at quill driving! No, I didn’t want that sort of life, but I was going to do for myself so here I am.”

“That’s quite right,” cut in Thornhill. “You’re the sort of chap we want out here, Parry. And even if you don’t stick to the force a few years’ training in it’ll do you all the good in the world.”

And then the boy, all ideas of the difference between a Police trooper and the Resident Magistrate forgotten for the time, opened his heart, and got back to his home in the pleasant English country, and his schooldays, only, comparatively speaking, a matter of yesterday. He had not been coddled either, but had had to take the rough with the smooth—and more rough than smooth—therein. And eagerly and enthusiastically did he let himself go to his older listeners, his fellow-captives, here, in the night-gloom of this savage hut, lighted only by the dimness of the dying fire: forgetting everything, forgetting that he might never see that English home again; might never see the setting of another sun; and causing them almost to forget it too. Poor boy! Poor boy!

He was eloquent on the big trout he had taken out of the mill-pool in the rippling moonlight in the sweet early summer, with a white moth; the big two-and-a-half pounder he had tried for so often; on the sparrow-hawk’s nest in the straight, slippery stemmed Scotch fir on the border of the most carefully watched covert of the countryside, also in the moonlight, and the hanging on by one hand—for an awful half minute to a greasy, slippery bough, with sixty feet of clear drop beneath him—on his brothers and sisters, and the first pipe which he and two of the former had smoked, with doubtful satisfaction, in the depths of a clay-sided ditch overhung with brambles, a little way below the vicarage garden—on the splendid old copper-beech beneath which they used to take tea on sultry summer afternoons. Elvesdon, listening sympathetically, encouraged him to talk on—Thornhill was already snoring. At last the boy himself grew drowsy.

“Well, Mr Elvesdon, I’m keeping you awake,” he said. “But I can’t tell you how kind you have been to me. I hope, if we get out of this, and you are ever in England you will go and see my people, and I hope still more that I shall, by some chance or other, be there too to welcome you. I’m so thankful we’re together again; it was awfully lonely stuck away there all by myself among these brutes.”

“Why Parry, that’s a first-rate after-dinner speech,” laughed Elvesdon, dropping a kindly hand on the lad’s shoulder. “I hope all that you say, too. And now—go to sleep.”

The other obeyed. Elvesdon however, sitting there, did not feel in the least inclined to follow suit. He felt uncomfortably wakeful, and unwontedly depressed. He groped around for some fresh twigs to throw on the fire, and found a scanty remnant. As the flame flared up, making a shimmer on the shining backs of innumerable cockroaches studding the domed roof, he got out his pouch, and as he filled his pipe he thought how there was about enough to stand him in for another day’s smoke, and that only. He also thought of Edala.

It was nothing new. He had been flunking of her all the time. Now, however, he thought of her with a vividity of concentration that almost seemed to bring her presence here within this squalid hut. Would she miss him, or would her anxiety be all on account of her father? He did not know what to think—he could only hope.

His companions were slumbering peacefully. Hour followed hour and still he sat. The fire burned low, then went out altogether. The keen breaths of the night air chilled him to the bone. Rolling his blanket around him—they had been allowed the use of a blanket apiece by their captors—he lay down and suddenly sleep came to him.

But not for long. Hardly five minutes seemed to have passed before he was awake again—in reality it was as many hours. Daylight was streaming into the hut through the wicker-door, but what had really awakened him, and the other two as well, was a hubbub of voices outside.

“What the devil is that infernal racket?” he growled—a man awakened in the soundness of a much needed sleep is apt to growl.

“Don’t know. I’m listening,” returned Thornhill. And the purport of the said listening made the listener grow rather grave. Then the door was violently banged against, and excited voices ordered those within to come forth.

“What is it?” exclaimed Parry, springing up eager and alert. “Are we rescued?”

But to his two elder companions an idea suggested itself. Had a white force suddenly appeared and was threatening the kraal? If so the more excuse they could find for delaying to come forth from the hut the better.

“What is it?” called back Thornhill. “Wait now. *Gahle*, *gahle*! we must dress ourselves.”

They had lain down in their clothes, of course, but anything for an excuse to gain time. But those without did not see things in the same light. The uproar redoubled.

“Come forth! Come forth! *Au*! Dress yourselves? You shall be dressed—in red.”

Thornhill and Elvesdon looked at each other, and the look was that of men who knew that their last hour had come. The third, of course, did not understand what was being said, or rather howled, outside.

“Well, you can wait,” called back Elvesdon. “I am an official of the Government—of the most powerful Government the world has ever seen. I am not accustomed to be hurried, and I will not be. When we are ready we will come forth.”

It was the boldness of desperation. If an attacking force was advancing it might be here at any moment. They were not going forth to hold out their throats to be cut.

There was silence at this answer, save that a few deep voices were vehemently debating in a wholly indistinct undertone. Elvesdon and Thornhill looked around for a weapon, even a stick. There was nothing of the sort within the hut. They even put up their hands and groped among the thatch in the hope of finding concealed assegais—anything for a weapon! Same result. There was nothing.

“The chief would see you, *Abelungu*,” now called out a voice in more conciliatory tones. “The chief—*Au*! he would speak with you.”

“Well, I suppose we must chance it,” said Thornhill. Elvesdon nodded. The other, of course, had no say in the matter. The trio passed through the low doorway, and stood upright. What was this? They were in the midst of hundreds of armed warriors. The latter looked dusty and travel soiled. Some, even, had wounds bound up, the blood which had filtered through the filthy rags, browned and hardened upon them.

“Where is the chief?” cried Elvesdon. “As a Government official I talk to no common man.”

A growl arose, and assegai hafts rattled ominously. But the policy of boldness answered here. No aggressive move was made.

“There he is, *Abelungu*,” said one or two.

They passed between the armed ranks, to where a tall man was standing. He was a sullen, heavy-faced savage, black-bearded, and holding his shining head-ring as proudly thrown back as though he were the Zulu king, at least.

“Greeting Nteseni,” said Thornhill. “It is not long since we met, and now we meet again. I am glad to look upon your face, and having done so, I think now we will go home.”

The chief returned no answer, save for a sullen grunt. The armed men however made up for his silence, for they crowded up, in a kind of war-dancing step, and their clamour was for blood, to make up for the blood that had been shed, to make the *múti* which should put into those who tasted it the strength that should enable them to avenge that blood. So they howled, and stamped, and clamoured, crying again and again that these should be given over to them. Here was a curious contrast. Little less than half of them had been quiet, civil, peaceable storeboys or rickshaw drawers in the towns until a few months ago—some, even, still wore the decorative horns affected by those pursuing the latter useful calling—ready to greet their present prisoners with smiles and civility; to exchange chaff with them, and to receive the reward of their labours with whole-hearted geniality. Now, as by the wave of a magic wand, they had reverted to their original barbarism. Every vestige of civilised clothing had been discarded, and they now stood forth, naked, bloodthirsty savages, rattling shields and assegais, and thirsting for all the cruelty of barbarian vengeance.

Nteseni made a hardly perceptible sign. There was a sudden, overwhelming rush forward. The young Police trooper was swept away from the other two. There was a confusion of leaping, howling forms. It was in vain that both Thornhill and Elvesdon strove to make themselves heard. The tumult was too deafening. They were borne back, assegais flashing zig-zag lightning before their eyes. They went through a hundred deaths. But of their comrade in adversity they saw no more.

He the while, was dragged to the feet of the chief and barbarously butchered. Then into his poor bleeding, mutilated body these fiends drove their assegais, again and again, anointing themselves with the blood, in some instances even licking it. And the roar of their devilish blood-song reached these other two, sitting within the hut into which they had been forced back, looking into each other’s faces with stony horror, with a glance that seemed to say: “What could we have done?” And the answer could only be: “Nothing.”

But their turn would come next. And there was no escape.

In gloomy horror thus they sat, listening to the dreadful clamour of many voices outside like ravening beasts all howling for their blood. For upwards of an hour this continued, and the strain became so great that it was all they could do not to go forth, and say, “Here, work your will.” Then, suddenly, the hubbub ceased and an authoritative voice was heard addressing the multitude. And then indeed did Thornhill, at any rate, know the very depths of all hope abandoned, for the voice was that of Manamandhla—of Manamandhla, for every reason under the sun, his own particular enemy.

Chapter Thirty.

Overheard.

“And I say it’s a judgment on him. He killed that poor wife of his and now the Kafirs have killed.”

“But it never was proved against him.”

“No, it weren’t, but everyone knows it. He couldn’t prove he never did it, now could he? Tell me that.”

This essentially feminine line of argument proceeded, needless to say, from one of that sex, which was also the sex of the other party to the conversation. The latter was taking place a few yards from Elvesdon’s house, a day or two after the successful defence of the laager. The speakers were stock-raisers’ wives, of the unrefined and little-educated class.

“Well if he couldn’t prove he never did it they couldn’t prove he did, so he ought to have—what do they call it—the benefit of the doubt,” came the rejoinder, though not in any tone of real conviction.

“Benefit of the fiddlestick. Why it was like looking for a needle in a haystack trying to find her poor body among all those krantzes and holes and caves. But it’s there, you may take your oath to that. The Bible says those that take the sword shall perish by the sword, don’t it? Well here’s a case of it. Oh he’s a deep old fox and a wrong bad ’un is old Thornhill, and now he’s—”

But what he was or where—was not destined to be supplied. From the open window Edala’s voice rang out clear.

“Ladies—if it amuses you to wickedly slander my father, who may not be alive at this moment, don’t you think it would show better feeling to go and do so out of my hearing.”

The tones were cutting like a whip-lash. The girl’s face was deathly white, with a burning red spot in either cheek, and her blue eyes fairly blazed. The two women started as if they had been shot: then gasped as if they were going to say something, but couldn’t—then moved quickly away without a word; which perhaps, under the circumstances was the best course they could have adopted.

Edala turned back into the room. Evelyn’s face was as ghastly as her own. For a moment the two stood looking at each other, then Edala flung herself into a chair, dropped her arms upon the table and buried her face in her hands. The great sobs that shook her frame seemed as if they would tear it in pieces.

“Darling, don’t give way like this,” adjured Evelyn with an arm round the bowed shoulders, and brushing away the fast dropping tears from her own eyes. “Those wicked slanderous brutes—they ought to have their tongues cut out! How could they utter such shameful lies!”

But the sobs seemed to intensify. Suddenly Edala flung up her head.

“I—believed—it—myself. God—help me!”

“No—no—no! You couldn’t have,” and the momentary instinct to shrink away from the utterer of this terrible self-denunciation, passed. “You have been so frightfully upset, Edala, and you hardly know what you are saying. Why I have known your father for weeks only, and you have known him all your life, and yet I would no more believe him guilty of—of what those horrible wretches were saying than I would yourself. It is impossible that you could have done so.”

“But I did. I don’t now—and it is too late. *He* predicted that that would happen, and so did you. Too late—too late!”

And again her face was buried in her hands.

No one living was farther removed from the hysterical tendency than Evelyn Carden, but now she required every effort of her will to command her own nerves—not to break down herself. The inconceivable despair with which those last words were uttered was awful. Quickly again Edala looked up.

“If he does not come back to me,” she said, slowly and solemnly, “that I may tell him what a horrible wicked wretch I’ve been to him, I shall go and tell him in the other world. I shall kill myself. As sure as there is a God above I shall kill myself.”

The words were not uttered passionately. There was a calm solemnity about them which caused the other to believe that she would keep her word. What comfort could be administered to such remorse as this?

Then, in a moment, the scales dropped from Evelyn’s eyes, and she stood there as one who beheld a new revelation. Everything stood clear now, the aloofness with which the neighbourhood had treated her relatives and for which Thornhill had, with good-humoured contempt, pronounced himself duly thankful; in that the said neighbourhood consisted of a rotten crowd, the bulk of whom were scarcely able to write their own names, and the residue perhaps too well able to write those of other people. Edala’s attitude, too, stood explained. If she believed that her father had done this thing why the estrangement was only natural. If she believed—but—how could she—how could she? Before Evelyn could reply, however, a step was heard outside, and the door opened.

Hyland half drew back, then entered.

“Now, now, you two. This won’t do you know. Didn’t you promise me to keep up?” he said but there was a suspicious quaver in his own voice which rendered his tone gruff. “The more so that I’ve got some news for you.”

“News. Quick! What is it?” Edala sprang to her feet, while Evelyn’s face lightened.

“He is alive.”

A gasp escaped both girls.

“Where? Where?”

“At Nteseni’s ‘Great Place.’ Don’t interrupt and I’ll tell you all about it. Well then, you remember the fellow I questioned during the fight, the prisoner I mean? He sent for me this morning, and said he could tell me something I would like to hear; and after a little beating around he told me that father and Elvesdon are still alive, and if I promised not to turn him over to the police along with the other prisoners he’d tell me where they were. Of course I promised, and he said at Nteseni’s. How did he know? Well he did know, and it didn’t matter how, but if we wanted to get them away we must lose no time.

“How did I know he was telling the truth, I asked. Easily, he answered. If we were going to make an attempt to get them out, we could take him with us. All he asked was that he should be allowed to escape when we had found them. I talked this over with Prior and he agreed, so I went around on the quiet beating up volunteers. I got about two dozen, and we’re going to slip off quietly as soon as it’s dark. By pushing the horses a bit we can do it, and be back here again to-morrow morning—with them.”

“Oh Hyland, for God’s sake do,” said Edala. “But what if this man is only trying to lead you into some trap?”

“We shall take precious good care that in such an eventuality he’ll be the first man to go under—and he jolly well knows it. We’re keeping the jump-off on the strict Q.T. though, so don’t you go giving it away.”

“Of course not. It’s a long time to wait, though, until dark.”

“It’s just as long to me—you may swear to that,” answered Hyland. “But it would simply wreck the whole biz if we moved a moment before.”

A troop of Mounted Police had arrived at Kwabulazi later on the same day as the repulse—perhaps an inkling of their approach on the part of the rebels had had something to do with the abandonment of the attack. Other refugees, too, had come in, and the place was now a large and important laager. The prisoners were set to work to bury the slain, and the wounded were attended to in the camp hospital under the direction of our former acquaintance, Dr Vine, and things were ship-shape again. Ndabakosi’s kraals had been burnt, but the old chief and some of his headmen had surrendered; he declaring that he had nothing to do with the attack upon the place, the impi being composed almost entirely of strangers; a statement which Hyland Thornhill for one, remembering his experience at Ndabakosi’s kraal, took with a considerable dash of salt.

Now Hyland’s praises were in everybody’s mouth. His coolness and daring during the fight had been witnessed by all, and his brusque and almost commandeering manner was quite forgiven him. Men will overlook—especially at such a time as this—a great deal in one who has given them ocular proof of the above-named qualities; moreover all there knew that this one was undergoing at heart an intense grief and apprehension. So when he went about quietly, asking the most likely men to back him up in his perilous venture he met with no single refusal. He could have doubled his force had he so wished, but he did not. This was to be a run-through venture, not a fighting one, and for such a purpose a small force was better than a larger one.

During the afternoon one of the detectives sent out by Prior slipped quietly into the camp. He confirmed the statement of the Zulu in every particular. The prisoners were at Nteseni’s kraal. One had been murdered, that morning, and that was the Police trooper. He had been killed by order of the chief, and the impi had been ‘doctored’ with his blood. The others would have shared the same fate had not another chief, one presumably of higher authority than Nteseni, prevented it, and he had only done this with some difficulty. These facts had the detective been able to gather owing to the wonderful and telegraphic swiftness with which news spreads among natives; for it must not be supposed that he himself had been at the scene of the tragedy—or anywhere near it.

Here was grand comfort for the two sorrowing women, but the lamentable side of the story, the murder of poor young Parry was kept from them, as indeed it was from the camp at large until the expedition should have returned. They could hardly find words for their thankfulness and hope. But would those leaden hours of sunlight never cease to drag on?

“Hyland, darling,” pleaded Edala, as she hung around her brother’s neck as the time came to start. “You will not be reckless will you? When you have got them you will come straight back—you won’t delay for the sake of a fight unless you are obliged—you are always tempted to do that, you know. Think what I—what we—shall be suffering all the time.”

“No—little one. You may take your oath I’ll do nothing of the kind. But I’ll bring him—them—back or I won’t come back myself. That, also, you may take your oath to,” he answered huskily, gruffly. “Now—good-bye—good-bye.”

He disappeared into the darkness. No lights were shown—no fuss was made about seeing them off. So the two women were left alone to weep—and perchance to pray.

Had it been light enough as the horsemen moved away it might have been seen that they led among them two spare mounts. It might also have been seen that there was another led horse, but it was not a riderless one. On its back, his feet tied beneath its belly with a raw-hide thong, sat the Zulu prisoner. Though firmly convinced of the good faith of the latter, Hyland had no idea of taking any risks. To a savage, even though riding in their very midst, to slip off into the darkness of the thick bush and disappear would be no impossible feat, but to do so, firmly bound to the horse itself, would be: and this had been explained to him. But he took it with characteristic imperturbability.

“What I have said I will do I will do. What Ugwala says he will do he will do. I am content,” was his unruffled comment upon this apparent indignity.

“Attend, Njalo,” whispered Hyland, ranging his horse alongside that of the captive. “If you are true to us now and we rescue those whom we seek, letting you escape is not all that will happen to you for good. Cattle shall be yours—cattle that will make you almost a rich man among your people, after the troubles are all over. That will be good, will it not, and such is my word to you?”

“*Au! Nkose* has an open hand,” answered the man in a gratified tone. “And I think that the two whom you seek will return with you.”

“The *two* whom you seek,” he had said. Not until afterwards did it occur to Hyland to wonder how it was the speaker knew that there were only two left to seek. Here again that wonderful, mysterious native telegraphy must have come in.

Chapter Thirty One.

Manamandhla’s Story.

To the said ‘two’ it seemed that life could contain no further horrors, and that they had better get it over and done with, and this held good especially of Elvesdon, as the younger and less hardened. Thornhill was speculating as to how it was that Manamandhla, so far from hastening their death, seemed to have averted it. The tumult had not been renewed, and nobody had come near them. Then later on they had been allowed to sit outside, and even to stroll about a little as usual. But there seemed to be very few people at the kraal, and, noting this, they looked at each other as though inspired by a new hope.

The day wore on. The unrolled panorama of bush and cliff and spur grew purple and dim in the declining sun. In the mind of both was the thought—Would they see the set of another sun?

“Look here, Thornhill,” said Elvesdon as though seized with a sudden impulse. “I don’t know whether either of us will get away from here alive, or both. But I want to say something. In case we do, have you any objection to my trying to win your daughter’s love?”

If the other was startled he did not show it. The two were seated upon a rock just outside the kraal, watching the changing lights over the far-away kloofs as the sun sank behind the highest ridge to the westward. Both were scraping together the last shreds of their remaining stock of tobacco, which might perhaps afford them a last half pipe apiece.

“Why no,” was the meditative answer. “But do you think you can do it, Elvesdon?”

“I had hopes. But why I mention it—here and now of all places—is because if you should get away and I should not, I should like Edala to know that my last thoughts were of her, as indeed all my thoughts have been ever since I’ve known her. She is unique, Thornhill. I don’t suppose there’s another girl in the world in the least like her.”

“First of all Elvesdon, don’t talk of me getting away, and you not. Is that likely now? We stand or fall together. And if they want a second blood feast—the damned butchering brutes—they can take it out of me. You’re the younger man of the two, and have a sight more life in front of you than I have. So you skip away if you see a chance while they are busy with me.”

Elvesdon laughed, rather mirthlessly.

“That would be such a noble way of returning to Edala, wouldn’t it? How she’d thank me for coming to tell her I’d left her father to be chopped to pieces in order to save my own precious skin on her account, wouldn’t she? No, I’m afraid you must ‘ask us another,’ Thornhill.”

The latter suddenly sprang to his feet.

“Come on Elvesdon. We must buck up, man. We’re both getting too much into the holy blues. But the sight of that poor young devil being butchered this morning got on to even my tough old time-hardened nerves, I allow. Well, to get back to what you were saying. If we’re lucky and get out of this, you are welcome to try your chances with Edala—from what I’ve seen of you I can say that wholeheartedly. Only I warn you that—to use your own words—she *is* unique. But I daresay you’ve more than half fixed it up between you before this.”

“I wish we had,” was the answer. And then at a signal from the armed group that watched them, they returned to the hut.

But they found it already tenanted. A man was seated there warming himself by a fire to which he had just applied a light, and the gleam of the darting flames was reflected from his head-ring. Then indeed was astonishment depicted on the faces of both—especially on that of Thornhill—as they recognised the features of Manamandhla.

The Zulu returned their greeting, and sat silent for a few minutes. So did they. Blank amazement was in the mind of one, but the other—hoped. And he had the least reason to hope anything from the man before him, but he remembered that this man’s voice had been raised powerfully for their protection that very day, wherefore he hoped—on his companion’s behalf if not on his own. Then Manamandhla spoke.

“My life is yet my own, Inqoto, which is well for some.”

Thornhill understood the allusion and—hoped still more. He made the usual murmur of assent.

“Listen *Abelungu*,” went on the Zulu, “and I will tell a story. There were two children—brothers. They fought in the ranks of the *ibuto* called Ngobamakosi what time the impi of the Great Great One was defeated *kwa Nodvengu*. (Historically known as the battle of Ulundi.) Both were wounded in the battle, and could not flee far, so when the white horsemen poured forth in pursuit they soon overtook these, who lay down, already dead. The horsemen thundered down upon them, and seeing that they still moved—for who at such a time sees anything but red?—pointed their pistols. But another white man rode there too and he pointed his pistol too—not at those who lay there but at those who threatened them. They were angry, and words rose high, but they rode on and left those two children, of whom one is alive to-day.”

The speaker paused, and began deliberately to take snuff. Elvesdon was interested; Thornhill was more, as he bent his glance keenly upon the dark face before him.

“Time—a long time—rolled on, and one of those ‘children,’ then a young man no longer, but ringed, sought out the white man who had saved him and his brother from death. He found him and—*au*! he himself became lame for life. For he fell—but he arose again. Then twice after that he escaped death.”

Thornhill's face became rigid. He had entertained an angel unawares and had, all unconsciously, done his best to transform him into a devil. Elvesdon, too, began to see through the veil—though not entirely. He recalled the incident in the kloof when his friend had fired straight at this man, and but for his timely interruption and that of Edala would certainly have shot him dead. The Zulu for his part knew exactly how much to render clear to both and how much to keep dark from one.

"And now Inqoto," he went on. "Thy daughter? What of her?"

"She is safe." There was a rigid eagerness in the tone that by no means conveyed the assurance intended to be conveyed.

"She is safe," was the answer, and Thornhill sank back with a sigh of relief. "Hers was one life saved by those of the two children *kwa Nodwengu*. She, and another, had taken hiding on the tree which grows out from Sipazi-pazi. Two eyes saw them, many others who sought for them on the mountain top—ah ah—on the mountain top—did not. She is safe at Kwabulazi—both are safe."

A great sigh of relief went up from both listeners. They could fill in all the details. But Thornhill, to his companion's amazement went through a strange performance. He leaped to his feet, and the next moment was swinging the narrator to and fro as he sat, with a vice-like hand upon each shoulder.

"Manamandhla, my *brother*!" he exclaimed in a deep, quivering tone. "You saved her life like this? You? See now. Before I am killed here I will write that on paper which shall give you after the trouble is over what will make you a rich man, and what will protect you if you are known as having taken part in the trouble. Now—now I see everything. I did not before."

At first the Zulu looked astonished at this outburst, and then his magnificent white teeth showed in a gratified smile.

"*Whau*!" he exclaimed. "A life for a life—that is a safe rule. The life of a woman does not count. The oxen which Inqoto has given to my brother's son pay for that. But the lives of the two 'children'—warriors in the *ibuto* known as Ngobamakosi—such are the lives of men. And these I give ye two—so far as I can," he added somewhat seriously. "Listen. I am not chief here, Nteseni is. But Nteseni is away with most of his people. This night you must leave. To-morrow may be too late. Here are the weapons you came with—"

From under his blanket he produced two revolvers, the same which had been taken from them at their capture.

"—For food, if you have none, that I cannot help, but you are both strong. Listen. Now I am going out hence, and I shall draw those who watch this hut away with me. When you no longer hear voices, then go forth, but be careful to leave the door of the hut in its place. *Hambani gahle*!"

He crawled through the low doorway and was gone, leaving the two staring at each other in speechless amazement. To Thornhill, especially, it seemed like a dream. He remembered the long-forgotten incident now recalled, and how in the rout after Ulundi he had saved two youths who had sunk down exhausted in their flight, from being ruthlessly pistolled by two of his own comrades in the troop of irregular Horse in which he was serving—and now this was one of them: this man of whom he had gone in dread as a witness against him, whose blood he had sought with deadly persistency and on two occasions had nearly shed It was wonderful—wonderful.

And this man—this savage—had been the means of saving Edala—his darling—his idolised child—from a bloody death or worse brutalities at the hands of the fiends who sought her! By the side of that the fact of the saving of their own lives counted as nothing—nothing.

"Well, Elvesdon. I think it's time to skip," he said as at last the sound of deep-toned voices died into silence.

Cautiously they took down the door and slipped out, taking care to place it in position again. There was no sign of life in the kraal, except the muffled murmur of a few drowsy voices coming from one or two of the huts. In a minute they had gained the welcome darkness of the bush.

"Now I think we can steer our way," whispered Thornhill. "Our nearest is by old Zisiso's kraal, but that's a regular path, and we don't want that. We'll keep a bit up, and we shall have the double advantage of avoiding the enemy—every Kafir is an enemy now—and being able to get an occasional outlook over the country. If we don't fetch Kwabulazi by sunrise we shall have to lie low all through to-morrow."

Steadily they held on. Thornhill was a master of veldt-craft, and Elvesdon did not come very far behind him in that line for all that he was professionally an official. The night air blew keen and chill, very chill, but the walking exercise largely counteracted that. And the sense of freedom again was exhilarating in itself—still more so was the sense of the impending reunion.

They did not talk as they travelled—when they had occasion to do so it was in the barest whispers. In ordinary and peaceful times they would not have encountered a living soul, for the native is strongly averse to moving about at night. Now, however, it was different. They might run into an impi at any moment, travelling swiftly across country to take up its position for attack or observation.

The night was dark, but, fortunately there was no mist. The stars to a certain degree piloted their direction, as they do, or should do, to every dweller in the free, sparsely inhabited open. Only this was not so sparsely inhabited, in that twice they came upon a large kraal where the inhabitants were alert and on the move, a thing they would never have been at that time of night, in peaceful times.

Now as they got almost within the glow of the red fires of one of these there was a rush and an open-mouthed clamour of curs, and that in their direction. The inhabitants, too, seemed to pause, and gaze suspiciously upwards—fortunately they were above them, on the apex of a ridge.

"*Gahle*, *Gahle*! Elvesdon!" whispered Thornhill. "They've spotted us. This way. Don't rattle more stones than you can help."

They plunged down the other side of the rise. Ah but, they were many wearisome miles from safety—and they were

unmounted.

Along the hillside they made their way, but how slow did that way seem to men unaccustomed to doing that sort of travelling on foot. The dawn began to show signs of breaking, and they were still a long way from Kwabulazi. A weary day of close hiding and starvation lay before them.

It was light enough now to distinguish the surroundings. Suddenly Thornhill stopped and was listening intently.

“All up,” he said. “Look.”

The other followed the direction of his gaze. The tops of the bushes were shaking in a long quivering line. Clearly their enemies had been tracking them like hounds, throughout the dark hours.

“We can make a stand here as well as anywhere,” growled Thornhill. “We hold five lives apiece, and the last bullet for ourselves—if we get time. Oh-h!”

A burning, blinding flash came before his eyes. Everything whirled round him, and he sank to the earth. Elvesdon set his teeth, with something like the snarl of a wild beast as his revolver bullet thudded hard into the naked form of the savage who had just hurled the deadly assegai, at the same time dropping another who was in the act of following it up by a second cast. For the moment none seemed anxious to take the risk of that quick, deadly aim.

Elvesdon glanced down at his unconscious friend, from whose head the blood was pouring. The assegai had struck him on the temple, and the blade, glancing along the skull had laid it bare in a frightful gash, with the effect of momentary stunning. The position was a low bush, the ground being open for more than a score of yards from it on the side of the attack, but this none of the assailants seemed eager to take the risk of crossing. He crouched down low so as to offer as small a mark as possible, and cool with the deadly calmness of desperation watched his chance.

It came. A movement among the bushes told that their enemies were making a surrounding move. For less than a second one of them showed, and again the pistol spoke, but whether with effect or not he was unable to determine. And then, if there was room for any addition to the utter despair which was upon him, Elvesdon’s quick, searching glance became alive to something else. On the roll of the slope, approaching from the direction they had been taking, the bushes were agitating in the morning stillness, and there was no breeze. His assailants were being reinforced, and as though to prove that fact beyond a doubt, there was a report of firearms, then another, and something hummed unpleasantly near. They had got rifles then? Well they could not go on missing him all day.

“Lie flat, Mister, and give us a chance of letting ’em have hell.”

The loud, hearty English hail was as a voice from Heaven. With characteristic promptitude Elvesdon obeyed, and then came a dropping volley, as the rescuers advanced in a line through the bushes, getting in their fire whenever an enemy showed himself. They were on foot, having left their horses just beyond the rise, with the object of making a silent advance and thus surprising the savages the more effectively.

The latter did not wait. They were in sufficient strength to tackle two men, but not such an opponent as the relieving force, of whose very number they were ignorant. So they wriggled away as swiftly and noiselessly as so many snakes, not, however, entirely without loss.

“Hallo. Who’s down?” cried Hyland Thornhill, coming up to the group standing around the two. “Eh? Who the blazes is down?”

They made way for him in silence.

“Oh, good God!” he cried, staggering to the ground beside the wounded man. “He isn’t killed—no damn it—he isn’t killed,” gritting his teeth. “Oh, dear old dad—tell me you know me, for God’s sake.”

A wave of returning consciousness swept over the face of the wounded man. He opened his eyes, and there was a gleam of recognition in them. Then he closed them, knitting his brows as though in pain.

Thus Hyland Thornhill succeeded in rescuing his father—but—was it too late?

Chapter Thirty Two.

Thornhill’s Story.

“Will you go in and see him, Evelyn? No, it’s not you Edala. He wants to talk to Evelyn this time.”

Hyland had just come from his father’s sick room. Both girls, awaiting the summons, had started up. Some days had passed since the rescue party had returned to Kwabulazi, but the wounded man did not seem to improve. The doctor feared lest erysipelas might set in, it was even possible that the patient might lose his sight, for the wound had perforce been dressed in rough and ready fashion at the time—indeed but that they had put their best foot foremost in the retreat they would have been attacked by a force whose overwhelming strength would have rendered massacre almost a certainty. As it was they were pressed hard to within a mile of the entrenchments; but some at any rate among the savages had had experience in trying to rush that very entrenchment, and had no stomach for a repetition thereof. So the impi had drawn off.

To her dying day Edala will never forget the return of that rescue party—and the lifting down of her father’s half—unconscious form from the horse on which Hyland had supported him—the deathly pallor of the drawn face, the beard all clotted with dried blood, the hands limp and nerveless. So utterly did she give way, in the plenitude of her grief and gnawing remorse that several of the men had to turn away with a suspicious choke.

“Too late! Too late!” she moaned, throwing herself on the ground beside him. “You said it would be, and it is.”

“But it isn’t,” struck in Hyland. “He’s got a bad knock on the head, but old Vine’ll be able to put that right. Come, get up, Edala dear. We must put him to bed, you know.”

The tone was decisive, practical, but the speaker felt far from as confident as he would have his sister believe. And Dr Vine’s diagnosis was by no means reassuring. He feared complications. So the wounded man was carried into the airiest and most comfortable room in Elvesdon’s far from luxurious house, where all was done for him that could be done.

There was difficulty with Edala. She refused to leave the bedside day or night. It was only when her father recovered full consciousness that they were able to get her away, when she had poured out her soul to him in an agony of remorse and self-reproach. Then he had soothed her, and insisted upon her taking rest and food; and she had obeyed unquestioningly. His lightest word was law now—as it had been in the times long past. She was allowed to help her brother and Elvesdon in their unremitting care of the wounded man, and the same held good of Evelyn Carden. But it was once and for all decided that neither of the girls should be allowed to overdo it, and this was adhered to no matter how much they begged and pleaded.

Elvesdon had taken up the reins of office again, and found his hands very full indeed. The telegraph wire had been repaired, and messages kept flashing in, communicating matters which demanded his constant attention, some necessary and some not. But at night he never curtailed one single half hour of his vigil at the bedside of his friend in recently and narrowly escaped peril. They had gone through a furnace together.

Strong man as he was the strain was beginning to tell upon Elvesdon. He looked pale and fagged, and his spirits became depressed. His conversation with Thornhill in the hour of their mutual danger was fresh in his mind, but although he saw a great deal of Edala there was nothing in the girl’s look or manner to show that she regarded him in the light of any other than an ordinary friend, a jolly good chum with no nonsense about him, and whom she could treat with the same free, frank *camaraderie* as her own brother. This, of course, was no time to urge any further claim upon her: he recognised that. Still he felt depressed.

While feeling a little more so than usual there came a knock at his office door. It was late afternoon and he was wondering whether he could venture to shut up for a time before any more of those beastly wires came in.

“Miss Thornhill would like to see you, sir,” said Prior, entering. “Will you see her?”

“Why of course. And—er—Prior. I don’t want to be disturbed, no matter who by. See?”

Prior did see, and if the Governor himself had appeared on the scene until that door should open again, decidedly His Excellency would have had to wait.

“And now, to what is this unwonted honour due?” he began, closing the door behind his visitor. “First of all, sit. Why, *Diane chasseresse*, you have not been obeying orders I’m afraid. You are looking a little bit—well, overdone.”

“That’s better than feeling a good bit underdone,” she rejoined with something of her old, bright laugh.

“How’s the patient? Any further improvement?”

“Rather. Old Vine says we needn’t be anxious any more.”

“That’s right royal news. We ought to give three cheers. But it was sweet of you to come and tell me this, Edala.”

The name came out half-unconsciously. He had taken to using it of late: their new *rapprochement* in the circumstances of a mutual care and anxiety had seemed to render it natural. And she had never resented it or shown any sign of astonishment.

“I didn’t come to tell it you,” answered the girl, in her direct straightforward way. She had risen from her chair, and the clear blue eyes met his full, yet he thought to detect in them a shade of embarrassment. “What I came to tell you was—is—what an ungrateful, unappreciative little beast I must have seemed all this time never to have said a word about your bravery—your heroism. You saved father’s life. You stood over him and kept off those brutes when—when—”

She broke off, with a little stamp of the foot. Her eyes were beginning to fill. Elvesdon’s face flushed uneasily.

“No—no—no. ‘Bravery! Heroism!’ Bah!” he answered. “You don’t suppose I was going to run away and leave him, do you? Why even Ramasam would hardly have done that. Besides—if I had wanted to ever so much I couldn’t have got far. We were unmounted remember. And, if you only knew it, I’ve been cursing myself and my own idiocy right roundly in having been such a blithering idiot as to get us into that hobble at all. I daresay I shall get a kick down in the Service on the strength of it when my full report goes in, and I haven’t spared myself in it I can tell you.”

“Have you sent it in yet?” asked the girl, speaking quickly.

“No—but I shall to-morrow.”

“Then promise me you won’t—until you’ve rewritten it. If you don’t I shall make Hyland, and anyone else who’s likely to be of any use, blazon the whole thing out in every paper in the Colony, and in all South Africa too. Now promise me you won’t.”

The colour had come into her cheeks, emphasising the clearness of the dilated blue eyes. She looked lovely. As she stood there, drawn up erect, again came back to him that vision of her on that exciting occasion of their first meeting. He felt a trifle unsteadied, a trifle thrown off his balance.

“It’s of no use belittling the thing,” she went on, her words tripping over each other’s heels, as it were. “You men who *do* things are too fond of doing that—”

“Are—*they*?” rejoined Elvesdon, with a touch of humour. “I’ve sometimes noticed it’s rather the other way on.” And then a sudden whirlwind of feeling seemed to sweep him off his feet. “Edala, when your father and I were in that very tight fix together—I mean just before either of us knew that we were going to have the feeblest chance of escape—I put a

question to him. Would you like to know what it was?”

“Yes.”

“Then you shall. I asked him whether, in the event of us ever getting away again, he would have any objection to my trying to win your love.”

“What did he answer?”

“He answered by another question. Did I think I could do it?”

“Well—and do you?”

She stood—the lovely flower-like face transformed with sweetness. He had already taken a couple of steps towards her, in his uncontrollable tension, and then—

“Yes, I think you can—darling,” she whispered, into his shoulder a few moments later. “In fact—you have.”

“This is a strange sort of surrounding for such a climax—my own,” he murmured—after an interval. “A fusty, dusty old office.”

“Well, and what could be more appropriate,”—she returned—“under the circumstances.”

The while Prior had sent at least two damning Government transport—riders away, using dreadful language because being *after office hours* they could not get their way-bills checked, and wondering what was the *blanked* use of blanked Resident Magistrates or blanked *blanked* Civil servants *blanked* anyhow.

Evelyn Carden got up in obedience to the summons, to go to her relative. “You don’t mind, do you, dear?” she said, with her usual tactful consideration.

“No—no. Of course not,” answered Edala, yet still conscious of that faint remaining twinge of jealousy. But the two had become drawn to each other like sisters now. They had been through strange experiences together, and each had come fully to rate the other at her own worth.

The room was cool and restful if not luxurious. Thornhill’s tall form lay there under the coverlet, a pathetic embodiment of strength laid low. Even the bandages round his head, unsightly as all bandages are, did not detract from the reposeful dignity of that calm strong face. Evelyn stooped and kissed him on the cheek, taking, in her cool grasp, the hand which was searching for hers.

“Well Inqoto, and you are much better now?” she said, and there was a sort of cooing softness about the tone.

“No—I am not particularly—by the way, you seem to have got your tongue round that dick at last.”

“Practice,” she answered smilingly.

“I’m not better, and I don’t want to be. I’ve run out my time. Who cares how soon I’m dead? I don’t, for one.” The pathos in the naturalness of the voice brought something of a lump into the listener’s throat.

“Who cares?” she echoed after a moment of suspicious pause. “What about Hyland for instance?”

“Hyland? Ah! Dear boy, he always believed in me.”

“So does Edala,” said the other boldly.

There was no answer. What was she to say? thought Evelyn.

“She does now,” she went on. The wounded man opened his eyes wide.

“Does now? Rather late in the day. But,” as if it had suddenly dawned upon him, “what do you—I’ve had a whack on the head you know, and it’s left me rather stupid—what do you—know about things?”

“Nothing. Because there’s nothing to know,” came the cheerful confident rejoinder. “Listen Inqoto—I believe it’s useless, and worse, any beating about the bush between you and me. Shall I speak plainly?”

Thornhill looked at her long and earnestly. As he did so a whole world of reassurance came into his eyes. “Yes, of course,” he said. “Talk as plainly as you like.”

“Well, I overheard a couple of silly cackling geese under the window the other day, but the subject of their cackle was too farcical for words—about you of course. Edala heard it too.”

“Edala heard it?”

“Yes. Then we talked it out, and she said she didn’t believe it either.”

There seemed no necessity on the part of Thornhill—perhaps from force of mental habit no such occurred to him—to ask what the said ‘it’ might be.

“She has believed it up till now, anyhow,” he said.

“And if you could have seen the awful agony of self-reproach she was in that day!” urged the other. “It seemed

almost like someone blind restored to sight when I put the whole thing to her in a few words. Under any other circumstances it would have been laughable—the quick transformation, I mean."

"Yet they had something to go upon—something to go upon," repeated the wounded man slowly. "I may as well tell you all about it, though there's not much to tell."

Evelyn's clasp of the hand she held, tightened.

"You know I was under arrest years ago on suspicion of doing away with my—legal partner in life?"

Evelyn nodded. Since she had overheard the two women's gossip she had gone straight to Hyland and got the whole story out of him. Thornhill went on.

"The strange part of the whole thing is that I didn't do it."

"I never for one fraction of a second supposed *you* did."

"You stand pretty well alone there," answered Thornhill with a pressure of the hand. "To cut a long story—and a very unpleasant one, for even now the taste comes back—short, the party to whom I had given my name, when I was young and foolish, and who, incidentally, gained far more by the transaction than I did, led me a most shocking life. No—it wasn't owing to drink, it was sheer innate devilishness. This went on for years—by the bye you can still see some of its results in the way Edala has turned against me ever since. That process, however, had begun before, and not only with this child but with all of them. Well let's get to the end of the abominable rotten episode, for the bare telling of it makes me sick."

"Then don't tell it, Inqoto. Why should you?" adjured Evelyn earnestly, and very uneasily as she remembered the doctor's injunctions that the wounded man was not to be allowed to excite himself in the least degree. Yet, now, his face was flushed and he was moving restlessly in the bed.

"I'd better get it over. Fact is I haven't mentioned the matter to anybody—since—since it happened. You are the first. One night—after raising a particularly shameful and scandalous scene—good Lord! it's lucky the walls at Sipazi can't talk—she rushed out of the house swearing that she was going to put an end to herself. Candidly I didn't in the least care if she did, to such a pass had things come; however I thought I should probably be suspected of murder if such a thing happened. So I started to follow her, and didn't overtake her all of a sudden either. When I did she had got among the rocks and crevices—never mind what part of the farm or even if on it at all. I tell you then, she was just like one possessed. I thought the devil must be standing there before me, but I tried to warn her that she was ramping dangerously near an ugly crevice that might be any depth. She answered she didn't care. She was going to jump into it if only to get me hanged for her murder. Well hardly were the words uttered than she tripped on something and hurtled bang into the crack. I could do nothing, you know. I was fully twenty yards off. Horrible, isn't it?"

The listener bent her head gravely.

"You were not to blame," she said. "The thing was sheer accident."

"So it was. I have had a great many years wherein to look back, and I have never been able to blame myself in the affair in any single particular. Well at the time my first feeling was one of intense relief—shocking again, wasn't it? Then a horrid thought struck me. Our relations with each other were well known, were matter of common scandal. I began to feel the tightening of a noose, for who the devil was likely to believe my version? Just then I saw someone watching me.

"I must have been mad. I don't know how it happened, but instead of treating any witness as a friendly and invaluable one, I at once assumed this one's hostility. I decided that one of us must not leave the spot alive. I flung myself upon him and—didn't we have a tussle! Well, he did exactly the same thing—stepped back into a crevice, and—stayed there. That man was Manamandhla."

"Then he got out?"

"Well, of course. But I didn't know he was alive from that night until a few weeks before you came. And he saved all four of our lives—but that part of the story you know. Well that's all—and, thank God it is."

The narrator closed his eyes wearily and lay still. The listener sat there, still holding his hand. Her glance rested upon the firm, fine features, and a great yearning was round her heart. What a tragedy had this man's life been. Her thoughts went round to Edala. Had she been in Edala's place would she have taken everything on trust? She thought she would: she was sure she would.

"Why didn't you tell Edala all this, Inqoto?" she asked. "When she was old enough I mean."

"She wouldn't have believed me. Do you?"

He had opened his eyes and was fixing them full on her face. But not the slightest sign of doubt or misgiving did he read there. On the contrary the expression was one of complete trust.

"Haven't I already said so?" she answered.

"Do you know, Evelyn, since I have been lying here I have found myself wishing you had never found us out at all."

She looked hurt. "Why, Inqoto?"

"Because child," and he smiled a little at her still slight difficulty with the dick. "I am wondering how I am ever going to do without you again. You did threaten to take yourself off once you know."

"Well I can't inflict myself upon you for ever," she answered, with a laugh. "But I have been very happy at Sipazi—very."

“Happy? I should have thought you’d have been bored out of your immortal soul, shut up all this time with only another girl and a sober-sided, boring, old fogey.”

“Stop that now, Inqoto,” she said quickly, dropping her other hand on to his, and there was a ring in her voice that his ear might or might not have caught. The air seemed charged with some sort of unwonted force.

“Well, what I was trying to screw up courage to say was this,” he went on. “If you have been so happy here why not continue to be so on the same terms, for the rest of our natural lives—that is if you can put up with the old fogey aforesaid ‘for better or for worse,’ as the rigmarole has it, probably the latter? What do you say, dear?”

A flush had come over her face, giving way to a momentary paleness, then it returned. The light in her eyes burned dear and soft. She looked wonderfully attractive.

“I say—‘Yes,’” she answered. “But oh, dearest, are you sure of yourself. You are weak and ill you know. Had we not better treat this as though it had not been until you are your own strong self again, and even then if you wish it?”

“No—we had not. Well? You said yes just now. Say it again.”

She did so. And she bent down and kissed him again, this time on the lips.

“I’ve never seen anyone like you before,” she whispered tenderly. “Never.”

“Gee-yupp! Strikes me I’ve looked in at the wrong time.”

Evelyn sprang back, flushing crimson. Hyland was standing in the doorway, with the most mischievously comical expression of countenance. The coolest of the three was the patient himself.

“No you haven’t,” said the latter. “Come in Hyland, and shut the door. Evelyn here has agreed to take me on for better or for worse—probably worse, I tell her. What d’you think of that?”

“Good old step-ma!” cried Hyland, seizing hold of Evelyn, and bestowing upon her cheeks a hearty kiss—Hyland was nothing if not boisterous. “I say dad, though, I’ve got a bit of news for you—and very much of the same sort. Edala’s gone and got engaged to that fellow Elvesdon. What d’you think of that?”

“Well, it doesn’t come upon me as a wild surprise. When did they put up that bargain?”

“Now. This afternoon; half an hour ago.”

“That’s odd, the coincidence I mean. So did we.”

Hyland whistled.

“My hat!” he exclaimed, “but it’s a rum world.”

”—And very much given to match-making,” supplied Thornhill complacently.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Envoi.

The table was laid out in the cool shade of the fig-trees, but the birds which loved to depredate in crowds in the garden at Sipazi had taken themselves off to the further end of the same with that object, for it was not quiet here; not by any means. A small, but very jovial party was assembled, a party of six. And it was Christmas day.

The afternoon heat of the midsummer day shimmered without, but there was no hot wind, wherefore here in the cool shade it was delightful. Nearly a year had gone by since we first made acquaintance with the spot, and the party here gathered; nearly half a year since we last saw the latter brought safely through the times of peril and anxiety which that year had brought forth. And upon the third finger of the left hand of two members of that party was a plain ring of somewhat suspicious brightness—which had not been there then.

“I say,” cried Hyland, getting up to pop off another of the gold-headed bottles which stood in a *vaatje* of water. “We’ve drank all our own healths and everybody else’s. Now we ought to drink the health of this jolly ghost party.”

“Contradiction in terms, boy,” said his father. “Who ever heard of a ‘jolly’ ghost?”

“Well, ain’t we? We’re all in white.”

“Lucky we’re not all in black,” said Edala, half seriously.

“Hear—hear!” cried Prior.

“Appropriate colour for Christmas,” put in Evelyn.

“And the heat,” supplied Elvesdon.

“Who ever saw a ghost with a very red and skinned nose either?” observed Edala, with a severe glance at her brother, whose face still bore traces of the exposure of a hard campaign.

“Look here, Mrs Elvesdon, don’t you make personal remarks,” retorted Hyland. “Two can play at that game, and I for one never saw you look so dashed fetching as you’re doing now—and that’s saying a great deal. Gee-yupp!” pretending to dodge the bottle which his sister pretended to throw at him. “Elvesdon, keep your wife in order, can’t you. It’s a bad example for us two old bachelors—eh. Prior? Two poor old bachelors!”

“The remedy for that pitiable state lies in your own hands, Hyland,” said Evelyn serenely. “Why don’t you apply it?”

“That’s what I might have been going to do, if the dad there hadn’t been so beastly *slim* in cutting me out,” retorted the incorrigible rascal. “I don’t know what to say about Prior. Pity you haven’t got any sisters, Evelyn.”

“Plenty of other people have, Hyland,” said Elvesdon. “A man crowned with your laurels, you know, isn’t likely to go begging.”

“Oh here, I say, shut up,” was the reply, made half seriously, the point being that the speaker had served all through the campaign and that with some distinction.

“No fear,” cried Edala. “You started the campaign of chaff, Hyland, and you can’t yell out if you get the worst of it.”

“Ah. I like to see—er—pals, shall we call it? stand by each other. Now then Elvesdon—back her up.”

Of course all this was precious poor repartee or wit, especially in cold print. But given the circumstances—a jovial reunion coming close upon vivid recollections of peril and storm—now a setting of peace and serenity and happiness—and Christmas Day—and it is obvious to anyone not possessed of a churlish soul that very little makes towards fun and jollity and mirth. And this held good here.

The rising, a far more formidable affair than the home public ever seems to have realised, and of which this narrative only deals with in its earlier stages, had been very effectually quelled, through the bravery and devotion of Colonial troops and the high efficiency and *personnel* of Colonial officers; and that without the aid of a single Imperial soldier. As such the campaign stands unique in the annals of South African warfare. The pluck displayed in several fierce battles, the splendid grit and endurance, never failing, under every difficulty, in hard and almost unnegotiable country, has been in evidence before in such warfare, but never more so than during this last campaign in Natal.

Well it was over now, but in it Hyland Thornhill as we have said, had borne his full share, and that with distinction. Elvesdon, as a Civil servant, had perforce taken no active part in the subsequent operations, but indirectly, ever at his post during that wearing anxious time he had borne his share in it by smoothing down many a difficulty—in the matter of facilitating supplies, and so forth, for those who had; so much so that his superiors were led to re-consider their first impressions to the effect that he had rather muddled the situation in the matter of Babatyana. Anyhow, here he was, still at Kwabulazi, and with him the faithful Prior.

“Please—one man want to see master. He say he Zulu nigger.”

The interruption came from Thornhill’s Indian cook. There was a laugh, and Hyland fairly roared.

“I’ll swear he never said that, Ramasam,” said the latter, “Who is he?”

But before the other could answer a tall figure strode up and halted in front of them, uttering a sonorous hail.

“*Whau! Manamandhla*!” cried Hyland. “This is good, good to meet again here, for I think the last time we looked on each other’s faces was among the rocks and bushes of the Mome. Here is *tywala* that I don’t suppose *you* ever drank before,” creaming up a large tumbler with champagne, and handing it to the new arrival.

“That have I never, Ugwala,” said the Zulu with a smile, after a good pull at the sparkling beverage. “How a man—an impi—could fight if doctored with such *múti* as this, say in the Nkandhla!”

There was a humorous twinkle in the speaker’s eyes, the point of the allusion being that he and Hyland had twice met in battle face to face, but the assegai of the one and the revolver of the other had simultaneously turned upon another enemy.

“We’ll have no end of yarns now from the other side,” went on Hyland. Then to the Zulu. “I was saying Manamandhla, this is a good day to have arrived on—Christmas Day—but then, you don’t know what that is.”

“I have heard U ’Jobo tell the people some story about it—” was the answer.

“U ’Jobo!” cried Hyland, “*Whau*! U ’Jobo! It will be a long time before he tells ‘the people’ any more of his stories—*impela*!”

“He’s a considerable swine and deserves all he’s got,” said Elvesdon. “Still I’m glad I was able to help the poor devil a little. After all he did try to warn us.”

For the Rev. Job Magwegwe had fallen upon evil days. He had been arrested at an early stage of the rebellion, and tried, on several charges of holding seditious and inflammatory gatherings under the guise of prayer meetings; and in the result was sentenced to two years’ hard labour and thirty-six lashes. But Elvesdon’s representations had procured the remission of the lashes and of six months of imprisonment.

They sat thus chatting for some time, and then Thornhill suggested that his visitor should go with Hyland and choose a fat beast to kill, for himself and the farm people, and any others the latter might like to send word to—by way of making a Christmas festivity for themselves in the evening.

“Good idea!” said Hyland, “I’m getting tired of sitting still. A ride over to the herd will do all right. Coming, Prior?”

“Rather.”

Now, by all rights, Manamandhla should have been arrested as an arch-rebel, and sent for trial: but—he was not.

So the remaining four sat on there, and the hours of the golden afternoon rolled on, and the birds piped and twittered down the valley in the lengthening sunbeams, and the great red krantz, frowning down majestically from the face of Sipazi, glowed like fire in the westering sun. But upon these lay the sunset of a perfect content and peace.

The End.

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