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Author: Bertram Mitford

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FIRE TRUMPET: A ROMANCE OF THE CAPE FRONTIER ***

Bertram Mitford

"The Fire Trumpet"

"A Romance of the Cape Frontier"

Volume One—Chapter One.

A Queer Legacy.

"To my valued friend, Arthur Claverton, I bequeath the sum of nine thousand pounds."

He to whom this announcement was made could not repress a start of surprise. The only other occupant of the room paused and laid down the document from which he had been reading. The room was a solicitor's office.

"You hardly expected to be remembered, then?" said the latter.

"No. At least I won't say that, exactly; but nothing like to such an extent. I thought poor Spalding might have left me some trifle to remember him by—his pet breechloader, or something of the kind; but, candidly, I never expected anything like this!"

"Yet you saved his life, once."

"Pooh! Nothing at all. The weather was hot, and the swim did me good. If I hadn't gone in, the nearest Jack Tar would have, and have thought nothing of it; nor do I. Poor Spalding!"

The speaker is a man of about thirty to all appearance. His face, which is a handsome and a refined one, wears a look of firmness, not unmixed with recklessness. It is the countenance of one who has seen a good deal of the world, and knows thoroughly well how to take care of himself. The other man is more than twice his age, and looks what he is—every inch the comfortable, well-preserved family solicitor.

"I don't know about that, Mr Claverton," answered the latter. "The story our poor friend told me was something very different. The vessel was going at thirteen knots, the night being pitch dark, and a heavy sea running. And no one saw him fall overboard but yourself."

The other laughed in a would-be careless way. "Oh, well, I think you are making too much of it. But the job was a risky one, I admit, and at one time I did think we should never be picked up. And now, Mr Smythe, I'm going to ask you a question that you may think queer. First of all, you knew my poor friend intimately for a good many years?"

"I did. When first I made his acquaintance, Herbert Spalding was a little chap in Eton jackets. I've known him tolerably intimately ever since."

"Well, then, didn't it strike you that latterly he had something on his mind?"

"Yes, it did. And I happen to know he had. The old story. He was jilted; and being one of those sensitive men with a high-strung nervous organisation, he took it to heart too much. I believe it shortened his life. Poor fellow."

"Well, whoever did it, has something to answer for, or would have had, at least; for, between ourselves, that time he went overboard he went of his own free will."

"I had suspected as much," said the lawyer, quietly. "That was on the voyage out, wasn't it?"

"It was. We first became acquainted on board ship, you know. He hardly spoke to any one on board till, all of a sudden, he took a violent fancy to me. We occupied the same cabin. In fact, I soon began to suspect there was a petticoat in the case, the poor chap was so down on his luck; but he didn't tell me in so many words, and it wasn't for me to pry into another fellow's private affairs. One evening I came into the cabin, and found him loading a revolver. There was nothing very astonishing in that, you know, because fellows often go in for revolver practice at sea—shooting bottles from the yard-arm, and all that sort of thing; but it was the way in which it was done. He hid the thing, too, when he saw me, and that looked fishy. However, I managed to get hold of it, unknown to him, and stuck it right away, and made up my mind to keep an eye on him. That very night, or rather morning, for it was in the small hours, I was awoke by something moving in the cabin. I sung out, but got no answer. Then I went over to Spalding's bunk, and, by Jove, it was empty. When a fellow has been kicked about the world as much as I have, he don't take long to think; consequently I was on deck in about a second, with precious little on but my nightshirt, and luckily so as it happened. It was pitch dark, and blowing half a gale. I didn't want to sing out if I could help it—wanted to avoid a fuss, you understand; so I peered about for Spalding. At last I made out a dark figure standing behind the wheel, looking astern. They don't use the rudder wheel, you know—steer from the bridge. I was just going to sing out quietly, when the figure disappeared, and I heard a splash that there was no mistaking. Then, you bet, I gave a war-whoop loud enough to wake the dead, as I went over the side after it. Fortunately for Spalding—for it was him all right—fortunately for us both, the quarter-master had his wits about him, and pitched over one of those fire-buoys that are kept handy for these occasions; but there was a heavy, lamping sea on that nearly knocked the breath out of one. I wasn't long reaching Spalding; but he could hardly swim a stroke at the best of times, and at that time was simply helpless. But I can tell you I had my work cut out for me. By the time the ship was brought round to us again, and we were picked up, we had been nearer half an hour in the water than twenty minutes, and not many seconds more would have done for us. I was all right again next day, and, by way of explanation, I gave out that Spalding was given to somnambulism. The idea took; and no one suspected anything, or, if they did, never said so, and the affair created a deuce of a sensation on board."

"I should rather imagine it did," said the lawyer, who had been vividly interested in the other's narrative. "But you were with him when he died, weren't you—I mean at the moment?"

"Yes and no. After the affair I've been telling you about we became greater chums than ever. He seemed to pick up in health and spirits, and I began to think the poor chap was going to forget all about his troubles. We stayed in Sydney a little while, and then went up country, where we spent three or four months, knocking about from station to station, for Spalding had no end of letters of introduction. At last, as ill luck would have it, the mail—that curse of existence—overtook us even away up in the bush. I don't know what news he got; but poor Spalding became worse than ever. Nothing would satisfy him but we must return home to England immediately. I say 'we,' because I'll be hanged if I could make him see that I, at any rate, hadn't come to Australia for fun, but to try and find a means of livelihood. No; I *must* go back with him. He had influence and abundant means, and could get me a much better berth in England than I should ever find out there, he argued. He wanted my company on the voyage home, and was determined to have it; I shouldn't be out of pocket by it, and so on. We nearly had a tremendous row over it; but at last I yielded, partly to sentiment, for we were great chums and the poor fellow seemed utterly cut up at the prospect of my leaving him to go back alone, partly to carelessness, for, I reasoned, I should be no worse off than when I left England, and could always pick up some sort of a living anywhere. So we sailed by the first vessel we could catch, and a precious slow old tub she was. Before we had been a week at sea, Spalding got a notion into his head that he would never see England again, and all I could say or do to cheer him was of no use. Well, to cut the matter short, one evening about half an hour before sundown, we were sitting aft smoking our weeds. I left him, wanting to do a constitutional before dinner. I hadn't been gone five minutes when the quarter-master came to say that my chum didn't seem well. Back I went like a shot. There was Spalding sitting in his deck-chair just as I left him with his book in front of him. But his head hung forward queerly. I had only to take one look at him to know what was up. The poor chap was stone dead."

"Dear me—dear me!" said the lawyer.

Claverton paused a little—moved by the recollection. He had never told the story so circumstantially before.

"We carried him to the cabin, and the doctor made an official examination and all that sort of thing. Then the captain sealed up his effects, and the next evening our poor friend was buried. It was in the tropical seas, you know, where they don't delay funerals longer than they can help. And, curiously enough, it could not have been far from the spot where the poor fellow made his nocturnal plunge on the voyage out. Yes; whoever *she* is, she'll have something to answer for. The doctor called it heart disease; but heart-break would have been nearer the mark, I believe."

There was silence for a few moments. It was at length broken by the lawyer.

"And you actually knew nothing of that codicil?"

"Nothing whatever. Hadn't the faintest suspicion of anything of the kind. It's all right, I suppose; can't be disputed or upset—eh?"

"No. It's perfectly in order—adequately witnessed and everything. If Spalding had been a solicitor in busy practice, he couldn't have added that codicil more correctly. And he did it at sea, too!"

"What did he die worth?"

"It's hard to say at present. Most of his property was landed—very extensive, but all entailed. He has bequeathed to yourself nearly all that it was in his power to bequeath to anybody; but—"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that," interrupted the other impatiently, and somewhat annoyed. "I merely asked out of curiosity. And, as I told you before, I never expected anything at all."

“But, I was going to say, there’s a queer stipulation attached to your bequest. I don’t quite know what you’ll think of it,” went on Mr Smythe, with a dry smile. “You only profit by the bequest—which is funded—provided you remain single until the age of thirty-five. Should you marry before then you forfeit the whole, which, in that case, would pass to a distant relative. But I should think you will not have very long to wait. Three or four years, perhaps?” and he looked inquiringly at the other. “Of course you draw the interest from now,” he added.

“More likely eight years.”

“You don’t say so. I declare you look much older!”

“The conditions are queer, certainly,” said the legatee, with a smile. “I think I can see through it, though. Poor Spalding was played the mischief with so severely by a woman, that he thought the best kindness he could do me was to offer a counter inducement to me against making a fool of myself in that line. And, look, thirty-five is the age stipulated—his own age at the time of his death.”

“It’s singular, certainly,” said Smythe; “but there seems to be method in it. Probably he thought that he, not having arrived at years of discretion at that time of life, neither would you. As if a man ever does arrive at years of discretion where the sex is concerned! But I congratulate you heartily—at least, I suppose I must; for you look heart-whole enough at present, anyhow. But you are young—you are young.”

“Not too young to know the value of nine thousand pounds and its yearly interest, I can tell you, Mr Smythe,” said the other, with a laugh. And then he took his leave.

Volume One—Chapter Two.

The Legatee.

If there is one quality in this world which its fortunate possessor is to be envied the enjoyment of, it is that of absolute *insouciance*. I don’t mean the spurious article known as “putting a bold face on things,” though this is a gift by no means to be despised; but that downright, thorough, devil-may-care way of taking the vicissitudes of life, in such wise as these interfere neither with the appetite, sleep, nor temper, which is well-nigh as rare—at any rate among us Englishmen—as the Little Bustard.

When Claverton entered Mr Smythe’s office, he owned barely enough sovereigns in the world to make a creditable jingle in his breeches pocket; when he left the lawyer he walked out into the street a man of independent means. Yet the change, welcome and wholly unexpected as it was, in no wise disturbed his mental equilibrium. He was conscious of an increased feeling of complacency as he contemplated the world at large by the light of his own improved prospects; but he would permit himself no elation. While going through the hardest times he had known—and he had known some very hard ones indeed—he had cultivated the severest philosophy; and now it had become second nature to him. “Bad luck—no use growling, won’t last; good luck—no use crowing, may not last,” was his self-invented and favourite maxim.

At the time when we first make his acquaintance, Arthur Claverton stood absolutely alone in the world. I don’t mean to say that he had no relatives, but they cold-shouldered him. A few of them were near relatives, others very distant; but the nearer they were, the more they cold-shouldered him. He was an only child and an orphan; his mother having died at his birth, and his father being killed in a railway accident sortie four years later, leaving him to the care of a guardian, one of the near relatives aforesaid. Near, too, in another sense of the word; for, though very comfortably off, and indeed wealthy, this conscientious and benevolent guardian impounded the scanty substance left for the orphan’s start in life, on the ground that his family was a large one, and he could not afford the addition of his dead brother’s child.

His family certainly was a large one, which is to say that it was a supremely disagreeable and discordant one. The boys, rough and unruly, worried the girls and their father. The girls, underhand and spiteful, tormented the boys and their mother. Wrangling and mischief-making was the order of the day. After this it will not be surprising to learn that it was a pious family, which is to say, that much attention was given to morning and evening prayers; and that Sunday, jocosely termed the day of rest, was to be employed getting up epistles and gospels by heart, with a slice of catechism or so thrown in, what time the whole master was not pent up in a square box undergoing edification at the lips of a prolix and Geneva-clad Boanerges, who seldom said “And now to” within an hour and a quarter from the enunciation of his text. By an odd coincidence, the day on which this exemplary piety had its full scope—notably in the tabooing of all secular literature or any approach to levity of demeanour—the reign of strife, squabble, and jar seemed to reach its acme.

Such was the amiable family circle among which young Arthur’s earlier lot was cast. But somehow he never assimilated. He was a species of Ishmael when “at home,” which, by the way, was not often, for he spent most of his holidays at school. All things considered, a good thing for him? No. For it was not a nice school where his educational lines were cast. It was a very cheap and a very nasty school; one in which he learnt nothing but the art of getting into serious scrapes, and—perhaps the only useful thing he did learn—the art of getting out of them. A bringing up of this kind would have been the ruin of most boys; but it was not so with Arthur. He came of a splendid stock, and the wretched associations of his boyhood and youth, instead of destroying his character, had the effect of forming it. They hardened him. True, they rendered him cynical at an age when one looks for impulsiveness and generosity, and if they had inspired him with a disgust for religion, his mind was absolutely clear of cant. They had taught him utterly to despise sentiment, while leaving him capabilities of generosity and even geniality. And if any one showed him a kindness, he never forgot it.

One day, when he was seventeen, the second master of his school, the clever son of an army Scripture reader, had the unwisdom to strike him. In about ten seconds that ill-advised pedagogue was picking himself up in a corner with a bleeding nose and otherwise in receipt of grievous bodily harm. Expulsion was imminent; but Arthur did not wait for it. He took the first train, went straight to his guardian and told him he wanted to emigrate.

His guardian looked acidly at the tall, handsome stripling before him, and began a severe lecture. He also looked uneasily; for it was evident that Arthur had somehow got to learn that his father had not left him absolutely penniless, which meant that no appeal on the grounds of gratitude would lie—for the expenses of the orphan’s bringing up and education, such as it was, had by no means exhausted the sum which the dead man had left. Of this Arthur had gained a very shrewd idea; but he merely asked for sufficient to pay his passage and a small sum towards a necessary outfit, for he intended to go to one of our colonies.

Then his guardian, unlocking a desk, handed Arthur the sum of thirty-five pounds, and told him—metaphorically, of course, good pious man that he was, yet very plainly—to go to the devil.

He did not go to the devil; he went to the Cape.

Some of my readers may think this a distinction without a difference. Well, that is a matter of opinion. He turned his hand first to one thing, then another; but nothing seemed to answer for long, possibly because he was young and restless. At last a small “coup” at the Diamond Fields set him up with a few hundreds. But fortune changed round again; and, in disgust, he resolved to return to England previous to trying his luck in some other colony.

He landed in his native country after several years of a hard, adventurous life; but there was not a soul to welcome him. Not long did he stay; but, by the time he had taken his passage to Australia, not much remained of the proceeds of his Diamond Fields’ enterprise. Then on that eventful voyage he fell in with Herbert Spalding, and the rest of his experiences we have heard from his own lips.

A few mornings after his interview with the lawyer, a card was brought up to Claverton as he sat in his rooms.

“Rev. George Wainwright,” reading the name. “Now, who the deuce is the Rev. George Wainwright? Certainly not one of my kinsfolk or acquaintance.”

There entered an elderly man with stiff, iron-grey hair, a very red face and fierce brown eyes, peering aggressively from beneath a pair of bushy brows. He wore clerical attire, and in his hand carried a tall hat like unto a stove-pipe. There was aggressiveness in his whole aspect, especially in the short, stiff bow with which he greeted Claverton. Farther, there was aggressiveness even in the knock and ring which had heralded his arrival.

“A country rector,” mused our friend, mentally reading off his visitor. “In earlier life of the sporting order, now gouty and addicted to port. Domineering in his parish, tyrant in domestic circle. I know the breed. What the deuce can he want with me?” Then, aloud: “Pray be seated. Cold morning, isn’t it?” and he drew a chair to the fire for his visitor.

“No doubt, Mr—er—Claverton, you will readily guess the object of my visit,” began the other, brusquely, leaning both, hands on the knob of his umbrella, and staring his interlocutor straight in the face.

“Excuse me, but I hardly do.”

“What! You don’t? Why, about this will—this will of Spalding’s?”

“Spalding’s will! My dear sir, I am afraid you have come to me by mistake. My poor friend’s solicitor is Smythe of Chancery Lane. I’ll give you his address in full.”

“No mistake at all—no mistake at all,” rejoined the other, abruptly. “I’ve just come from Smythe, it was he who referred me to you. I want to know about that preposi—er—that bequest—the bequest to you. Do you intend to avail yourself of it, may I ask?”

“Well, really, that is a most astonishing question—”

“You don’t. No—of course you don’t,” came the angry interruption. “No young man with any independence of spirit, could possibly take the money under such conditions. It would be preposterous if he did—preposterous.”

“But, Mr Wainwright, I do intend to take the money.”

“You do?”

“Every farthing of it—bar probate and succession dues.”

The wrath struggling for suppression exhibited in the old man’s countenance beggars description.

“Well, well,” he jerked out at last, “the case is a strange one—a very strange one. Wills have been upset on less fishy grounds than this. Here you take this unfortunate man across the world and come back without him, but profiting substantially by his death. Putting it mildly, what will be said? Eh, sir, what will people say—what will they say?” and, throwing out his hand, he glared at his interlocutor as if awaiting a reply.

“I don’t know what they’ll say. Equally certain is it that I don’t care. As you remark, Mr Wainwright, wills have been upset, but I hardly imagine there’s any chance of this one being so dealt with. Anyhow, I’m ready to take what chance there is. However, you have no doubt made yourself familiar with the conditions under which I inherit,” he went on good-humouredly, but with a wicked twinkle in his eyes. “Don’t you know, for instance, of some young woman attractive enough to induce me to pay forfeit? She must be very attractive, mind; not too young either—’teens mean selfishness; nor too passée—that carries temper. I incline to the dark style of beauty, or something between the two. And I should be sure to capitulate at discretion, if only because it would be in a sense forbidden fruit.”

The other sat speechless with anger. At last he exploded.

“I did not come here to trifle, sir. But, I tell you, this will bring you no good. Ill-gotten gains never do. Ill-gotten gains, I say.” And, with a final glare, he bounced out of the room.

“Poor old man,” thought Claverton, watching him from the window. “Dare say he’s rather sore, and it was a sin to chaff him. But then he brought it upon himself by his bumptiousness. Likely I’m going to cut my own throat for his benefit. The man must be a fool.”

Had he but known it, his late visitor was at that very moment of the same opinion, as, jolting along in the ’bus he had just hailed, a sudden idea struck him.

“By Jingo! What an ass I am! He thought *I* was the one who would benefit. I’ll go back. Hi! Conductor—stop—stop! No use, though. The fellow has no sense of honour. Still, if I hadn’t lost my confounded temper, I might have induced him to yield. No, I shouldn’t. The man’s a scamp any way—an utter scamp.”

Wherein the old gentleman was wrong. Had he entered upon the interview with a clear head and courteous manner, it is highly probable that the whole course of this not uneventful narrative would have been changed.

Having got rid of his choleric visitor, Claverton went out. His face was turned Citywards, and, as he walked, he pondered.

“Nine thousand pounds contingent on eight years of single blessedness. Well, the terms oughtn’t to be difficult. Why, many a fellow would give away double the amount for the same privilege, if I know anything of my world. But as I told that old parson in chaff just now—forbidden fruit is what attracts. Poor Spalding! What on earth made him clog the concern with such a condition? The only thing is to turn the lot over—capitalise and double it as soon as possible; and, fortunately, I’m not particular how. Grand thing, a careful training in a pious family.”

An hour’s walking, and he is in the heart of the City. Turning down a little lane out of Fenchurch Street, he looks about him carefully. Through a doorway, then a couple of flights of stairs, and he is hammering at a door labelled “Mr Silas B. Morkum.”

“Boss engaged,” said the sharp boy who appeared.

“Of course he is. Take that pasteboard in at once.”

Almost immediately the boy returned and ushered Claverton into an inner office. A thin, wiry-looking man, with a hooked nose and very keen grey eyes; advanced with outstretched hand.

“Well, Claverton, my boy,” he began, with a slight Yankee drawl. “Thought you’d turn up again some day. Devilish cold? Yes. Here’s some stuff, though, to counteract that,” and he produced a wicker-covered bottle and glasses. “Fill up—that’s right. Here’s to old times. Now what can I do for you?”

Claverton laughed drily.

“That’s so like you, Morkum. Can’t you imagine any fellow looking you up purely for the fun of the thing?”

“Well, not many do—not many,” answered the American in an apologetic tone. “But—”

“But this time you’ve hit the right nail on the head. There *is* something you can do for me, if any one can. You can put me in the way of doubling a given sum in the shortest possible time.”

“That all?” answered the other, almost disappointedly. “Reckon I can—and I’d do more than that for you—as you know. Silas B. Morkum ain’t the boy to forget—well, we know what. Now let’s hear all about it.”

Claverton told him. The tie of gratitude to which Morkum had referred went back to the time of the former’s earlier wanderings, when our friend had by the merest chance been able to do him a most important service, and the American had never forgotten it. He was a curious unit. By profession broker, money-lender, and half-a-dozen other things; in reality, such of his dealings as were most remunerative were known only to himself and to those immediately concerned.

“Well, then,” he said, reflectively, lighting up a long Havana and pushing the box across to his companion, “well, then—you want to turn over this sum and ain’t particular how?”

“Not in the least.”

“Then I can lay you on to something. But you are open to putting your hide pretty considerably in pawn?”

“Quite open. What is it? Mines in Sonora?”

“No. ’Tain’t that. Two years ago I sent a party on that lay. Twenty-three Western men, all well armed and mounted. Game chickens all round.”

“What then?”

“They are there yet. No one ever saw or heard of them again. Beckon the Apaches wiped ’em out. No. This is less risky; still, it is risky—tarnation so."

"What is it?"

The other fixed his keen grey eyes upon Claverton for a moment. Then he delivered himself of just three words.

"The devil!" exclaimed Claverton, astonished, "I thought that game was played out long ago."

"No, it ain't; not a bit of it. And it's sure profits, quick returns; but-all-fired risk."

"Well, let's hear all about it."

The other left the papers which he had been sorting, and, drawing his chair to the fire, began to lay out his scheme. And at last the dingy office grew shadowy, and the boy came in to know if he shouldn't lock up.

"Yes," assented Morkum. "Come along and dine somewhere, Claverton, and you shall tell me what you've been doing all this time. We can talk business to-morrow."

The clocks were chiming a quarter to twelve as they separated at King's Cross Station.

"Going to walk home, are you?" said the American, reflectively. "Queer city, this. Many a man disappears, and is never more heard of by his inquiring relatives."

"It would be a precious risky job for any enterprising spirits to try and conceal my whereabouts. They'd get hurt," answered Claverton, with a meaning laugh.

"That's right," said the other, approvingly. "Never have your hand far from your coat-pocket, and you'll do. Good-night."

* * *

The wind howls dismally round a cosy old country rectory on this gloomy March evening, but, within, all is snugness and warmth. From one well-lighted room comes a sound of many cheerful voices; but passing by this, let us take a look into the library, where sits a girl all alone. She is a lovely girl, as far as we can see by the uncertain firelight, and may be nineteen or twenty. Her well-shaped head is crowned with an abundance of soft, dark hair, tinted with strange lights as the flickering glow plays upon it. Her sweet, lustrous eyes are gazing pensively at the clock on the mantelpiece, while the rain rolls in gusts against the old-fashioned casement.

"Past six. Uncle George should be back by now. The train must be late. Ah, there he is!" as the sound of wheels is audible on the gravel outside.

She hears the occupants of the other room rush to the front door to welcome their father; but with a hasty kiss all round, the rector goes straight to the library.

"Here I am, Uncle George," says the girl, meeting him in the doorway, for she heard him inquiring for her. "But do go and change first, you must be very wet."

"No, I'm not, my dear; not in the least. Come in here and shut the door; I want to tell you about this."

Then he hesitates, clears his throat, manages to knock down the tongs with a hideous clatter, and jerks out:

"I could do nothing."

His niece waits for him to continue.

"Nothing. He says he intends to stick to the money, every penny of it. Why, when I put it to him fairly, he laughed in my face; made some ill-chosen jest about it being only a question of time. He's a scamp, a downright scamp, and will come to no good. Mark my words."

"Who is he, Uncle George? What's his name?"

"Some adventurer. I was going to say *low* adventurer, but he isn't that; the man's a gentleman by birth, unmistakably. Name! Why, bless my soul, I've quite forgotten. What is it again? Clinton—Emerson—something like that—I forget exactly."

The girl stood silently gazing into the fire, with one arm on the old man's shoulder. She was an orphan niece, whom he had welcomed to his home, nominally until it could be decided what should be done with her; actually he had already decided this, and his decision was that that home should be a permanent one. He was a very soft-hearted man, was the Rev. George Wainwright, in spite of his quick temper and aggressive exterior. But the girl, for her part, was equally determined in her own mind not to remain a burden on him. He had a large family of his own, and she must manage to earn her own livelihood. Then came the news of the death of her distant cousin, Herbert Spalding, and of the legacy which would revert to her, contingent upon the nuptials of a stranger. The rector, with characteristic hot-headedness, had voted the contingency absolutely monstrous. No man of honour, he had said, could possibly accept a bequest subject to it, especially as by doing so he would be robbing a penniless orphan—and had started for town there and then with the intention of inducing the legatee to forego his claim. In which laudable mission he had signally failed, as we have seen—a failure due in no small measure to his own hot temper and want of tact.

"Never mind, Uncle George; we are only where we were before, you see, and I think I shall get that situation I advertised for.”

“No you won’t, my dear. We shan’t let you go away from us.”

She kisses him affectionately. She is determined to carry her point, but does not press it to-night. “Now you must go and talk to the others, Uncle George; I’ve been keeping you from them quite long enough.” And with her arm still on the old man’s shoulder she leads him to the door, and they join the family circle in the cheerful lamplight.

Volume One—Chapter Three.

The Slave Settlement.

“Idiot! Don’t you see that the poor devil can’t move an inch further to save his wretched life. Leave him alone. You’re the greatest brute even in this bestial land?”

“Am I? And if I am, what’s that to you?” is the defiant reply.

The first speaker is a young Englishman, whose face, tanned to a coppery brown by exposure to a torrid sun, bears a stamp of recklessness and determination. His bearded lips are set firm as he confronts the other, a powerful, savage-looking mulatto, and his eyes are ablaze with wrathful contempt. Around stretches a wide, sun-baked desert in Central Africa. A few palms, dotted about here and there, throw a faint pretence of a shadow, and not far from the cloudless horizon hangs the now declining sun. A gang of black men and women, weary and emaciated, and a few of them tied together, are standing wearily contemplating one of their number who lies prone upon the earth, sick, footsore, and unable to move another step. It is a slave-gang on the march.

“Here, you two,” goes on the first speaker, addressing a couple of the strongest-looking among the slaves, “pick him up and carry him along.”

The two fellows designated pause, and look hesitatingly from one to the other of their drivers. They stand in mortal fear of the ruffianly mulatto, and prefer to chance the wrath of the Englishman.

“Do you hear what I say? Let him alone, Sharkey,” repeats the latter in a warning tone.

For all answer the ruffian addressed advances upon the fallen slave, and with a frightful grin, disclosing two pointed, shark-like teeth—whence his hideous *sobriquet*—curls his raw-hide lash round the naked body of the emaciated wretch. But a terrific blow full in the face sends him reeling half-a-dozen paces.

“There! Won’t you listen?” And the Englishman stands between the miserable wretch and his smiter. With a growl like a wild beast, the latter springs up.

“Stand off, Sharkey!” cries his companion in a firm, warning tone. Too late. With features working in fury, and foaming at the mouth, the other rushes upon him knife in hand.

“Stand off, I say, or—”

Crack!

The savage makes one spring and rolls over and over at his slayer’s feet, digging his knife into the hard earth in his death-throes.

“Dog! You would have it!” observes the Englishman, calmly reloading the discharged chamber of his still smoking revolver. “You won’t bite again. Now then, you fellows, do as I told you just now—pick up that chap and—march.”

They obey apathetically; and, with many a furtive glance backward, the slaves move wearily on, leaving the body of their late oppressor to the vultures and jackals of the desert.

And now, after a march of several miles further, the melancholy *cortège* arrives at its destination. In a natural clearing, surrounded by dense jungle, stand a few thatched shanties. In the centre is a large barracoon, and into this the miserable human herd is turned. The last rays of the sun have disappeared, and here and there in the open space a fire glows redly. Several men are standing about; awful-looking cut-throats, villainy personified. Half-a-dozen of them are Portuguese, the rest Arabs and negroes. They crowd up to inspect the slaves.

“Well, Lidwell,” says one of the first nationality in good English, addressing the new arrival. “You’ve brought in a poor-looking lot. How many did you lose?”

“Two. Both died.”

“And Sharkey—wasn’t he with you? Where’s he?”

“Dead.”

“Dead? Nonsense! What killed him?” And the first speaker stares in amazement.

“A pistol ball, regulation calibre.”

A gleam of triumphant malice flits across the other’s swarthy features. He is young, and by no means bad-looking but for a chronic scowl.

"Comrade," he replies, "you have done a good thing in ridding us of that beast." But the man addressed as Lidwell has marked that exultant expression, and he knows that it means mischief. Sharkey has relatives in the camp who will certainly do their utmost to revenge his death, and it is doubtful whether the ruffianly European element will have either the strength or resolution to stand out against these should they clamour for his slayer's blood. It is more than doubtful if they have the will; for this Englishman is both hated and feared by them. His coolness and daring in the pursuit of their lawless traffic has not only been the means of quadrupling their gains, but has twice saved the whole party from capture red-handed, for of late the Union Jack has been—to them—unpleasantly active in Zanzibar waters. Yes, they hate him bitterly. He has won largely from them at play, for they are great gamblers, and can they once get him into their power they are fully determined to make him yield up—by torture if necessary—the large sums which they know him to keep concealed somewhere. But then, his revolver is ever ready, and they are most of them cowards at heart.

Sternly he now looks the young Portuguese in the face.

"Juarez," he says, in a very significant tone. "Do you know, I always think I can never have enough revolver practice. It makes a man invulnerable, does this little bit of wood and iron."

The other turns away with an oily smile. He has his own reasons for not being fond of the Englishman.

The latter strolls leisurely into one of the huts, keeping his eyes about him, though, unobtrusively. Arrived there, he sits down for a few minutes to rest and think out his plans. For he is determined to take leave of his repulsive surroundings; and the sooner the better. Nearly two years of his life have been spent in this detestable traffic, and how sick he is of it, he himself hardly knows. He has amassed wealth with a rapidity little short of marvellous; but not for the ransom of an empire would he go through the experiences of those two years over again. Many and many a scene of human suffering has it been his lot to witness during that period—for he is a slave-dealer, a trafficker in human flesh. But he is guiltless of any single act of brutality or wanton oppression towards the unfortunate wretches who have passed through his hands. In his eyes mere cattle, yet he would never allow them to be tortured or ill-treated. More than once has he stood between the victim and the lash, occasionally at the risk of his life—as we have seen—or interfered to save some worn-out wretch from being abandoned to the beasts of the desert. More than once, even, during a long desert march when water was worth its weight in gold, has he shared his scanty stock of the priceless fluid with some toiling, parched, and exhausted slave, who, with tongue swollen and protruding, could hardly drag one foot after the other. Yet, what is he but a hard-hearted, self-seeking slave-dealer, coining money out of suffering flesh and blood?

The gloom deepens. Lidwell, sitting there in his hut, can make out a knot of his rascally confederates talking earnestly together by one of the fires. A strange instinct warns him. Unless he leaves this place to-night he will never leave it alive. Quickly he stows away a flask and some biscuits in his pockets. Already his gains are secured about his person, carefully sewn up in his clothes—a large sum, partly in gold, partly in the paper currency of several nationalities. For some time past he has been prepared for a sudden flight, and he has a canoe snugly concealed in a convenient place on the river bank. To-night he will cut the whole concern for ever, and woe betide the man who shall try to stop him.

He looks out of the doorway, carelessly. All seems quiet enough, and it is now quite dark. His sheath-knife is ready to his hand in case of need; so, too, is the brace of revolvers without which he never moves.

"Now for a start," he muses; "but—hang it—I must go round and say good-bye to Anita. Can't leave without seeing the little one again."

Down a narrow path through the shadowy forest a few hundred yards, and he reaches a small thatched dwelling, more substantially built than the rest. Within all is silence. But for a lamp burning in one of the windows the place would seem deserted. He imitates the cry of a jackal twice. A moment, and then a dark figure glides swiftly round the corner of the house and stands beside him.

"At last! I wondered when you were coming to see me. You have been back hours, and never came near me." The voice is low, soft, and musical; but there is resentment in it.

"Didn't I? Well, I came as soon as I could. Don't scold me to-night, little one."

And he looks down at her with a queer expression. Every moment lost is a nail in his coffin; yet he is wasting those precious moments gazing into a pair of dark eyes.

She nestles close to his side. "I hate it so when you are away. And I am always afraid you may get killed, or catch that terrible fever over there, and never come back to me at all."

"Listen now, Anita," he says, gravely. "I must go away again—now—to-night, or my life is not worth a pebble, and I don't feel inclined to throw it away for the benefit of those brutes." Then he tells her about the fate of Sharkey, and the unmistakable signs he had read among his associates of their deadly intentions towards him.

The girl trembles with horror and apprehension as she listens.

"You must indeed go, and immediately. You can do nothing against them, and there are so many of them; and—Ah, I may as well die," she breaks off in a wail of despair.

"Don't say that, little one. You will soon learn to do without me; but I am afraid you will forget all your English. And you were getting on with it so nicely, too."

The girl is silent; but looks up at him with a stricken, hopeless expression that goes to his heart. She is very lovely, standing there in the starlight, lovely in the rich, southern, voluptuous type. She is quite young—barely sixteen—but the delicate arched features are fully formed. As regards education or mental culture, Anita de Castro is a wild flower indeed. Her father is the head of this slave-dealing colony. Formerly a merchant in the Portuguese settlement of Delagoa Bay, his rascalities have landed him in outlawry, and he has taken his daughter with him into exile. Such is the girl who had attracted the attention of the Englishman Lidwell, who in her had found the one redeeming feature in his present reckless life. He had to a certain extent, and in a desultory sort of way, educated this girl; at any rate had moulded her into something better than a mere mental blank; and the process had been to him a real recreation, a refuge from the disgust which he increasingly felt for his cold-blooded and lawless occupation. And she? Here, on the threshold of budding womanhood, this stranger, who looked upon her as a mere plaything, possessed her whole heart. How it was she could not tell, even had she asked herself the question. Juarez, her sworn admirer, was softer of speech and far more deferential; whereas Lidwell sometimes seemed to ignore her very existence. Yet she would with a heavy heart anticipate the absence of the latter on long and perilous expeditions, and look forward so anxiously and so joyfully to his return. And now he has returned only to leave again immediately, and well she knew that she would see him no more. Suddenly she throws herself on his breast in a fit of passionate weeping.

“Ah, love! I shall never see you again. Never—never.”

A wave of wild temptation sweeps over the man. Why should he not take her with him? She is beautiful enough in face and form, and it suddenly strikes him that she is not the child he has hitherto been wont to consider her. She is in his arms now. He has only to say the word and she will stay there. But Lidwell is gifted with a cool head, and a strong one. He knows the world well enough, and he also knows his own nature. He will not sacrifice this girl to a passing impulse, however powerful. So he resists the momentary temptation, and—it is the saving of his life.

He strokes back the soft hair from her forehead. “Anita, child—you must not grieve like this for me—I don’t say forget the times we have spent together. What I do say is, you are, made for something better than this kind of life; leave it as soon as you are able, and—”

“Hush!”

She has heard something. With a quick gesture she draws herself from him, and stands erect and listening intently. A glow suffuses the sky, and the golden moon peeps above the tree-tops. And now the sound of stealthy footsteps and smothered voices may be heard approaching.

“Go!” exclaims the girl, imprinting a shower of kisses upon his lips. “Go—quick. They are coming. You shall not die here. Good-bye, love. I shall never see you again. Go.” And, as she pushes him from her, the advancing voices are very near indeed. She has barely time to regain the house before several men are knocking at the door. Feigning to be half asleep, she opens.

“Well, father, what has gone wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, Anita. Has Lidwell been here? We want him down at the camp. He promised to help us through with the wine,” answers De Castro.

“The Englishman? No, he hasn’t been here. He must be in his own hut.”

A glance goes round the group.

“But he must have been here, señorita,” replies Juarez. “He was seen to come in this direction.”

A thought strikes the girl. She must gain time. So with an admirably-feigned glance of uneasiness at a side door leading into another room, she reiterates that she has not seen him.

“Ah, well, comrades, I have some old wine in here,” says her father, advancing towards this door. “We will try it.” He turns the handle; but the door is locked. “The key, Anita, the key!”

“The key? Oh, here it is,” and after a pretended search she finds the key. They throw open the door suddenly, and stand staring in stupid surprise into an empty room.

“Juarez,” said the girl, calling him apart from the rest—“keep quiet now. Do you want the Englishman? You shall take him.”

The other started, and his eyes lit up with savage triumph.

“How? Where? Where is he?”

“You shall have him. Listen, Juarez. He has been here, but if you try to find him now you will fail. I promised to meet him two hours after midnight at the corner of the cane planting. He thinks I love him, but I hate him,” she went on, working herself into a state of admirably-feigned fury. “He laughed at me and treated me as a plaything—now I shall have revenge. But listen. Go back to the camp. He is suspicious of you already; but he will come to me two hours after midnight. Then be in waiting, and you shall take him as easily as a leopard in a net. Don’t tell the others about it until the time comes, only get them away now.”

If Juarez felt a qualm of suspicion, she acted her part so well, that he fell headlong into the trap. With difficulty, he persuaded his fellow ruffians to abandon their quest for the present. He trusted Anita implicitly; and, full of elation at the speedy vengeance which would overtake his rival, he returned with the others to their carousals.

The hours drag their length, and silence reigns in the tropical forest. A damp, unwholesome mist rises from the river and spreads over the tree-tops. Now and again the shout of the revellers breaks upon the silence, or the deep bass of a bloodhound is raised in dismal bay at the moon. Still Anita sits there, gazing out upon the forest, and following in spirit every step of him whose life she has saved, further and further as each step takes him from her. At last she falls fast asleep, worn out with the excitement and tension of the past few hours. Then comes a loud, angry knocking at the door.

Opening it, she is confronted with her father. He is shaking with wrath, and behind him are nine or ten others all armed to the teeth.

“Where is the Englishman?” he roared. “Have you fooled us? It is nearly daybreak—and two hours after midnight we were to take him! Where is he?”

“Where is he?” echoed Anita, her voice as clear as a bell. “Where is he? Safe. Far away—leagues and leagues. You will never see him again. He is safe.” And her large eyes flashed upon the enraged and astonished group in scornful defiance as she stood in the doorway.

With the yell of a wild beast baffled of its prey, the old ruffian sprang at his daughter. She never moved. But his clenched hand was seized in a firm grasp before it could descend.

“Softly—softly, patron!” said Juarez. “You would not strike the señorita!”

De Castro struggled in the grasp of the younger man and yelled the most awful curses upon Lidwell, his daughter, and all present; but Juarez was firm. He was not all bad, and a glow of admiration went through him at Anita’s daring, and the shrewd way in which she had outwitted them. Moreover, rivalry apart, he had rather liked Lidwell. The latter they would never see again, for had not Anita herself said as much. On the whole, therefore, it was just as well that he had escaped, and saved them the necessity of killing a former brave comrade. So he tried to pacify the old man.

“Patron,” he said, “be reasonable. We are well rid of this English devil. Certainly, he has won a lot of our dollars; but then he will lose his share in the profits of the last expedition.” Then, in a low tone: “And he has rid us of that turbulent beast, Sharkey. He is a determined devil, and while he was with us he served us well. Let him go.”

The old slave-dealer fumed and raved, then fell in with things as they were. “Ah well,” he said at last, “what is—is, and we can’t help it. We will empty another skin of wine.” Then they withdrew to drown their discomfiture in drink, though some of the party, less easily pacified, would fain have started in pursuit of the fugitive, but that they knew it would be useless.

Six weeks later the mail steamer from Zanzibar was securely docked in the port of London, and Lidwell, bidding farewell to a few fellow passengers, stepped ashore, and in a moment was lost among the busy crowd in the great restless city. He was now in easy circumstances for life.

Volume One—Chapter Four.

Seringa Vale.

One round, black speck high up yonder on the stony hillside. There he sits—the large old baboon; wary sentinel that he is, keeping jealous watch over the safety of the nimble troop under his charge, which, scattered about amid the bush, is feasting upon succulent roots and other vegetable provender afforded by its native wilds. And from his lofty perch he can descry something unwonted immediately beneath—danger possibly, intrusion at any rate—and he lifts up his voice: “Baugch-m! Baugch-m?” The sun blazes in a blue, cloudless sky, darting down his beams with a fierceness and vigour somewhat premature this lovely afternoon of an early South African spring day, and all nature is at rest in the drowsy stillness now broken by that loud, harsh cry. A cliff rears its perpendicular face from amid the bush-covered slopes, which, meeting at its base, form a triangular hollow. From the brow of the cliff rises a rugged steep, thickly grown with dark prickly aloes, whose bristling shapes, surmounted by bunches of red blossom, sprout upwards from the dry, stony soil. The tiniest thread of a streamlet trickles down the face of the rock, losing itself in a pool beneath, which reflects, as in a mirror, cliff, and overhanging bushes, and blue sky. A faint cattle track leading down to the water betokens that in a land of droughts and burning skies even this reservoir, remote and insignificant, is of account at times; but to-day here are no cattle. The long-drawn piping whistle of a spreuw (of the starling species) echoes now and again from the cool recesses of the rock; the hum of bees among the blossoming spekboem and mimosa; the twittering of the finks, whose pear-shaped pendulous nests sway to and fro over the water as the light-hearted birds fly in and out—all tell of solitude and of the peace of the wilderness. Here a big butterfly flits lightly on spotted wings above the flowering bushes; there, stalking solemnly among the stones, an armour-plated tortoise seems to be in rivalry with a horny and long-legged beetle as to which of them shall be the first to reach the other side of the small open space.

“Baugch-m! Baugch-m!”

Two round black specks high up there on the stony hillside. The resounding call is answered, and the two guardians of the troop sit there, a couple of hundred yards apart, looking down into the sequestered nook below.

The sleeper moves, then rolls over on his back and draws his broad-brimmed hat right over his face.

Clearly he does not intend rousing himself just yet. The sun’s beams strike full upon him, but he feels them not; evidently he is indisposed to let even the monarch of light interfere with his siesta. A few minutes more, and, with a start, he raises himself on his elbow and looks around.

“By Jove, how hot it is! I must have been doing the sluggard trick to some purpose, for the cliff was full in the sun when first I pricked for the softest plank here, and now it's throwing out a shadow as long as an attorney's bill of costs. Past four!" looking at his watch. "Now for a pipe; then a start."

He picks himself up out of the pass, yawns and stretches. The tortoise, which had already stood motionless, its bright eye dilated with alarm, now subsides into its shell, hoping to pass for one of the surrounding stones; its scarabean competitor likewise is equal to the occasion, after its own manner, and falling over on its side, with legs stiff and extended, feigns death industriously. Meanwhile the aloe-dotted steep overhead is alive with the loud warning cries of the disturbed baboons, whose ungainly but nimble shapes—some fifty in number—may be seen making off helter-skelter up the hill, to disappear with all possible despatch over the brow of the same.

"Noisy brutes!" grumbles the wayfarer, shading his eyes to watch them. "But for your unprincipled shindy I could have done a good hour's more snooze with all the pleasure in life. If only I had a rifle here—even a Government Snider—it would go hard but that one or two of you would learn the golden art of silence."

Look at him as he stands there just six foot high in his boots—well-proportioned, broad-shouldered, straight as a dart. The face is of a very uncommon type, with character and determination in its regular, clear-cut features; but a look of *insouciance* in the eyes—which are neither grey nor blue, but sometimes one, sometimes the other—neutralises what would otherwise be an energetic and restless expression. The mouth is nearly hidden by a drooping, golden-brown moustache. In the matter of age the man would have satisfied a census collector by the casual reply, "Rising nine-and-twenty."

Colonial born you would certainly not pronounce him. Yet not a touch of the "rawness" of the greenhorn or "new chum" would you descry, even if the serviceable suit of tancord and the quality of the saddle and riding gear lying on the ground did not betoken a certain amount of acquaintance with colonial life on the part of their owner.

He draws a rough cherrywood pipe from his pocket, fills and lights it, sending forth vigorous blue puffs which hang upon the drowsy air. He stands for a moment looking at the sun, and decides that it is time to start.

"Now, I wonder what has become of Sticks. The old scamp is given to erring and straying afar just when wanted. When I don't require his services he'll fool about the camp by the hour."

Sticks was his horse. That estimable quadruped had at one time been addicted to "sticking," an inconvenient vice of which his present owner had thoroughly cured him.

Our wayfarer strolls leisurely to the ridge which shuts in the hollow, and looks around. Then a reddish object amid the green bush, some hundreds of yards further down, catches his eye. It is the object of his search; and, with one hand thrust carelessly into a pocket, he makes for the errant nag and returns leading his steed to the waterhole, where clouds of yellow finks scatter right and left, vociferously giving vent to their indignation at being thus invaded.

And now, having saddled up, he is on his way. Steeper and steeper grows the ascent; the bush meets here and there over the narrow path, nearly sweeping the rider from his saddle, and the horse, blinded now and then by a thick branch of spekboem flying back in his eyes, makes an approach to a stumble, for which he is not to blame, for the track is rugged enough in all conscience. At length the narrow path comes to an end, merging into a broad but stony waggon road.

But—excelsior! The bay steps out at a brisk walk, ascending ever the rough road which winds round the abrupt spurs of the hills like a ledge, mounting higher and higher above the long sweep of bush-covered slope, where, among the recesses of many a dark ravine, thickets of "wait-a-bit" thorn, and mimosa, and tangled underwood, afford retreat to the more retiring denizens of the waste—the sharp-horned bushbuck and the tusked wild pig, the hooded cobra, and the deadly puff-adder. And beneath those shades, too, in the still gloom, the spotted leopard creeps stealthily upon its prey, and the howl of the hyena and the shrill yelping bay of the jackal resound weirdly through the night.

"It's waxing chilly. Up, old Sticks!" ejaculates the traveller, with a light tap of his riding-crop. The horse picks up his head and scrambles along with new zest. A few minutes more and he is standing on the top of the *randt* (the high ground or ridge overlooking the valley of a river) for a brief blow after his exertions, which his heaving flanks proclaim to have been of no mean order, while his rider is contemplating the fresh scene which opens out before his gaze. For the wooded country has been left, and now before him lies spread a panorama of broad and rolling plains, dotted capriciously here and there with clumps of bush. A lovely sweep of country stretches away in many undulations to the wooded foothills of a beautiful mountain range which forms a background to the whole view, extending, crescent-like, far as the eye can travel. The snow-cap yet resting on the lofty peak of the Great Winterberg flushes first with a delicate tinge and then blood-red; many a jutting spur and grey cliff starts forth wondrously distinct, while the forest trees upon a score of distant heights stand soft and feathery, touched with a shimmer of green and gold from the long beams of the sinking sun as he dips down and down to the purpling west.

The stranger rides on, enjoying the glorious beauty of this fair landscape—never fairer than when seen thus, in the almost unearthly lustre of a perfect evening. A steinbuck leaps out of the grass, and after a brief run halts and steadily surveys the intruder. Down in the hollow a pair of blue cranes utter their musical note of alarm, and stalk rapidly hither and thither, as though undecided about the quarter whence danger threatens, and the cooing of doves from yon clump of euphorbia blends in soft harmony with the peaceful surroundings as in a vesper chant of rest.

And now a strange group appears over the rise in front. It is a Kafir *trek*. Two men, three women, and some children, driving before them their modest possessions in live stock, consisting of three cows (one with a calf), and a few sheep and goats. The men wear an ample blanket apiece thrown loosely round their shoulders, but other clothing have they none, with the exception of a pair of boots, which however, each carries slung over his shoulder, preferring to walk barefoot. The women are somewhat less scantily clad, with nondescript draperies of blanketing and bead-work falling around them. Each has her baby slung on her back, and carries an enormous bundle on her head, containing pots and pans, blankets and matting—the household goods and chattels; for her lord disdains to bear anything but his kerries, or knobsticks, and marches along in front looking as if the whole world belonged to him. Some of the elder children are laden with smaller bundles, and even the cows are pressed into the service as porters, each having a long roll of mats fastened across her horns, and two or three mongrel curs slink behind the group. All Kafir garments are plentifully bedaubed with red ochre, an adornment frequently extended to their wearers, giving them the appearance of peripatetic flower-pots.

“Naand, Baas!” (Note 1) sing out the men as they meet the traveller, and then continue in their own tongue, “Nxazéla.” (Tobacco.)

No bad specimens of their hardy and supple race are these two fellows as they stand there, their well-knit, active figures glistening like bronze in the setting sun. They hold their heads well up, and each of their shrewd and rather good-looking countenances is lighted by a pair of clear, penetrating eyes. The stranger chucks them a bit of the coveted plant, and asks how much further it is to Seringa Vale.

“Over there,” replies one of the Kafirs, pointing with his stick to the second rise in the ground, about two miles off. With a brief good-night the horseman touches up his nag and breaks into a gentle canter, while the natives, collecting their stock—which has taken advantage of the halt to scatter over the *veldt* and pick up a few mouthfuls of grass—resume their way.

The sun has gone down, and the white peak of the Great Winterberg towers up cold and spectral to the liquid sky, as the horseman crests the ridge indicated, and lo—the broad roof of a substantial farmhouse lies beneath. Around, are several thatched outbuildings, and the whole is charmingly situated, nestling in a grove of seringas and orange trees. There is a fruit-garden in front of the house, or rather on one side of it, though it may almost be said to have two fronts, for the verandah and the *stoep* run round the two sides which command the best and widest view, while another and a larger garden, even more leafy and inviting-looking, lies down in the kloof. Close to the homestead are the sheep and cattle kraals, with their prickly thorn-fences, into one of which a white, fleecy flock is already being counted, while another, preceded by its *voerbok* (Note 2) is coming down the kloof, urged on by the shout and whistle of its Kafir shepherd. The cattle enclosure is already alive with the dappled hides of its denizens, moving about among whom are the bronzed forms of the cattle-herd and his small boys, who are busily employed in sorting out the calves and shutting them up in their pen for the night, away from their mothers, so that these may contribute their share towards filling the milk-pails in the morning. Behind the kraals stand the abodes of the Kafir farm servants, eight or ten beehive-shaped huts to wit, and stepping along towards these, calabash on head, comes a file of native women and girls who have been to draw water from the spring. They sing, as they walk, a monotonous kind of savage chant, stopping now and then to bawl out some “chaff” to the shepherd approaching with his flock as aforesaid, and going into shrill peals of laughter over his reply.

The traveller draws rein for a little while, till the counting-in process is accomplished, then rides down to the kraal gate and dismounts. A man turns away from giving some final directions to the Kafir who is tying up the gate—an old man, over whose head at least seventy summers must have passed, but yet stalwart of body and handsome of feature, with hair and beard like silver. He is dressed in the rough cord suit and slouch hat of the ordinary frontier farmer, and in his hand he carries a whip of plaited raw-hide. His clothes have a timeworn appearance, and his hands are large and hard-looking; but, in spite of the roughness of his aspect and attire, you need only look once into Walter Brathwaite’s face to know that you were confronting a man of gentle blood.

“Good evening,” he says, heartily, advancing with outstretched hand towards the stranger. But a curious smile upon the tatter’s face causes him to pause with a half mystified, hesitating air, as if it were not unfamiliar to him. “Why, no. It can’t be. Bless my soul, it is, though. Why, Claverton, how are you, my boy? Glad to see you back again in Africa,” and he enclosed the younger man’s hand in a strong grip. “But come in; the wife’ll be delighted. Here, Jacob,” he shouted, in stentorian tones which brought a young Hottentot upon the scene in a twinkling, “take the Baas’s horse and off-saddle him.”

Passing through a hall, garnished with trophies of the chase, bushbuck horns, and tusks of the wild pig, and a couple of grinning panther-heads, they entered the dining-room, a large, homelike apartment, plainly but comfortably furnished.

“Here, Mary, I’ve brought you a visitor,” said the settler, as they entered. “You remember Arthur Claverton?”

A tall old lady, whose kindly and still handsome face bore unmistakable signs of former beauty, rose from a sewing-machine at which she had been working, with a start of surprise.

“What! Arthur? Why, so it is. But I should never have known you, you’re so altered. Ah, I always said we should see you out here again,” she continued, shaking his hand cordially.

The stranger smiled, and a very pleasant smile it was.

“Well, yes, so you did, Mrs Brathwaite; but at least I have the faculty of knowing when and where I am well off,” he said, really touched by the genuine warmth of his reception.

“So you’ve been all over the world since we saw you last—to Australia and back?” she went on. “And then the last thing we heard of you was that you had gone to America.”

“I attempted to; but Providence, or rather the blunder-headed lookout on board a homeward-bound liner, willed otherwise.”

“How do you mean?”

“Why! that the said idiotically-handled craft collided with ours, two days out, cutting her down to the water’s edge and sinking her in thirteen minutes. I and twenty-four others were picked up, but the rest went to Davy Jones's locker. There weren't many more of them, though, for it was a small boat, and I was nearly the only passenger."

"Oh! And you didn't try the voyage again?" said Mrs Brathwaite, in subdued tones. She was colonial born, and in her own element as brave a woman as ever stepped. In the earlier frontier wars she had stood by her husband's side within the laager and loaded his guns for him, while the conflict waxed long and desperate, and the night was ablaze with the flash of volleys, and the air was heavy with asphyxiating smoke, and the detonating crash of musketry and the battle-shouts of the savage foe, and had never flinched. But she had a shuddering horror of the sea, and would almost have gone through all her terrible experiences again rather than trust herself for one hour on its smiling, treacherous expanse.

"Well, no; I didn't," he answered. "I took it as an omen, and concluded to dismiss the Far West in favour of the 'Sunny South.' So here I am."

"Ah! well," put in the old settler. "Perhaps we'll be able to find you something in the way of excitement here, if that's what you were in search of, and that before very long, too. All isn't so quiet here as they try to make out. I've lived on the frontier, man and boy, all my life, and I can see pretty plainly that there's mischief brewing."

"Is there? I did hear something of the sort on my way up, now I think of it; but I had an idea that the days of war were over, and that Jack Kafir had got his quietus."

"Ha! ha! Had you really, now? Why, bless my soul, the Kafirs are far more numerous than ever; they outnumber us by fifty to one. They hate us as much as ever they did, and for some time past have been steadily collecting guns and ammunition. Now, what do they want those guns and that ammunition for? Not for hunting, for there's next to no game in all Kafirland. No, it is to put them on an equal footing with us; and then, with their numbers, they think to have it all their own way. There's mischief brewing, mark my words."

"It wouldn't mean a scrimmage among themselves, would it? They might be anxious to exterminate each other," ventured Claverton.

The other smiled significantly, and was about to reply, when the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of supper and—Hicks.

The latter was one of those young Englishmen often met with on colonial farms, learning their business in the capacity of assistant, or general factotum; and who may be divided into two categories: those who take kindly to the life and throw themselves thoroughly into it and its interests, and those who don't, and leave it after a trial. Our friend Hicks may be placed in the former of these. He was a strong, energetic, good-tempered fellow, who loved his calling, and was a favourite with everybody. He had served three years in the Frontier Mounted Police, and had been two with Mr Brathwaite, and, by virtue of so much hard, healthy, open-air life, was twice the man he had been when he left his father's Midlandshire parsonage five years previously.

"You were asking if the Kafirs might not be preparing for a fight among themselves?" resumed the old settler as they took their places at the supper-table, which looked cheerful and homelike in the extreme. He had got upon a favourite hobby, and was not to be diverted from a congenial ride. "There isn't the slightest chance of it, because they know very well we shan't let them. We prefer encouraging them to hammer away at us."

"Pickling a rod for our own backs?" remarked Claverton.

"Just so. By patching up their tribal disputes we check just so much salutary blood-letting, and foster hordes of lazy, thieving rascals right on our border. Even if the sham philanthropy, under which we groan, obliges us to sit still while the savages grow fat on our stolen cattle and laugh at us, the least it could do would be to allow them to cut a few of each other's throats when they have a mind to."

"The Home Government, I suppose?"

"That's it. A parcel of old women in Downing Street, ruled by Exeter Hall and the Peace Society. What do they know about the Colony, and what do they care? After British subjects have been murdered and plundered all along the border, an official is sent to inquire into it. Of course the chiefs all pretend ignorance, and throw the blame on somebody else. Then follows great palaver and buttering over. The chiefs are told to be good boys and not do it again, and are given waggon-loads of presents—and a treaty is made. A treaty! With savages—savages whose boast is that they are a nation of liars. Can't you imagine the wily rascals sniggering in their blankets, and wondering how much longer they are going to allow themselves to be governed by such a race of milksops!"

His listeners could not forbear a laugh.

"I can tell you it's no laughing matter to be burned out of house and home three times as I have been," went on the old man, "and that through the sentimental cant of our rulers. No; coddling savages doesn't do—never did do, and never will. Treat them fairly and with the strictest justice; but, if you are to rule them at all, you must do so with a strong hand."

Walter Brathwaite had, as he said, lived on the frontier, man and boy, all his life; for he was a mere child when his father, tempted by the inducement of free grants of land, had transferred the family fortunes to the shores of Southern Africa in the early days of the settlement of the Cape Colony. His youth and earlier manhood were passed amid the hardships and obstacles of an emigrant's life. And also its dangers—for the tribes infesting the rugged and difficult country which then was Kafirland, were wont to lay marauding hands on the settler's flocks and herds—nor did the savages scruple about adding murder to pillage. Still the emigrants throve; for those were the days of good seasons and healthy flocks and herds—when pasturage was plentiful and succulent, droughts were infrequent, and disease almost unknown. Three successive wars at short intervals swept away the fruits of the unfortunate settlers' toil; but they managed to pick up again, and now, at this period of our narrative, it is twenty years since the last of these, and there are once more the same signs of restlessness among the tribes which the experienced remember to have heralded former outbreaks. So if Walter Brathwaite expresses strong distrust of his barbarous neighbours, it is not without ample justification. He has done good service, too, in the time of need; has fought valiantly and ungrudgingly on behalf of his adopted country, and whether in peace or in war has ever enjoyed the respect and good opinion of his fellows. In truth, right justly so. Gifted with strong, practical common sense; his straightforward nature abhorring anything in the shape of humbug or meanness; of a thoroughly kind-hearted, genial disposition and open-handed to a degree, he is a splendid specimen of the colonist who is also by birth and tradition a true English gentleman; and now in the latter years of his long, useful, and honourable life, he is an object of esteem and affection to all who know him—and they are many.

Note 1. Dutch, "Evening, master." Dutch is nearly always employed in the Cape Colony for intercourse with the natives, comparatively few frontiersmen, even, being well versed in the Kafir language.

Note 2. "The goat which goes before."—A goat is always used instead of a bell-wether on the Cape sheep farms, and so accustomed do the flocks become to their leader that it is a hard and toilsome business to induce them to enter their fold without it.

Volume One—Chapter Five.

The Biter Bitten.

It was early when Claverton awoke on the following morning; but, early as it was, the occupant of the other bed had disappeared. He had "shaken down" in Hicks' room, and the two had talked and smoked themselves to sleep; and, early as it was, there were plenty of sounds outside, which told of the day's doings having begun.

The most epicurean of late sleepers will find it hard to keep up his usual luxurious habit in a frontier house. There is a something which seems to preclude late lying—possibly the consciousness of exceptional laziness, or a sneaking qualm over taking it easy in bed when every soul on the place has long been astir; but even the most inveterate sluggard will hardly find it in his conscience to roll over again, especially if a companion's long since vacated conch is staring him reproachfully in the face from the other side of the room.

Claverton, who was in no sense an epicurean, felt something of this, and lost no time in turning out. The sun had risen, but was unable to pierce the heavy mist which hang over the earth in opaque folds. He found his host busy at the sheep kraals, the thorn-fence dividing which had been broken through in the night, with the result of mixing the flocks. Three Kafirs were hard at work sorting them out again, and the dust flew in clouds as the flock rushed hither and thither within the confined space—the ground rumbling under their hoofs.

"Pleasure of farming!" remarked the old man, with a smile, after greetings had been exchanged. Both turned away their faces a minute as a pungent and blinding cloud swept past them. "The rascals might have avoided all this by simply putting a thorn tack or two in its place last night. You can't trust them, you see—have to look to everything yourself."

"Suppose so," replied Claverton, slipping out of his jacket. "I'm going to give your fellows a hand. The brand, though, is rather indistinct. Which come out?"

"All branded B, with the double ear mark."

"Right?" And he dived into the thick of the fun, with all the energy and more than the dexterity of the Kafirs, who paused for a moment with a stare of astonishment and a smothered "Whouw!" They did not know who the strange *Baas* was, but he was evidently no greenhorn.

Another hour's hard work and the flocks are separate again; but it is rather too early to turn them out to grass. So the two stroll round to the cattle kraal, whose denizens stand patiently and ruminatingly about for the most part, though some are restless and on the move, recognising with responsive "moo" the voices of their calves in the pen. Nearly all the cows are of good breed—the serviceable and hardy cattle of the country, crossed with imported stock, though now and again among them can be descried the small head and straight back of an almost thorough-bred Alderney. Milking is going on. There sits the old cattle-herd beneath a wild young animal properly secured, milking away and gossiping with his satellites as fast as he fills his pail—for Kafirs are awful gossips. Then he turns the frightened young cow loose, and, removing the foaming pail out of the way of a possible upset, proceeds in search of a fresh victim. He salutes his master in passing, and, with a rapid, keen glance at the stranger, extends his greeting to him.

Mr Brathwaite is very proud of his choice and well-bred animals. He knows every hoof of them like ABC, almost every hair; and as they walk about among the beasts he entertains his companion with the history of each, and where it came from, and the events of its career in life.

"Hullo! Who's this?" said Claverton suddenly, as two horsemen appeared on the brow of the opposite hill. "One's Hicks, the other looks like, uncommonly like, Jim."

"Yes, it is Jim," assented Mr Brathwaite. "What's brought him over this morning, I wonder?" The said Jim was his eldest son. He was a married man, and lived on a farm of his own some fifteen or sixteen miles off. A few minutes more, and the two horsemen drew rein in front of the cattle kraal.

"Hullo, Arthur!" sang out Jim, jumping to the ground. "Here we are again! Hicks told me I should find *you* here, of all people. Morning, father! Have Ethel and Laura arrived yet?"

"I believe so. I saw Jeffreys' trap coming over the hill about an hour ago, and he was to bring them. I was busy and couldn't go in then. My brother's children, Arthur," he explained, noting a surprised look in his guest's face. "They have come from Cape Town to stay a couple of months while their father is away up the country."

"Come to enliven us up a bit," said jovial Jim. "Ethel will lead you a life of it, or I'm a Trojan."

Jim Brathwaite was a fine, handsome fellow of thirty-five, over six feet in height, strong as a bull and active as a leopard. His bronzed and bearded countenance was stamped with that air of dashing intrepidity with which a genial disposition usually goes hand in hand. He was a quick-tempered man, and his native dependents stood in considerable awe of him, for they knew—some of them to their cost—that he would stand no nonsense. Of untiring energy, and with all his father's practical common sense, he had prospered exceedingly in good times, and had managed to hold his own against bad ones. Shrewd and clear-headed, he was thoroughly well able to look after his own interests; and any one given to sharp practice or rascality—whether cattle dealer or Dutchman, Kafir or Hottentot—would have to get up very early indeed to reach the blind side of him.

Claverton had been on very intimate terms with the Brathwaites some years previously. They had been good friends to him in the earlier days of his wandering life, and he had a warm regard for them. It was more than pleasant, he thought, being among them again, laughing over many a reminiscence evoked by the jest-loving Jim as they strolled towards the house.

The long, low dining-room looked invitingly cool after the glare and heat outside. Mrs Brathwaite, who was seated at the table, scolded them playfully for keeping breakfast waiting. Beside her sat a girl—a beautiful creature, with large blue eyes fringed with curling lashes, and a sparkling, dimpled rosebud of a face made for capriciousness and kisses. The masses of her golden hair, drawn back from the brows, were allowed to fall in a rippling shower below her waist, and a fresh, cool morning-dress set off her neat little figure to perfection.

"Arthur. This is my niece, Ethel," said Mrs Brathwaite.

Claverton started ever so slightly and bowed. He was wondering where on earth this vision of loveliness had suddenly dropped from in this out-of-the-way place. And Mr Brathwaite had said, "My brother's *children*."

The girl shot one glance at him from under the curling lashes as she acknowledged the introduction, and a gleam of merriment darted across the bright face. Each had been trying to read off the other, and each had detected the other in the act. She turned away to greet her cousin.

"Why, what in the world has brought *you* here?" cried that jovial blade in his hearty voice. "We weren't expecting you for ever so long. Where's Laura?"

"The Union Company's steamer *Basuto*. Cobb and Co, and Mr Jeffreys' trap. Laura's in the next room. One question at a time, please."

Jim roared with laughter as he took his seat at the table. Between himself and Ethel much sparring took place whenever the pair got together.

"Sharp as ever, by Jingo," he cried. "I say, Ethel, I wonder you haven't been quodded for bribery and corruption. They say Uncle George only gets returned by sending you round to tout for votes."

The point of this joke lay in the fact that her father was a fervid politician and a member of the Legislative Assembly. Before Ethel could retort, a diversion was created by the entrance of Mr Brathwaite and his other niece. Laura was her sister's junior by a year, and as unlike her as it was possible to be. She was a slight, graceful girl, with dark hair and eyes, and as quiet and demure in manner as the other was merry and impulsive; and though falling far short of her sister in actual beauty, yet when interested her face would light up in a manner that was very attractive. So thought, at any rate, our friend Hicks, on whom, during her last visit at Seringa Vale, Laura had made an impression. Not to put too fine a point upon it, Hicks was very hard hit indeed.

"Really, those two are too bad," said Mrs Brathwaite. "Beginning to fight before they have been five minutes together. Isn't it too bad of them, Arthur?"

He appealed to, looked up just in time to catch Ethel's glance of defiance which said as plainly as words: "You mind your own business." She was not going to defer to the opinions of this stranger, and did not see why he should be called upon to decide in the matter. No doubt he had come out there with the notion that they were a mere set of half-civilised, ignorant colonials whom it was his business to set right. Those new arrivals from England always gave themselves such airs, and expected to have everything their own way. That might do with the old people and good-natured Jim, but it would not go down with her, Ethel Brathwaite, aged nineteen, and she intended to let him know it. She had taken a dislike to this new arrival, which he saw at once, and the idea rather entertained him.

"Uncle, I declare Jim gets worse and worse as he grows older. Yes—older, Jim, for you're quite grey since I saw you last, you know. How are you, Mr Hicks?" she continued, as that tardy youth entered the room. "Have you shot your twenty backs yet? You know we said last year we should vote you out of our good opinion unless you could show as twenty pairs of horns fairly killed by your own gun when next we met?"

"Well, not yet," was the answer, somewhat reluctantly given.

"As you are strong, be merciful," put in Claverton, thereby drawing down upon himself another indignant glance.

Our friend Hicks, like many a greater man, had his weaknesses. One of these was a passion for sport. He would lay himself out to the most arduous labours in the heat of the day, and forego many an hour of well-earned rest at night, in the pursuit of his favourite pastime. Not that his efforts were always crowned with the success they deserved—indeed, it was the exception rather than the rule if they were so—but the mere pleasure of having his gun in his hand, expecting, Micawber-like, something to turn up, satisfied him. When he first came to Seringa Vale he had been in the habit of starting off in quest of game at times when by no possibility could he have obtained a shot, and under such circumstances had been known to empty his gun at such small fry as spreuws or meercats rather than not discharge it at all. But whatever he let off his gun at, it didn't make the least difference to the object under fire. He never hit anything, and much good-humoured chaff was habitually indulged in at his expense. "He couldn't hit a house, couldn't Hicks," Mr Brathwaite was wont to observe jocosely, "unless he were put inside and all the doors and shutters barred up." Which witticism Jim would supplement by two or three of his own. But the subject of this rallying was the very essence of good humour. He didn't mind any amount of chaff, and devoted himself to the pursuit of *ferae naturae* with a perseverance which was literally as laid down by the copy-books—its own reward.

"I move that we all go down and look at the ostriches," suggested Ethel, ever anxious to be on the move.

"Who seconds that?" said Jim, looking around. "Now, then, Arthur!"

"As junior member my innate modesty forbids," was the reply.

"That is meant satirically, Mr Claverton," cried Ethel. "You deserve to be voted out of the expedition, and if you don't apologise you shall be."

"Then I withdraw the innate modesty. What—that not enough? Then there's nothing for it but a pistol or a pipe. Of the two evils here goes for the pipe. Hicks, we haven't blown our cloud this morning." He saw how the land lay.

"Er—well, you see—er—that is—er—I mean," stammered Hicks, who, good-natured fellow, shrank from refusing outright. "Er—the fact is, I've got to go down and feed the ostriches some time, so I may as well go now."

"Well, I am surprised at *you*, Mr Hicks," said Ethel. "So the pleasure of our company counts as nothing. You deserve to be put on the stool of repentance too."

"But really that's just what I meant—er—that is, I mean—it does, you know—but—" stuttered the unlucky youth, putting his foot in it deeper and deeper.

Laura had fled into another room under the pretext of finding her hat, whence a stifled sob of suppressed laughter was audible now and again. The originator of this turn of affairs was imperturbably sticking a penknife through and through a piece of card, and contemplating the actors in it as if he were unconscious of anything humorous in the situation, though in reality he was repressing, with an effort, an overpowering desire to go outside and roar for five minutes.

"Good-bye, Mr Claverton," said Ethel, with a mock bow, and emphasising the first word. She was rather disappointed at his ready acquiescence in her ostracism of him, as it upset a little scheme of vengeance she had been forming.

"Say rather 'Au reservoir,' for your way, I believe, lies past the dam."

"Oh-h!" burst from the whole party at the villainy of the pun, as they left him.

"I'm afraid your friend is a dreadful firebrand; Ethel and he will fight awfully," said Laura to Hicks as they walked down to the large enclosure. These two had fallen behind, and Hicks was in the seventh heaven of delight. The mischief of it was that the arrangement would be of such short duration. Some twenty yards in front Ethel was keeping her aunt and Jim in fits of laughter.

"Let me carry that for you," said Hicks, pouncing upon a tiny apology for a basket which was in her hand.

"No, no; you've got quite enough to carry," she replied, referring to a large colander containing the daily ration of maize for the ostriches, and which formed his burden on the occasion.

"Not a bit of it. Look, I can carry it easily. Do let me," he went on in his eagerness.

"Take care, or you'll drop the other," said she.

The warning was just one shade too late. Down came the colander, its contents promptly burying themselves in the long grass. The salvage which Hicks managed to effect was but a very small fraction of the original portion.

"There now, I've spilt all the mealies," said he, ruefully, eyeing the scattered grain. He was not thinking of its intrinsic value, but that the necessity of going back for more would do him out of the two or three hundred yards left to him of his walk with Laura.

"Your friend would say 'it's of no use crying over spilt mealies.' Never mind, we can go back and get some more."

"What!" he exclaimed, delightfully. "Do you mean to say you'll go all the way back with me? But really I can't let you take all that trouble," he added, with reluctant compunction.

"I mean to say I'll go *all* the way back with you, and I intend 'to take *all* that trouble' with or with out permission," she replied, looking up at him with a saucy gleam in her eyes.

Close to the storeroom they came upon Claverton. He was sitting on the disselboom of a tent-waggon smoking a pipe, and meditatively shying pebbles at an itinerant scarabaeus, which was wandering aimlessly about on a sun-baked open patch of ground about seven yards off.

"Well, has your sister thought better of it, and removed the ban?" asked he, as the two came up.

"No, she hasn't," answered Laura, "but I see you're penitent, so I will do so on her behalf. You may come down with us," she added, demurely. She knew he would do nothing of the sort, so could safely indulge the temptation to mischief.

Poor Hicks was on thorns. "Yes, come along, Claverton," he chimed in, mechanically, in the plenitude of his self-abnegation fondly imagining that his doleful tones were the acme of cordiality.

"Well, I think I will," pretended Claverton, making a feint at moving. Hicks' countenance fell, and Laura turned away convulsed. "Don't know, though; think I'll join you later. I must go in and get a fresh fill; my pipe's gone out," and he sauntered away to Hicks' great relief, as he and Laura started off to rejoin the others at the ostrich camp.

The male bird was very savage, and no sooner did he descry the party, than he came bearing down upon them from the far end of the enclosure.

"What a grand fellow!" exclaimed Ethel, putting out her hand to stroke the long serpentine neck of the huge biped, who, so far from appreciating the caress, resented it by pressing the stone wall with his hard breast-bone as though he would overthrow it, and making the splinters fly with a vicious kick or two, in his futile longing to get at and smash the whole party. And standing there in all the bravery of his jet-black array, the snowy plumes of his wings dazzling white in the sun as he waved them in wrathful challenge, he certainly merited to the full the encomium passed upon him. Hicks emptied the contents of the colander, which brought the hen bird running down to take her share—a mild-eyed, grey, unobtrusive-looking creature. She stood timidly pecking on the outside of the "spread," every now and again running off some twenty yards as her tyrannical lord made at her, with a sonorous hiss, aiming a savage kick at her with his pointed toe.

"Oh, you odious wretch," cried Ethel, apostrophising the bird. "Mr Hicks, can't we give the poor hen some all to herself?"

"Behold the way of the world," said a voice behind her. "Every man for himself and—but I won't finish the saw."

She turned, and there was Claverton. A cherrywood pipe was in his mouth, and with one hand thrust carelessly into the pocket of a loose shooting-coat, he stood regarding her from beneath his broad-brimmed hat, looking the very personification of coolness and unconcern.

The sight of him angered her, but a thrill of malicious satisfaction shot through her, as she thought of the rude shock she would inflict upon that provoking imperturbability before he was an hour older.

"So you come down from the stool of repentance without permission," she said, severely.

"Couldn't stop away any longer," he replied, without removing his careless glance from her face. "Besides, your sister absolved me in your name."

"Then you may stay," she said, graciously, turning to look at the ostriches. The male bird was about fifty yards off, reluctant to leave the spot, and rolling his fiery eye towards them with a frequency that showed he had not quite given up all hopes of making mincemeat of some one of the party that day.

"Mr Claverton," suddenly exclaimed Ethel, even more graciously. "Do get me those red flowers over there, the ones on the long stalks."

"With pleasure," he answered, coming to her side. "Indicate them."

"There they are, those under that bush."

She pointed out ten or a dozen wiry-looking stalks with a few red blossoms that would not have overburdened one of them, but were injudiciously distributed amongst the group, which sprouted amid the undergrowth in a small clump of thorn-bushes right in the enclosure. To reach it about seventy yards of open ground, destitute of all cover save for a single mimosa bush growing half-way, must needs be traversed.

"Hold on, let's get the bird away first," said Jim, moving off with that intent.

"Never mind the bird, Jim, he won't interfere with me," quietly answered Claverton; and without even pocketing his pipe he climbed deliberately over the wall.

"Don't go, Arthur. Good gracious, he'll be killed!" cried Mrs Brathwaite, in dire trepidation. "Ethel, how could you?"

"No he won't, auntie; you'll see him run in a minute as for dear life. I wanted to make him run," she added in a low tone, with a mischievous, scornful laugh.

I know of no more perfect exemplification of the old adage about familiarity breeding contempt than the case of the fall-grown male ostrich. In his wild state the most timid and wary of creatures, he is up and away the moment you appear on the skyline, and fleetness and endurance must be the character of your mount if you hope to overtake him. In a state of domesticity, however, his aggressiveness and pugnacity know no bounds. He will charge anything or everything, resistance only adding to his blind ferocity—and when it is understood that a single stroke of his sharp horny toe—for he kicks down, not out—will shatter a man's skull, not to mention the possibility of a broken limb, it will not be difficult for the reader to realise that this gigantic fowl is a particularly awkward customer to deal with. Of course the bird is easily killed, or disabled, a very moderate blow from a stick being sufficient to break its leg. But it must be remembered that the creature is, so to say, worth its weight in gold, and any one would think more than, twice before slaying so valuable a possession, even in self-defence. So it is manifest that the expedition upon which Claverton had now embarked was by no means free from the element of peril.

Once over the wall he walked coolly forward, seeming altogether to ignore his foe's existence. The ostrich, however, was by no means disposed to take matters so quietly, for before he had gone fifteen paces it bore down upon him with a savage hiss; but a couple of light bounds brought him to the small bash above mentioned, where he was safe for the moment. For the moment, because it was only a question which of the two would tire first, and they dodged each other round the precarious shelter which was only half-way to his destination.

Soon, however, besieger and besieged alike came to a complete standstill, and the situation began to wax rather monotonous. Then the ostrich, withdrawing a couple of yards, dropped down on its shanks, and contorting its neck, and at the same time fluttering its wings in defiance, produced a curious drumming noise, of which grotesque challenge its human antagonist took not the slightest notice, but waited on as calmly as ever. Suddenly it sprang up, and uttering its trumpet-like hiss, dashed right through the bush at him; then, while it was still blundering among the thorns, Claverton started off upon the remainder of his journey. This he could have accomplished with ease and safety, but that above all he intended to do it quietly. He knew why Ethel had sent him in there as well as she did herself, and that astute young lady should not have the pleasure of seeing him routed, or enjoying a laugh at his expense. Consequently he had not covered more than half the distance that remained to him, at a quick but easy walk, when the ostrich, now simply infuriate by reason of a few pricks from the sharp mimosa thorns, which had penetrated even its tough hide, was upon him. And very huge and formidable looked the ferocious bird, as, rearing itself up to its full height, its jetty plumage erect and bristling, its eye glaring, and its fiery red bill wide open, it rushed upon Claverton, hissing like a fiend. No cover was at hand; there he stood in the open, completely at the mercy of his savage assailant.

In vain Jim and Hicks ran into the enclosure shouting, to draw off the creature's attention; it manifested a fell fixity of purpose, from which it was not to be turned aside by any such puerile tricks. Mrs Brathwaite grew pale, and averted her head; even Ethel now saw that she had carried her practical joke rather too far; but still her gaze was riveted upon the combatants with a strange, eager fascination.

But Claverton's coolness always stood him in good stead. He suddenly advanced a couple of paces, thus forestalling the attack, and seizing his powerful antagonist by the lower part of the neck, swung himself nimbly aside, just managing to avoid a kick that would probably have ripped him up, and held on firmly to the creature's throat, half choking it. It plunged and stamped, its great feet going all the time like sledge-hammers, and to hold on was just as much as he could do, for it was as powerful as a horse. But hold on he did as for dear life; then, watching his opportunity, he flung himself off, and before the bird, half-dazed, had recovered from the effects of the choking it had received, he stood safe within the friendly shelter of the clump of bush, somewhat used up, but uninjured, except that his right hand was torn and bleeding from contact with the bird's claw. His pursuer, indisposed to venture again among thorns, walked quickly up and down before the entrance to the cover, flicking its wings about in baffled wrath at the unaccountable escape of its victim.

The first thing he did was to gather every one of the flowers he had come for. Then the spectators could see him standing against a tree doing something with a pencil and the back of an envelope.

"Hallo! what on earth are you up to now?" called out Jim. "Tell us when you're ready, and we'll get the bird away."

"By no means," was the reply. "I'm making a rough sketch of the situation, now that I'm master of the same. Then you may call it a drawing by one of the Masters."

This sally provoked a laugh from all but Ethel. She was silent. To tell the truth, she was rather ashamed of herself.

In a few moments he put away his pencil and paper, and set to work to cut a couple of large thorn branches. This done, he issued forth from his refuge to return. The ostrich, apparently tired of the turn affairs had taken, had drawn off a little way; but no sooner was he in the open than it charged him again. This time, however, it was out of its reckoning; the *chevaux de frise* of thorns that Claverton held before him was not to be got over. With a powerful kick or two it beat down the branch, which, however, was immediately replaced by the other, and kick and hiss as it would, it could not get rid of the formidable array of prickly thorns which met its breast and unprotected neck whenever it pressed on to the attack. At last, convinced of the futility of the undertaking, the savage bird turned round and trotted away about fifty yards, and there stood, looking the picture of sullen defeat. Its cool opponent walked leisurely to the wall, and, abandoning his valuable means of defence, climbed over and joined the party.

"By Jove, but you did that well," said Jim. "Why, man, I expected to see you most awfully mauled."

"I don't know. 'Needs must where the'—but I won't finish that quotation, either. Here are the flowers, Miss Brathwaite," he said, handing her the innocent cause of all the pother. "By the way, Hicks, I forgot to tell you as I came down that there's been a porcupine in the mealie-land during the night. We might set the spring-gun for him, eh?"

"Rather! We'll set it this evening," said Hicks, gleefully, his instincts of destructiveness coming again to the fore.

That evening, between nine and ten o'clock, they were all sitting indoors. Jim had left in the afternoon to return to the bosom of his family, after making them all promise to ride over in a day or two. Suddenly a dull, heavy report was heard.

"*Pace* the porcupine," remarked Claverton.

“I say,” sputtered Hicks in his eagerness, “let’s go down and see if we’ve got him. We might set the gun again, you know, in case another came.”

“Let’s all go,” cried Ethel. “I’m dying to see the result of our trap-setting. Yes, *our* trap-setting, Mr Hicks—you know you’d have put that trigger too stiff if it hadn’t been for me.”

“But, my dear child,” feebly protested Mrs Brathwaite, “the grass is as wet as it can be, and—”

“And—there’s a path all the way down, and—it’s a lovely night—and—you’re a dear old auntie—and—we’re going,” she replied, with a hug and a kiss; then darting into the other room reappeared, looking inexpressibly killing, with a light-blue shawl thrown carelessly over her golden head.

“Well, then, don’t be too long, and don’t get into any mischief. Arthur, I shall look upon you as the responsible person. Keep them in order,” said the old lady, with her kindly smile.

“All right, Mrs Brathwaite, I’ll keep them well in hand, I promise you.”

“And—Arthur—just shy that old porcupine up in the air once or twice for Hicks to practise at,” sang out Mr Brathwaite jocosely as they left the room.

It was a perfect night, the moon was at half, and the whole earth slept in silence beneath its mantle of silver sheen, for a heavy dew had fallen. A grass fire or two shone forth redly upon the slopes of the far Amatola. Not a breath stirred the air, save for the faintest suspicion of a cool zephyr which now and again partly dispelled the light clouds of blue smoke which ascended from Claverton’s pipe. Hicks and Laura were on in front. Suddenly Ethel stopped.

“Mr Claverton,” she said. “Do you know I’ve been feeling quite ashamed of myself all day?”

“What about?” asked her companion.

“Why, for sending you after those wretched flowers this morning—I didn’t mean you to get hurt, you know; of course I thought you would easily be able to run away.”

“I see. But running away isn’t altogether in my line—I don’t mean under any circumstances—those who declaim most against the lawfulness of leg-bail at a push are generally the ones most prone to putting it to the test. In fact, I don’t mind telling you that I have ‘run away’ before now, having no alternative.”

“When I saw that dreadful creature coming at you, I declare I would have given anything not to have sent you in there. It was horrible.” And she shivered. “Do forgive me.”

“But I assure you the whole affair was fun to me. Keeps one in training for emergencies. Only—”

“Only what?”

“Only that I don’t know whether your uncle quite likes his prize ostrich being made the subject of a bull-fight.”

“And—we are friends?”

“I hope so.”

He looked with a trifle of wonder into the lovely eyes, now so soft in the moonlight. What an impulsive little thing it was, he thought. Then she said: “Do give me that drawing you made while the ostrich was waiting for you. It’s sure to be fun.”

“With pleasure. Here it is,” pulling the old envelope out of his pocket. “It about represents the position, though I’m no artist.”

It did. When Ethel examined it in her room half an hour later she found a very comical sketch reproducing the situation with graphic and whimsical distinctness. It was labelled “Cornered—or Brute Force *versus* Intellect.”

They found the other two standing over the mortal remains of a large old porcupine. The spring-gun had been set with the precision of clockwork, and no sooner had the luckless rodent entered the mealie-land than he ran his nose against the string and promptly received the contents of the infernal machine clean through his marauding carcase. There he lay—a spoiler who would spoil no more. Said Hicks:

“I’ll come down in the morning and get some of his best quills.”

Volume One—Chapter Six.

In a New Line.

“Of course you know the place well?”

“Every inch of it. Two thousand *morgen*, rather over. What did you say Van Rooyen asks for it?”

“Three thousand. Probably he’d take less.”

“Far too much. It isn’t particularly good veldt; sheep don’t do well there, and the place is nearly all bush. And then there's that stony hill right over the river, about one-fifth of the whole area. What sort of house is it?"

"A classic tenement meriting the veneration of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings."

"Humph! You'd better have nothing to do with the concern."

The above dialogue took place about three weeks after the events recorded in the former chapter, the speakers being Claverton and his host, who were returning from a ride.

"You have made up your mind to settle here, then?" went on the latter.

"Yes, I've taken rather a fancy to this part of the country."

"H'm! Well now, I'll tell you what I think. Don't you be in too great a hurry to buy; there's nothing like keeping your eyes open a bit first, and biding your time. Plenty of these fellows would be very glad to clear out. The Dutchmen round here are mostly a bankrupt lot, living from hand to mouth, and you'll soon be able to make your own terms and get a much better place than Springkaan's Hoek, which old Van Roozen, by the way, has done his best to spoil."

"But do you know of another place about here that would be likely to suit me?"

"Not at present—that is, not one that's in the market. But I've been thinking, why not stop on here a bit and help me? You'd get into practice and learn your craft, so to say. You see, at present you know precious little about it, though you're quicker at picking up wrinkles than most new hands who come out. I'm getting old now and am beginning to feel it, and can't look after things as much as I should like them to be looked after. As for Hicks, he's a smart fellow enough, but then he can't be everywhere *at* once, and as it is he has his hands full. Now between you and him, all might be kept going, which would be a great help to me, and, as I said before, you would get the experience you want before setting up on your own account. And it's not enough to see things done, the great thing is to know how to do them yourself. We do a little of everything here, as you see, and I don't think you could be much better placed for learning to farm," added the old man, with a touch of pardonable pride.

Claverton readily closed with this offer. Already during his stay he had done many a hand's turn, helping Hicks to look up missing stock, or seeing to odd jobs about the homestead when that invaluable majordomo was out of the way; and his host's practised eye had gauged his capabilities, seeing that he had all the makings of a first-rate colonist. The advantage of this offer Claverton could tell at a glance was all on his own side.

"You see," pursued Mr Brathwaite, "farming now is not what it was. You needn't expect to make a fortune at it, but still you can always make a very decent living, and then the position is a thoroughly independent one, the life a free and healthy one, you are absolutely your own master and need care for nobody. Times are very far from what they used to be, I admit; stock is more expensive, and there are more drawbacks in the way of bad seasons, diseases, long droughts and used-up *veldt*; but even then a good farmer can always manage to keep above water, and in a fairly prosperous season can forge ahead. Look at me: I've been burnt out, stick and stone, by the Kafirs in three successive wars, and have had to begin life over again, yet I've always got on. The secret of it is to look after everything yourself. It won't do to set your people to work and go away expecting them to do it, you must off with your jacket and work *with* them. And you must be here, there, and everywhere at once, Kafirs want continual looking after; directly they begin to think the 'Baas' is getting careless, good-bye to anything going straight. I don't mean to say that you must always be finding fault with them, they are naturally stupid devils and you can't make them anything else; but you can let them see that you've got your eye on them and will stand no nonsense. The great thing is to keep your temper with them, and, above all, to treat them fairly but firmly. Then again, you must make up your mind to being out in all weathers. The heavier and the colder the rains, the more certain are the Kafirs to huddle in their blankets under a bush or before a fire, and leave the flock to take care of itself. With the result that at nightfall about a third of it is missing and remains out in the *veldt* for the benefit of the jackals and wolves; what these leave perhaps stray to some Dutchman's place, and when you get them again you find that they are covered with *brand ziekte* (scab) from his miserable brutes. As I say, there are drawbacks innumerable, but it rests with yourself to minimise them."

"Yes; I quite grasp the situation in all its bearings."

"Very well, then, that's settled, and I think you'll have reason to see that my plan is the best."

They were nearing home now, and the sun, which was about an hour above the horizon, shed a soft, golden lustre upon the broad, sloping plains and on shining cliff and undulating vale, with many a dark patch of forest here and there. The peak of the Great Winterberg, his snowy cap now removed—sleeping in a filmy haze against the horizon, and the lofty backs of his lesser satellites purple and gold as they stood in the shade or in the sun—formed a grand and effective background to the picture, the beautiful range stretching from east to west, far as the eye could travel. Beneath lay the homestead, reposing among its shadowy trees, looking the very abode of peace and prosperity. Scarcely a breath of wind to ruffle the balminess of the air, nor a sound to create one, save for the occasional droning hum of some insect, while now and again the soft mellow note of a hoopoe sounded through the slumbrous dimness of the far distance. Looking upon this vista of rest and stillness, and in the midst of its influences, it was hard to realise that the red tide of war could ever engulf this fair land, and its fierce and jarring clangour break rudely upon such quiet calm.

On their return they found a visitor awaiting them. This was one Will Jeffreys, a sturdy, broad-shouldered fellow of five-and-twenty, with rather a heavy expression of countenance bordering on the sullen. A man who was shrewd enough as regarded all matters directly in his line, but would have a difficulty in grasping a very ordinary joke, and who was totally deficient in appreciation of aught beyond the humdrum and practical. A man who might be a good fellow at bottom, but certainly was a crusty dog on the surface. He was the son of the neighbour referred to in the foregoing chapter, as having brought the girls to Seringa Vale, and was well-to-do. But in one respect, at least, Will

Jeffreys wandered out of his natural groove. He had a genuine admiration for Ethel Brathwaite, whom he had met on previous occasions of her staying at her uncle's, and though he had returned home only that morning, had saddled up his horse and ridden over, under pretext of consulting Mr Brathwaite about a certain span of oxen which he thought of buying—most transparent of pretexts, which his good-natured father saw through at once, and went into fits of laughter over as soon as his hopeful's back was turned.

"Poor Will!" he would say to himself, "he's only singeing his wings. He hasn't the ghost of a chance in that quarter."

"Poor Will" certainly had not the ghost of a chance, for Ethel in no wise reciprocated his admiration, though she would accept his homage carelessly and half unconsciously at one time, and ruthlessly snub him at another, particularly when the admiration became too open and undisguised. Now it so happened that that afternoon they had been discussing the latest importation in all his bearings, with the result that young Jeffreys greeted Claverton with no great show of cordiality when the two were introduced. Nor was it increased by Ethel's remark: "At last, Mr Claverton! I thought uncle and you were never coming back. Why, you've been out nearly the whole day."

"Well, Will," said the old settler, heartily. "Had a good trip?"

"Yes, very good on the whole, thanks. It's rather dry up Colesberg way, and the locusts have been bad there, but my oxen were in good order, and I came through quick."

He had just returned from a transport-riding trip up the country.

"H'm! By the way, did your father manage to get back his horses?"

"No. He and Bob followed them as far as Tembani. The fellows had got a forged pass (Note 1) and walked through right under the agent's nose. After that the spoors separated; the thieves had taken two of the horses in the direction of the Tambookie country, the other towards Sandili's; and, of course, at every kraal they inquired at—for the spoor was soon lost—the headmen did their best to put them on the wrong track, although they set up to be no end sympathetic. We've got a spy down in the Gaika location, but a fat lot of good he'll do; he's sure to be in league with the rest," growled Will, who was not in the best of humours.

"No, you can't do much when the whole country is in league against you. We're quite at their mercy. I'm afraid you'll never see a hoof of them again," said the older man.

"Of course not. Three as good all-round horses as we ever had on the place, though Bles was a dev—er—a brute for bucking, at times. By-the-bye, Mr Brathwaite, there seems to be an awful lot of stock-lifting going on just now. Seven of Dirk van Heerden's best cows cleared off last week, and not a head of them has he been able to get back, except one which had dislocated its shoulder, and the niggers assegaied it to save its life."

"Well, it's time to count the sheep. You'll stay to night, Will?"

He was delighted.

"Er—thanks—I—er, that is—"

"All right. Better put your horse in the enclosure; only mind the bird."

"How tiresome that Will Jeffreys is getting!" remarked Ethel that evening, as some of them were standing outside in the garden. "Listen to him prosing away in there."

"Ssh! He'll hear you," said Laura.

"I don't much care. He comes over to see us, and instead of trying to amuse one he bores us with tiresome yarns about this Dutchman losing his cows and that Dutchman finding his horses."

"But what on earth do you want him to tell you about?" asked Hicks.

"Why, some of the news, of course. The gossip, scandal, engagements, and so forth."

"But he don't know anything about that sort of thing, so how can he tell you about it?" said Hicks.

"Oh, you're just as bad. Do go and join him and hear about Dirk van Heerden's cows. Please take my part, Mr Claverton. Isn't Will Jeffreys a bore?"

"Haven't been long enough in his company to answer with any certainty. Will let you know later."

"How provoking you are! Now I appeal to all of you. If you see me cornered by Will Jeffreys, come to the rescue."

"The greatest bore I ever knew," began Claverton, "was a lady—an elderly lady. She would volunteer instruction on any and every subject under heaven, from the precise length of Aaron's beard, to the cost of soup-kitchens; and once she cornered you, you had to listen or pretend to. One day she cornered me. It was in the drawing-room, and there was no escape; but there was a clock opposite. It occurred to me to time her. For exactly twenty-one minutes she prosed on uninterruptedly, like a stream flowing over its bed; never stopped to take breath once. A sermon was a joke to it. Twenty-one minutes! Heaven knows how much longer she would have gone on, but for a lucky interruption."

"What was she prosing about?" said Ethel.

"I haven't the very faintest idea."

"Well, I don't believe a word of the story. I believe you made it all up."

"You don't believe a word of that story?" said Claverton, with a stare of amazement, while Hicks and Laura went into fits.

"No, I don't; at least, I'll say this much—you may have known such a bore, but if so it was a man, not a lady."

"I've told you a bare fact, upon my honour. But if—"

They were interrupted by the appearance on the scene of Jeffreys himself; but Ethel was too quick for him. She had seen him coming, and was already on her way indoors. Then she began to sing duets with Laura, whom she had manoeuvred to the piano by some mysterious signal. Young Jeffreys, feeling very sulky and sore at his enslaver's capriciousness and want of consideration, went and sat by himself at the other side of the room, whence he could watch the author of his discomfort. The old people, under no necessity to talk, waxed drowsy, and nodded through the music. Presently Laura left the piano and, in a trice, she and Hicks were deep in an animated conversation in a low tone and in a snug corner, under pretence of looking through a pile of music. Ethel the while was extracting wondrous combinations from the keys, under cover of which she was carrying on a sharp running fire of banter, or rather word-skirmish, with Claverton.

Jeffreys, watching them, was on thorns and tenterhooks. Who the deuce was this stranger? A month ago no one had ever heard of him, and now here he was, with his damned finicking ways and smooth tongue, thinking that all the world was made for him. A fellow, too, he'd be bound to say, that with all his easy-going blarney, couldn't sit a bucking horse, or hit a haystack at ten yards. Yet there was Ethel carrying on furiously with this fellow, while he, Jeffreys, was sent to the wall. In reality, however, there was nothing that those two were saying that all the world—Jeffreys included—would not have been perfectly welcome to hear.

"Claverton," suddenly exclaimed Hicks, as two hours later they were discussing the usual pipe before turning in. Jeffreys had joined them, but did not add much to the conversation. "I hear you're going to stay on here."

"Yes, I am."

Jeffreys' jaw fell at this announcement. He had been laying balm to his wounded spirit in the thought that this interloping stranger would soon be going, and then—well, the field would be clear again.

"Glad to hear it, old fellow, awfully glad. By Jove, it's the best news I've heard for a long time."

"The deuce it is! And why, may I ask?"

"Why? Only hear him! Haven't I had to do everything by myself, and knock about by myself? No fellow to talk to at work, or to go out and sneak a buck with, or to blow a cloud with at night, and so on. Now we'll have a rare good time of it together."

"Especially when you go down to feed the ostriches," said Claverton, with a mischievous laugh.

The other coloured and looked foolish, and was about to make some stammering reply.

"Never mind, Hicks," said Claverton, in that wonderfully attractive manner which he now and then exhibited, "I don't think you and I will quarrel. Now I'm going to turn in. Good-night. Good-night, Jeffreys."

"I say," inquired Jeffreys, after he had gone out. "Is that cattle-branding on to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think I'll stay and give you a hand, if Mr Brathwaite doesn't mind. Times are slack, and there's nothing doing at home."

"Rather—mind you do; we'll be only too glad," answered Hicks with a yawn, as he blew out the candle; and in five minutes more a mild snore or so showed that he was out of reach of any further conversation.

Jeffreys lay and ruminated. Here, at any rate, he would be in his element. What sort of a figure would that stuck-up, priggish fool—again, reader, pardon a jealous man—cut in the cattle kraal among the clashing horns and the charging of maddened beasts, and all the dash and excitement of a piece of very rough work, by no means unattended with danger? He was all there in the drawing-room; but where would he be at this? And Jeffreys dropped off to sleep with a sardonic grin upon his countenance, to dream of his rival—for so he had already begun to regard Claverton—losing nerve, and being tossed and trampled by the wildest brute in the herd. As to the fulfilment of which benevolent expectation the morrow would show.

Note 1. No native is allowed to remove stock from the colony without a pass granted by his late employer to certify that he acquired it lawfully. This pass is countersigned by the various magistrates and native agents along the road.

Volume One—Chapter Seven.

The cattle-branding.

"Here they come. Is the whole of that lot to be done to-day, Xuvani?"

"Ja, Baas," replied that worthy, swinging back the ponderous gate of the cattle enclosure where he and Jeffreys were standing.

For the ground echoes a low rumble, drawing nearer every moment. It is the trample of many hoofs, and Jeffreys and his swart companion fix their attention upon a troop of cattle coming up the kloof. They are mostly young beasts, and skittish. Now and then one will leave the rest and attempt to strike out a line for itself, but lo, one of the two horsemen riding behind is down on it like lightning; a shout and a crack of the whip, and the recreant is back in the ways of the herd again. Peradventure half-a-dozen will start off headlong down some well-known track, and with frolicsome bellow and heels tossed in the air away they go, refusing to hear the voice of the driver; but the spirited horse darts beneath the spur like a greyhound from the leash; over ant-heap and through rhinoster bush straight as an arrow he flies; and behold, suddenly, from around that clump of spekboem, appears the form of one of the drivers. A shout, half-a-dozen appalling whip-cracks, the errant beasts stop short, heads go up and eyeballs dilate upon the unlooked-for apparition with startled inquiry, then wheeling round they scamper back to their comrades, helter-skelter, and the unruly mass moves swiftly on, urged by the horsemen, eyes glaring, horns clashing, and now and again an aggrieved "moo" as some quarrelsome brute playfully prods his nearest neighbour, in the crush. One young bull especially, a fine, well-made animal with curving wicked-looking horns, and not a speck of alien colour on his glistening red hide, is inordinately given to leading the rest astray, nor does he take kindly to correction, but puts his head down and throws his horns about as if he had more than half a mind to charge his drivers; but he is not quite used to that terrible cracking whip, and thinks better of it.

"That brute'll make things lively for some of us to-day," remarked Hicks, as his companion fell behind after "collecting" it for about the twentieth time.

"Shouldn't wonder. The interesting quadruped appears to be getting his hand in. That last time I had fully made up my mind for a roll, and should have got it too. 'Sticks' is an awful fool at getting out of anything's way."

"Well, we're in now," said Hicks. "Hey, Xuvani!" he called out, darting forward to head the animals into the kraal, "Look out over there!"

The Kafir gave a couple of bounds and threw up his arms. He was just in time; two seconds later and the whole troop would have streamed past him and galloped away across the *veldt*, which meant that a large part of the morning's work would have to be done over again. The animals stopped short, glared at the sudden obstacle, then looked wildly round on one side and on the other, but they were hemmed in; the rear part of the herd cannoned against the leaders, who at length made for the only egress open, and amid much crush and plunging, interlacing of horns, and starting eyeballs, the whole crowd poured through the wide gateway, the pungent dust rising in clouds from the trampling hoofs.

"Whew! that's warm work!" said Claverton, as Xuvani made fast the huge gate and drew a heavy beam across above the top of it for additional security. "Now for breakfast, I suppose. Hallo, Jeffreys. Good-morning."

"Mornin'," replied Will, shortly, as they turned towards the stable to off-saddle their horses.

Mr Brathwaite was somewhat unwell that day, and not at all sorry to have the assistance of Will Jeffreys in the morning's operations. So with many cautions to Hicks about this and that, more by way of showing that he didn't let everything slide because of a little indisposition, than for any misgivings as to his lieutenant's skill, he made up his mind to remain quiet in his room. Rheumatism is no respecter of persons, the only wonder being that the old farmer, after such a life of hardship and exposure, should be let down as easily as he was.

"Mr Claverton," said Ethel, as they were all seated round the breakfast-table, "Laura and I are going to see the branding, so I hope you'll show us some fun."

"Are you? That determination I should advise you to reconsider."

"But we won't. Aha, I know why you don't want us. You have never done that sort of thing before, and you don't want us to see you make a bad shot and run round the kraal with a cow after you. That's it, isn't it, Mr Jeffreys?" turning to him. She was in a bright, teasing mood, and looked bewitchingly pretty.

Jeffreys chuckled to himself at Claverton's expense, as he thought, and mumbled something about "it being dangerous for her."

"Dangerous! Not a bit of it. We shall stand outside and look over the gate, and we shall be perfectly safe."

Hicks looked up from his plate with a low whistle.

"Perfectly safe!" he reiterated. "Why, it was only last branding that that big black and white ox of Jim's, after chevying Tambusa twice round the kraal and knocking him down, jumped the gate, charged a big hencoop that was pitched close by and threw it fifty feet in the air, and then streaked off to the bush like a mad buffalo."

"What nonsense, Ethel! Of course you can't go," said her aunt, who had re-entered the room during this conversation. "Why, the things often break out of the kraal."

"Very well, aunt, I don't want to be a witness to poor Mr Claverton's discomfiture;" and she cast at him a glance of petulance, mingled with compassion, whose effect upon the object thereof was absolutely nil.

A business-like appearance was that of the scene of operations. The animals were standing quietly about the large enclosure seventy yards in diameter, with its solid, bristling thorn-fence eight or nine feet high and its massive five-barred gate. In the centre burnt—or rather smouldered, for it was of the red-hot glowing order—a great fire, over which bent the bronzed form of Xuvani, the cattle-herd, superintending the due heating of the branding-irons and gossiping in subdued gutturals with the other "hands"—two Kafirs and a smart, wiry little Hottentot, who, with the *penchant* of his race for scriptural appellations, rejoiced in the time-honoured and patriarchal one of Abram. Xuvani was a man of between fifty and sixty, of middle height, and of powerful, almost herculean build; the muscles stood out upon his limbs like great ropes, and a blow from his fist—that is, if he had known how to make use of his fists, which Kafirs very seldom do know—would have sufficed to fell an ox. He was rather light in colour, and his beard and woolly head were just shot with grey; there was shrewdness in his rugged features, and a twinkle of satiric humour lurked in his eye. He had been a long time in the service of his present master, who had found him a cut above the average Kafir in honesty and trustworthiness. Moreover, he was greatly looked up to by the other natives, not only on account of his great physical strength, but also as one who had shown his prowess in a marked manner during the wars which have been alluded to. Although far from quarrelsome by nature, Xuvani never needed a second challenge. His kerries were all ready, as more than one party of Fingoes passing Seringa Vale in search of employment could testify, to its sorrow. Indeed, once he had expiated his share in one of these African Donnybrooks by a sentence of several months in gaol.

"Well, Xuvani!" sang out Hicks, as they slipped off their jackets and flung them on to the kraal fence—"Got the iron hot? All right, let's begin. Now then, Piet—what the devil are you standing there for, grinning like a Cheshire cat? Lay hold of the *reim* and catch that heifer."

Piet, a stalwart Kafir, grinned all the harder, and drawing out the running noose of the *reim* he made a cast, then, as the heifer ran over it, with a mighty jerk he drew it taut and the animal, noosed by the hind leg, fell. Before it could rise again they all threw themselves upon it, and in a trice its legs were securely bound while two men firmly held its head. In a second Hicks had taken the branding-iron from one of the Kafirs, and held it for half a minute lightly but firmly pressed against the fleshy part of the thigh. The poor brute groaned and struggled violently as it felt the hot iron; there was a sharp, hissing sound from the singeing hair, a foetid smoke arose, diffusing a smell of burnt flesh, and the operation was complete. Whatever danger there is in the performance generally falls to the lot of him who releases the victim, which not unfrequently, as soon as it feels its logs again, fiercely charges its emancipator, all the others having previously withdrawn themselves behind some of the other cattle standing about the kraal. The first animal, however, was not of an inherently vicious nature. Consequently, no sooner was it free than it ran off among its kindred, greatly scared and bewildered. All went merrily enough till they had got a fine black and white cow under the iron. She lay still, but there was rage mingled with pain in her groaning.

"She'll be at some of us when she gets up," said Jeffreys, exerting all his strength to restrain the frenzied plunges of her pointed horns.

They stood aside, as, with a rapid turn of the wrist, Xuvani deftly cast loose her bonds. She sprang to her feet in a twinkling, and, lowering her head, furiously charged the old cattle-herd, who, there being no room for dodging, was constrained to run, with his late victim after him, head down, all ready to fling him a dozen feet in the air. But the consummate coolness and agility of the Kafir was to the fore. He zigzagged as he ran, to avoid a charge, then, seizing his opportunity, he sprang aside, and placing one hand between the animal's shoulders he vaulted lightly over her back as she sped past him and got in among the rest. A cheer broke from the spectators at this splendid feat, but before it had time to die, a shout of "Look out, she's coming this way," sent them all scattering; and sure enough, singling out Jeffreys, she made at him like a streak of lightning. He just avoided her charge by dodging round the rear of a great trek ox, who was standing quietly wondering what the deuce all the hubbub was about. The furious charge of the maddened cow into his unoffending flanks may, or may not, have enlightened him on the point; anyhow, he resented the familiarity by lashing out with his heels, one of which coming in violent contact with the chin of his assailant had the effect of somewhat modifying that exuberant animal's spirits, and she slunk off in aggrieved fashion, all thoughts of vengeance at an end.

"By Jove!" said Claverton. "Xuvani's a smart fellow. That's one of the neatest things I ever saw done."

The old Kafir grinned a little, and they went on with the programme. After two or three more beasts had been branded, Jeffreys remarked:

"Now then, you fellows, there are lively times in store. It's that bull's turn. I've been watching him, and he looks wicked—devilish wicked." He pointed to the young bull which had been troublesome in the morning.

"All right," said Claverton. "That's my speciality. I made up my mind to have the burning of that chap when I turned him back twenty-one times this morning."

"The branding's nothing; it's the letting him up that's the fishy part," said Jeffreys, with a thinly-veiled sneer.

Noose in hand the Kafirs advanced towards the bull, who was standing in a corner of the kraal, pawing up the ground, with his head down, and rolling his eyes viciously.

"Look out," warned Hicks, "he's all ready for a charge!"

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than the animal sprang forward as the noose was thrown down in front of him; then, as he rushed over it, the thong was tightened, and he fell sprawling on all-fours and roaring hideously. He plunged and struggled as for dear life, but another jerk of the *reim* threw him, and in ten seconds he was lying bound and helpless.

"Now then, Tambusa, bring the iron. Sharp's the word!" cried Claverton; then receiving it, he deliberately imprinted a neat B upon his prostrate foe, whose frenzied roars drowned the hissing of burnt flesh, as the moist steam rose in clouds from his tortured thigh.

"By Jove, there's a spree sticking out!" said Hicks, emphatically. "We *shall* have to mind our eye when he gets up.

Are you ready, Xuvani?”

“No, he isn’t. *I’m* going to loosen the *reim*,” answered Claverton, preparing to make good his words.

“Bosh, old chap! Better let him do it, he’s used to it,” remonstrated Hicks.

“Devil a bit. Now! Stand aside!” and as the others made themselves scarce, he drew off the noose, and the bull, springing to his feet, vented his feelings in an appalling roar as he glared round in search of somebody to pulverise. As luck would have it, at this moment a cow behind which Tambusa had taken refuge quietly walked away, thus disclosing that unfortunate aboriginal to the full view of the infuriated beast, which came straight at him there and then. Now Tambusa was a youthful Kafir, and naturally of a mild and unaggressive disposition, and when he saw the fierce brute making for him, he lost nerve and blindly fled. The kraal gate towered in front of him, and with the energy of despair he half leaped, half scrambled over it, and his foot catching the topmost bar he was hurled headlong, half-stunned and wholly bewildered, a dozen yards off upon the smooth green sward outside. His pursuer, without pausing, cleared the gate like a stag, and there he lay entirely at the mercy of the infuriated bull. Another minute, and he would be gored and torn in pieces. But a cool brain and determined heart was between him and certain death. Seizing his jacket from the hedge whereon it had been flung, Claverton was through the kraal gate in a twinkling, and not one second too soon, for the bull, who had been carried on some fifty yards by the impetus of his leap, had now turned, and with head lowered was thundering down upon his prostrate prey, “brilling” (Note 1) savagely. At this juncture Claverton darted in front of him, and throwing out his jacket, after the manner of the *cappa* of a *torero*, he succeeded in drawing off the headlong charge, which temporary respite Xuvani was able to make the most of by lugging his young compatriot through the gate again. Then the bull stopped, glared for a moment, and with a terrific roar came at Claverton again. This time he nimbly leapt aside, striking the animal across the eyes with the jacket. Had the bull charged at that moment it would probably have gone hard with him, for what with the violent exertion and the tension of the nerves, he was somewhat exhausted; but it did not. And what a picture was that upon the smooth sward. There stood the red savage brute, the sun glistening on his sleek hide and white horns, lashing his tail and pawing up the ground with his hoofs; the foam dropping from his mouth as with head lowered he gathered himself for one more terrific rush. Facing him ten yards off—his intrepid adversary, unarmed and exposed to his full fury. The spectators might well hold their breath. And yet as he slowly retreated step by step, and though he never took his eyes off the bull, Claverton was aware of every single movement that went on around him. He knew that the doorway leading into the garden was thronged, mistress and servant alike being attracted by the frenzied roars of the maddened beast. He saw Ethel faint dead away, and then summoning up nerve and strength for one final effort, he flung the coat right upon the gleaming horns of the ferocious brute, as with a new fury begotten of its short respite it made its deadly charge. Suddenly blinded, the bull stopped and began turning round and round in its efforts to free itself, for the jacket had caught firmly on its horns; but taking advantage of his dexterous *coup de main*, Claverton was over the gate again and safe, while his antagonist, having amused himself by tearing the garment to ribbons, trotted away down the kloof, growling in baffled wrath.

“Well, he can go, we’ve done with him this time, but Heaven help any nigger that has the ill luck to cross that chap’s path within the next quarter of an hour,” were Claverton’s first words. He was panting and breathless, but wanted to create a diversion from the string of congratulations which he knew was forthcoming; for, of all things, he hated a scene, and didn’t see what there was to make a fuss about because a fellow had had a little spree with a bull, to divert his attention from a young idiot of a nigger who had been ass enough to tumble head-over-heels just at the wrong moment. Whatever his faults, there wasn’t a grain of vanity in the man.

“Now then, Xuvani—Piet!” he went on sharply, as the Kafirs, with a chorus of emphatic “whouws,” were gazing after the retreating form of the cause of all the shindy. “What the devil are you fellows staring at? Come on—fall to—we’ve lost enough time already.”

They resumed operations. Now and then a beast, when it was let up, would run at the Kafirs, but in a bewildered, half-hearted sort of a way, and without doing any damage; and all the younger cattle were disposed of. There yet remained four or five large oxen who had come into their present owner’s possession late in life, and who were to be sealed. These were not thrown down, however, but their heads made fast to a post by a *reim* round their horns, while with another *reim* the leg to be operated on was drawn out at tension. They were sober, sedate creatures who had undergone plenty of the troubles of life, common to their race, in the shape of heavy loads, scarcity of water and often of grass in dry seasons, but, as if to make up for it, a plentiful allowance of whip; and took this additional affliction philosophically enough.

The result of the day’s doings was to open Jeffreys’ eyes. His estimation of the other had undergone a considerable change since the previous evening. The dressed-up, finicking carpet skipper was fully his own equal in pluck, and in cool-headedness immeasurably his superior. This he could not but recognise, though he regarded Claverton with no increase of cordiality.

* * *

Yes, life would flow pleasantly enough in this unruffled fashion, thought Claverton, as they were all strolling in the garden towards sundown. After the stirring events of the day, the quiet and rest of a perfect evening seemed more than ordinarily grateful. All was so still, and calm, and soothing, and such sound as reached them seemed so softened and mellowed by distance as to harmonise rather than to disturb. A dove cooed softly from an adjacent thorn-brake, and bees returning to the old basket hive set in a nook in the wall, made a tuneful hum upon the sensuous air. Yonder a dragon-fly zigzagged on gauzy wing above the glassy surface of the dam, seeking its prey among the gnats whose chrysalids were hatched beneath the overhanging weeds. Suddenly this idyllic scene was invaded by a brace of Kafirs. They were Xuvani and Tambusa, and they began to accost Claverton.

“What on earth do they want? Something to do with that eternal bull, I suppose. I wish the brute had found its way into some butcher’s shop long ago! Here, Hicks I come and interpret, there’s a good fellow!”

"He says Tambusa is his sister's child, and that you saved his life," interpreted Hicks; "that is to say you saved his—Xuvani's life, Kafir way of putting it, you know—and not only did you save his life, or rather both their lives," went on Hicks, manfully unravelling the native's long-winded oration; "but you nearly lost your own."

"That all?"

"No—don't interrupt him. He says that they are grateful—both he and the boy. That the future is uncertain, and that we never know what turn events will take—"

"He never spoke a truer word than that, anyhow."

"And that if ever at any time he or Tambusa can render you any service they will do so, even should it be at the risk of their lives—a life for a life—and that they are glad to have looked upon such a howling big swell," concluded Hicks, with the result that Ethel was obliged to turn away to stifle her laughter.

"Bosh, Hicks! He didn't say that, you know."

"He did, upon my word. At least, to be more literal, he said he was glad to have looked upon so great a chief. But my rendering was more euphonious—more poetical, don't you see?"

Then Tambusa knelt down and kissed his rescuer's foot, and the two Kafirs withdrew. Claverton looked after them with a curious expression.

"That's all too thickly laid on," he said. "Gratitude, 'lively sense of favours to come,' *i.e.* prospective 'bacco. H'm! much too thick!"

"What a dreadful person you are!" expostulated Ethel. "Why shouldn't they mean what they say? I declare that speech of Xuvani's was a perfect flower of savage poetry, and you don't know what a good fellow he is. I think it's quite horrid of you to throw cold water on him."

"So it would be if I had. The noble savage don't affect that fluid much as a rule in any state of temperature."

Did the Kafir mean what he said? We shall see.

Note 1. Frontier term for the growling noise which is neither roar nor bellow, made by enraged cattle.

Volume One—Chapter Eight.

Spoek Krantz.

It is Sunday.

Ride we behind the horseman who is picking his way down a stony path through the ever present bush, making for yon thatched building down there in the hollow. A low, rough shanty, built in the roughest and readiest fashion, and of the rawest of red brick. Three windows, cobwebbed and cloudy with many a patched-up pane of blue or brown paper, admit light and air, and a door made to open in halves. A smaller edifice hard by, with tumble-down mud walls and in a state of more or less rooflessness, does duty as a stable, and in front of the two an open space slopes down a distance of one hundred and fifty yards to the river, whose limpid waters dash and sparkle over their stony bed, between cactus-lined banks—the stubbornly encroaching and well-nigh ineradicable prickly pear. Opposite rises a great cliff, whose base and sides are set in the greenest and most luxuriant of forest trees, but whose brow, like its stern face, is bare of foliage and stands out in hard relief against the sky. There seems no reason why this cliff should be there at all, seeing that the hill would have been far more symmetrical without it, unless in its wild irregularity it were destined for the purpose alone of giving a magnificent—if a trifle forbidding—frontage to the ill-looking and commonplace dwelling-house. On all sides the towering heights rise to the sky, shutting in this beautiful and romantic spot which might be a veritable Sleepy Hollow, so far does it seem from the sights and the sounds of men. But it must be confessed that its beauty and romance are utterly thrown away upon its present occupant, who is wont to describe the place as "a beastly stifling hole out of which I'd be only too glad to clear to-morrow, by Jove; but then one can't chuck up the lease, you know, and it isn't half a bad place for stock, too." It rejoices in the inviting name of Spoek Krantz (Ghost Cliff), and is held in awe and terror as an unholy and demon-peopled locality by the superstitions natives, as well as by the scarcely less superstitious Boer; and gruesome tales are told of unearthly sights and sounds among the rocky caves at its base; shadowy shapes and strange fearful cries, and now and again mysterious fires are seen burning upon its ledges in the dead of night, while the most careful exploration the next morning has utterly failed to discover the smallest trace of footprint or cinder. Native tradition has stamped the spot as one to be avoided, for the spirit of a mighty wizard claims it as his resting-place. Even by day the place, shut in by its frowning heights, is lonely and forbidding of aspect.

But utterly impervious to supernatural terrors is he who now dwells in the haunted locality. The grim traditions of a savage race are to him as mere old wives' fables, and he laughs to scorn all notion of any awesome associations whatever. He would just like to see a ghost, that was all, any and every night you pleased; if he didn't make it lively for the spectral visitant with a bullet, call him a nigger. Yes, he would admit seeing strange lights on the cliff at times, and hearing strange sounds; but to ascribe them to supernatural agency struck him as utter bosh. The lights were caused by a moonlight reflection, or will-o'-the-wisps, or something of that sort; and the row, why, it was only some jackal yowling in the krantz, and as for getting in a funk about it, that would do for the niggers or white-livered Dutchmen, but not for him. Tradition said that there was a secret cavern in the cliff, but the entrance was known to very few even among the natives themselves, and only to their most redoubted magicians. Certain it is that no Kafir admitted knowledge of this, and when questioned carefully evaded the subject.

And now, as the horseman we have been following emerges from the bush on to the open space surrounding the low-roofed, thatched shanty, a man is seated in his shirt-sleeves on a stone in front of the door, intently watching something upon the ground. It is a large circular glass cover, such as might be used for placing over cheese or fruit; but to a very different use is it now being put. For imprisoned within it are two scorpions of differing species—a red one and a black one—hideous monsters, measuring five inches from their great lobster-like claws to the tip of their armed tails, and there they crouch, each upon one side of its glass prison-house, both, evidently, in that dubious state aptly known among schoolboys as “one’s funky, and t’other’s afraid.”

“Hold on a bit,” called out the man in the shirt sleeves, but without turning his head, as the trampling of hoofs behind him warned of the approach of a visitor, “or, at any rate, come up quietly.”

“Why, what in the name of all that’s blue have you got there?” demanded Hicks, dismounting; for he it is whom we have accompanied to this out-of-the-way spot. “Well, I’m blest?” he continued, going off into a roar of laughter as he approached near enough to see the other’s occupation.

“Tsh! tsh! Don’t make such an infernal row, man, you’ll spoil all the fun, and make me lose my bet.”

“What’s the bet?”

“Why, I’ve got five goats against that blue schimmel heifer of old Jafta’s on these two beggars, that the black one’ll polish off the red ’un; but they are to go at it of their own accord, and now I’ve been watching them for the last half-hour, but the beggars won’t fight,” replied the other, still without moving, or even so much as looking over his shoulder.

“Stir them up a bit,” suggested Hicks.

“Can’t; it’d scratch the bet.”

“Where’s Jafta?”

“Oh, he wouldn’t wait. Went away laughing in his sleeve. He’ll laugh the other side of his mouth, the old *schelm*, when he has to fork out.”

“Well, you must have been hard up for some one to run a bet with. A nice little occupation, too, for a Sunday morning,” replied Hicks, with sham irony.

“Sunday be somethinged. There’s no Sunday on the frontier. Hullo!”

This exclamation was the result of a change of attitude on the part of the grisly denizens of the glass. Slack began slowly to move round the circumference of his prison, in process of which he cannoned against red, and Greek met Greek. With claws interlaced, the venomous brutes plied their sting-armed tails like a couple of striving demons, till at length their grip relaxed, and red fell over on his back with his legs doubled up and rigid.

“Hooroosh! I’ve won,” called out our new acquaintance, jumping up gleefully. “Hi! Jafta, Jafta!” he bawled, anxious to notify his triumph over his sceptical retainer.

“Hold on; not so fast,” put in Hicks, “t’other fellow’s a gone coon, too, or not far from it. Look,” he added, pointing to the glass.

And in good sooth the victor began to show signs of approaching dissolution, which increased to such an extent, that in a couple of minutes he lay as rigid and motionless as the vanquished.

“Never mind, it all counts. He did polish off the other. Jafta, we’ll put my mark on that cow to-morrow.”

“Nay, Baas,” demurred that ancient servitor, who had just come up. He was a wiry little old Hottentot, with a yellow skin, and beady monkey eyes, and as ugly as the seven deadly sins. “Nay, Baas, the bet’s an even one; neither thrashed the other. Isn’t it so, Baas Hicks?”

“Well, as you put it to me, I think the bet’s a draw,” began Hicks.

“Oh, no, that won’t do,” objected Jafta’s master, “the black did polish off the red, you know. If he went off himself afterwards, it was owing to his uneasy conscience. That wasn’t provided for in the agreement. But never mind, Jafta, you can keep your old ‘stomp-stert’ this time.” (Note 1.)

The old Hottentot grinned all over his parchment countenance, and the numerous and grimy wrinkles thereof puckered themselves like the skin of a withered apple. He, and his two sons, strapping lads of eighteen and nineteen, constituted the whole staff of farm servants. No Kafir could be induced to stay on the place, owing to its weird associations; a circumstance which, according to its occupant, was not without its compensating advantage, for the marauding savage, in his nocturnal forays, at any rate kept his hands off these flocks and herds. The old fellow, however, was fairly faithful to his employer, though not scrupulously honest in all his dealings with the rest of mankind at large; the place suited him, and as for ghosts, well, he had never seen anything to frighten him.

And now the jolly frontiersman, who has been driven to so eccentric a form of Sabbath amusement, rises, and we see a man of middle height, with a humorous and gleeful countenance; in his eyes there lurks a mirthful twinkle, and every sun-tanned lineament bespeaks “a character.” And he is a character. Always on the look-out for the whimsical side of events, he is light-hearted to childishness, and has a disastrous weakness for the perpetration of practical jokes—a vein of humour far more entertaining to its possessor than to its victims—and game to bet upon any and every contingency. He is about thirty, and his name is Jack Armitage.

“Well, Hicks, old man,” said this worthy. “Taken pity on my lonely estate, eh? That’s right; we’ll make a day of it. Had breakfast?”

“No.”

“More have I; we’ll have it now. Er—Jafta!” he shouted, “Jafta! Wheel up those chops. Sharp’s the word.”

“Ya, Baas. Just now?” called out that menial, and from the kitchen sounds of hissing and sputtering betokened the preparation of a succulent fry.

“Just now! Only listen. Why, he’ll be twenty minutes at least.”

“Not he,” said Hicks; “he’s nearly ready, I can smell that much.”

“Nearly ready! Give you a dollar to five bob he’s twenty minutes from now. Is that on?” he inquired, putting out his watch to take the time. (Rix dollar, 1 shilling 6 pence.)

“No, it isn’t. I’m not going to encourage your disgraceful and sporting proclivities,” was the reply, as they entered the house. Three partitions boasted this domicile—a bedroom, a sitting-room, and the kitchen aforesaid. Of ceiling it was wholly guiltless, the sole canopy overhead being plain, unadulterated thatch; and the mud floor, plastered over with cow-dung, after the manner of the rougher frontier houses, gave forth a musty, uninviting odour, which it required all the ingress of the free air of Heaven to atone for. A large, roomy wooden press, and a row of shelves, with a green baize curtain in front, stood against the whitewashed wall, and in the middle of the room a coarse cloth was laid upon the wooden table, with a couple of plates and knives and forks. Armitage dived into the press and produced a great brown loaf, a tin of milk, and a mighty jar of quince jam.

“Hallo! the ants are in possession again,” said he, surveying the jar, whence issued an irregular crowd of those industrious insects—too industrious sometimes. “Never mind, we can dodge them; besides, they are fattening. Ah, that’s right, Jafta,”—as that worthy entered with a dish of fizzing chops in one hand and a pot of strong black coffee in the other. “Now we can fall to.”

“By the way, I shall have to go back soon,” said Hicks. “I only came to see if any of those sheep we lost had got in amongst Van Rooyen’s, and thought I’d sponge on you for a feed whilst I was down this way.”

“Oh, that can’t be allowed; I thought you had come to help a fellow kill Sunday. Hang it, man, don’t be in a hurry; stop and have some rifle practice, and then we can take out that bees’ nest down by the river. Ah, but I forgot,” he added, with a quizzical wink. “Never mind, my boy; I don’t want to spoil fun, you’ll be better employed at home.”

Hicks was sorely puzzled. He was a good-natured fellow, and could see that the other had reckoned upon his company for the day. Yet he had his reasons for wanting to get back. “Look here, Jack,” he said, at length, “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. I’ll hold on here a little and help you to get out that bees’ nest, then you can go back with me and we’ll get to Seringa Vale just nicely in time for dinner. Will that do?”

“All right,” assented the other, “that’ll do me well enough. I’ve had nothing but my own blessed company for the last fortnight, except for a Dutchman or two now and again, and a little jaw with my fellow creatures will do me a world of good. By the way, is that chap Claverton still with you?”

“Yes. How d’you like him?”

“Oh, he seems good enough sort, but about the most casual bird I ever saw. He was down here one day; did he tell you about it? No! Well, then, a couple of Dutchmen came in—Swaart Pexter and his brother Marthinus—and Swaart, who is one of your bragging devils and ‘down on’ a ‘raw Englishman’ like a ton of bricks, after yarning a little while points to Claverton, who was sitting over there blowing a cloud in his calm way, and says rather cheekily: ‘Who’s that?’ I told him. ‘Can he talk Dutch?’ was the next question. ‘Don’t know,’ says I. ‘How long has he been in this country?’ says he. ‘Tell him a year,’ says Claverton, quietly, without moving a muscle. I told him. ‘A year!’ says Pexter, turning up his nose more cheekily than before. ‘A year and can’t talk Dutch yet! He must be *domm*,’ (stupid). Thereupon Claverton looks the fellow bang in the eyes, and says in Dutch, ‘Can you talk English?’ ‘No!’ replies Pexter, with a stare of astonishment. ‘And how long have *you* been here?’ ‘Been here!’ says the other, with a contemptuous laugh at this—to him—new proof of the other fellow’s greenness. ‘Why, I was born here.’ ‘How old are you?’ goes on Claverton in a tone of friendly interest. ‘Forty-seven last May,’ says the Dutchman, wondering what the deuce is coming next. ‘Forty-seven last May!’ repeats our friend, calmly knocking the ash out of his pipe. ‘That is, you have been in this country forty-seven years, and can’t talk English yet. Well, you must be *domm*!’ I roared and so did Marthinus. ‘Got you there, old chap,’ says I. Swaart Pexter looked rather shirty and tried to laugh it off, but Claverton had him. Had him, sir, fairly—lock, stock, and barrel. Well, after a while we went outside and stuck up a bottle at four hundred yards to have some rifle practice. The Dutchmen are first-rate shots, and I—well, a buck or a nigger would be anything but safe in front of me at that distance—but I give you my word that none of us could touch that bottle. When we had fired a dozen shots apiece and nearly covered the beastly thing with dust, and ploughed up the ground all round it as if a thunderbolt had fallen, out saunters Claverton with a yellow-backed novel in his fist. ‘Doesn’t your friend shoot?’ asks Marthinus. ‘Suppose so,’ says I. ‘Have a shot, Claverton!’ ‘Don’t mind,’ says he, taking over my gun. I could see a malicious grin on Swaart’s ugly mug, and hugely was he preparing to chuckle over the ‘raw Englishman’s’ wide shooting. Claverton lay down, and without much aiming—bang—crash—we could hardly believe our eyes—the bottle had flown. By Jove it had. ‘Well done,’ says I, ‘but do that again, old chap’; yes, it was mean of me, I allow, but I couldn’t help it. ‘Don’t want to do for all your bottles, Armitage,’ says my joker as quietly as you please, as I sent the boy to stick up another, and I had just time to start a bet of five bob with Marthinus in his favour when—bang—and, by Jove, sir, would you believe it? that bottle shared the fate of the first. Well, we *were* astonished. ‘Aren’t you going to shoot any more?’ says Marthinus, handing over the five bob with a very bad grace. ‘Too hot out here,’ replies he, sloping into the shade of the house; and diving his nose into the yellow-back again, leaves us to our bottle-breaking or rather to our attempts at the same, for I’m dashed if we touched one after that. After the Pexters had gone I says, ‘Look here, old chap, we’ll have a quiet match between ourselves, five bob on every dozen shots—you shall give me odds.’ ‘My dear fellow,’ says he, ‘odds should be the other way about. I shan’t touch that bottle again three times if I blaze away at it the whole morning.’ ‘The Lord, you won’t,’ says I; ‘never mind, let’s try.’ He did, and was as good as his word, and handed over fifteen bob at the close of the entertainment, having hit the mark twice to my seven times. ‘And how the deuce did you pink it before—twice running can’t be a fluke, you know?’ I asked, when we had done. ‘Well, you see, those louts were bent on seeing me shoot wide, so I held straight just to spite them,’ was his cool answer. But didn’t he tell you all about it?”

“Not a word,” said Hicks. “He just said he had been down here, and a couple of slouching Dutchmen had looked in and tried to take a rise out of him, but didn’t manage it.”

“Well, he is a rum stick and no mistake. What’s in the wind now?” and as the trampling of hoofs fell upon the speaker’s ear, he got up hastily and made for the door, knocking over a wooden chair in his progress, and treading on the tail of a mongrel puppy which had sneaked in and was lying under the table, and which now fled, yelling disconsolately. “Here come two chaps,” he went on, shading his eyes from the sun’s glare and looking out into the *veldt*. “Dutchmen—no—one is—David Botha, I think; t’other’s Allen—no mistaking him. Wheu-uw! Now for some fun, Hicks, my boy. We’ll make him help us with the bees’ nest, and if you don’t kill yourself with almighty blue fits, call me a nigger.”

The two drew near. The Boer with his stolid, wooden face, slouch hat (round which was twined a faded blue veil), and bob-tailed and ancient tail-coat, was an ordinary specimen of his class and nation. The Englishman, however, was not. He was rather a queer-looking fellow, tall and loosely-built, with a great mop of yellow hair and an absent expression of countenance. His age might have been five or six-and-twenty. He had not been long in the colony, and was theoretically supposed to be farming. On horseback Allen was quaint of aspect. His seat in the saddle would not have been a good advertisement to his riding-master, putting it mildly, and he invariably rode screws. Moreover, he was great on jack-boots and huge spurs.

“Good day, David,” said Armitage, as the Boer extended a damp and uncleanly paw. “Hallo, Allen! you’re just in the nick of time. We are just going to get out a bees’ nest, and you must come and bear a hand.”

“But—er—I’m not much use at that sort of thing. Botha will help you much better.”

“Won’t do, old chap—won’t do,” said Armitage, decisively. “In the words of the poet, ‘Not to-day, baker!’ So come along.”

Allen’s jaw fell. If there was one thing on this earth he hated, it was depriving the little busy bee of the hard-earned fruits of his labours, not on humanitarian grounds—oh, no—but the despoiled insects had a knack of buzzing viciously around the noses and ears of the depredators and their accomplices in a way that was highly trying to weak nerves, to say nothing of the absolute certainty of two or three stings, if not half-a-dozen. He glanced instinctively towards David Botha as though mutely to ask: “Why the deuce won’t *he* do?” But that stolid Boer sat puffing away at his pipe, and showed no inclination to come to the rescue.

“Hicks, give Allen one of those big tins to put the honey in while I hunt up some brown paper to make a smoke with,” said Armitage, as they went into the house. It had been arranged that Allen should hold the receptacle for the honey, otherwise he would inevitably have sloped off.

They went down to the river bank, Armitage leading the way. A keg fixed in the fork of a small tree constituted the hive, and the busy insects were winging in and out with a murmuring hum. Armitage divested himself of his coat so that the bees shouldn’t get up the sleeves, as he said, and slouched his hat well over his face and neck; then with a chisel he removed the head of the keg, while Hicks ignited the brown paper and made the very deuce of a smoke.

“Not much in it—quite the wrong time of year to take it,” said Armitage, as the waxen combs in the hive were disclosed to view. “Never mind, they’ll make a lot more. Oh-h!” as one of the outraged insects playfully stung him on the ear. “Come a little nearer, Allen;” and he threw a couple of combs into the tin dish, while Hicks stood close at hand plying the smoke with all the energy of a Ritualistic thurifer.

“Oh-h—ah!” echoed Allen, in dismal staccato, as he received a sting on the hand, and another on the back of the neck.

“Hang it, man, don’t drop the concern!” exclaimed Armitage, pitching another comb or two into the large tin; nor was the warning altogether ill-timed, for poor Allen was undergoing a *mauvais quart d’heure* with a vengeance, ducking his head spasmodically as the angry insects “bizzed” savagely around his ears, and all the time looking intensely wretched under the infliction.

And in truth the fun began to wax warm. Armitage’s hat was invisible beneath the clusters of bees which swarmed over it, while others were crawling about on his clothes. Now and then he would give vent to an ejaculation, as a sting, inflicted more viciously than usual, told through even his hardened skin; but he kept on manfully at his task, cutting out the combs and depositing them in the tin, while the air was filled with buzzing angry bees and suffocating smoke.

“Think we’ve got enough now,” he said at last, drawing his face out of the cask, and quickly heading up the latter. Allen, to whom this dictum was like a reprieve to a condemned criminal, gave a sigh of relief, and began to breathe freely again. But his self-gratulation was somewhat premature, for at that moment a bee insinuated itself into his thick, frizzly-hair just above the neck, and began stinging like mad. Crash! Down went the tin containing the honey-combs, while the victim danced and capered and executed the most grotesque contortions for a moment; then, in a perfect frenzy, away he rushed to the nearest point of the river—a long, deep reach—where he plunged his head into the water, and losing his centre of gravity, ended by incontinently tumbling in, while the spectators were obliged to lie down and indulge their paroxysms of uncontrollable mirth to the very uttermost.

“Oh, oh, oh-h-h!” roared Armitage. “P-pick him out, some one; I’m n-not equal to it.” And he lay back on the sward and howled again.

And in good sooth the warning came none too soon, for at that point the current flowed swift and deep, and poor Allen, what with his exertions and the weight of his jack-boots, was in a state of dire exhaustion, and a few moments more would have put an end to his hopes and fears. Hicks and the Dutchman, who had managed to recover themselves, ran down to the water’s edge, and shouted to him to seize a branch which swept the surface, and at length the involuntary swimmer was fished out and stood dripping and shivering, and looking inexpressibly foolish, on the bank.

“Oh-h, Lord! oh, Lord!” roared Armitage, bursting out afresh as he picked up the fallen tin, and gathered up the fragments that remained. “I never saw anything to beat that, by the holy poker I never did! Come along, old man. We’ll tog you out while I get out some of these stings. The brutes must have been under the impression that I was a jolly pincushion, and have used me accordingly.”

“Dud—dud—don’t think I’ll go up to Seringa Vale to-day,” stuttered Allen, as soon as he recovered breath. He feared the chaff which he knew full well awaited him on the strength of this latest escapade.

“Nonsense, man! We’ll tog you out in no time, and then we’ll all ride over together and have a jolly day of it,” said Armitage.

Allen yielded, and was speedily arrayed in various garments which didn’t fit him. The jack-boots were inevitably left behind, to the great concern of their owner, for there was no possibility of their being dry before sundown at the earliest. Towards noon the horses were brought round and saddled, and having locked up the house the three started, while the Dutchman took his leave and rode off home to regale his *vrouw* and *hinders*, and his cousins and his aunts, with the story—highly coloured—of the “raw Englishman’s” discomfiture.

Note 1. “Stump tail.” Taillessness is frequent among colonial cattle—the result of inoculation.

Volume One—Chapter Nine.

In Which the Reader Becomes a Party to More Chaff.

They rode merrily along, or rather two of them did, for ever and anon Allen’s steed would drop behind, and its sorry pace wax slower and slower, till at length, taking advantage of its rider’s abstraction, it would stop and snatch up a tuft of grass here and there by the way-side.

“What the deuce has become of that fellow again?” exclaimed Armitage for the fifth time since their start, as he rose in his stirrups and turned to look back. “Hi—Allen. Come on, man, we shan’t get there to-night!” he bawled.

“All right,” echoed feebly from afar; and the white top of a pith helmet, which had escaped its owner’s immersion, hove in sight over the scrub like a peripatetic mushroom, as the laggard came trotting up.

“Come on! We thought you had got another bee in your bonnet,” was Armitage’s salutation. “Hi—Bles you *schelm*—hold up!” This to his horse, which started violently as something sprang up at its very feet; something lithe and red, with curious pointed ears, which darted away over the ground with lightning speed. “A *rooi-cat* (lynx), by Moses!” he went on, “after some of the late lambs. Hicks, *where is* that old shooting-iron of yours?” and thinking that though powerless to hurt the objectionable feline, at any rate he could frighten it, Armitage opened his mouth and gave vent to a true Kafir war yell, which certainly had the desired effect.

“Didn’t bring it. Sunday, you know; must respect people’s prejudices,” replies Hicks.

“Oh, Lord! and I would have liked to have peppered that chap’s hide,” groaned Armitage.

They rode on over hill and dale. Suddenly the rasping cry of the wild guinea-fowl brought Hicks’ heart into his mouth, and he certainly did not bless the good old-world prejudice in deference to which he had left his beloved gun at home on the first day of the week, and as a cloud of those splendid game birds rose from a grassy bottom within a few yards of them and winged away with their chattering note, poor Hicks fairly groaned.

“Look at that. Only look at that!” he exclaimed in tones of wrathful disgust. “Such a chance; did you ever see them rise like that! When a fellow has his gun and is all ready for them, blest if they won’t run hundreds of yards before they’ll get up, whereas—”

“I suppose they know it’s Sunday,” put in Allen, with a feeble attempt at chaff.

The other turned from him impatiently, without replying. Good-natured as he was habitually, there were moments when even Hicks felt justifiably cantankerous. This was one of them.

They continued their way without event, and, cresting the last ridge, descended into the long valley, at whose head stood the old farmhouse.

“Hallo! some one’s turned up,” said Armitage, indicating the white tent of a Cape cart, which stood outspanned before the stable-door, with the harness lying beside the swingle bars.

“Looks like Naylor’s trap,” said Hicks.

“Good. The more the merrier,” rejoined Armitage, as they cantered up and dismounted.

An air of perfect rest and peace seemed to enshroud the place, as though nature would supply the absence of all outward signs of the Sabbath. The gates of the empty kraals stood open, and save for a sickly sheep or two feeding about near the homestead, there was not a sign of animal life. Here and there a long rakish-looking hornet flitted beneath the leaves of a trellised vine, or sought the entrance of his pendulous paper-like nest in the verandah. In the garden a few butterflies disported, vying with the flowers in their bright colours; and big bumble-bees boomed in the burning glow of the noonday sun. There was that about the sultry stillness which warned of thunder in the air, a presage not unlikely to be borne out towards evening, judging from the great solid bank of clouds which loomed up blackly from behind the distant mountains.

Hicks was right as to the identity of the visitors, whose conveyance they had descried. Edward Naylor, Mr Brathwaite’s son-in-law, a jolly bluff frontiersman, whose weather-tanned face heavily bearded, was the soul of geniality, was seated on the disselboom of a waggon, discoursing on the state of the country with his host. His wife, a pretty, fair-haired woman of about thirty, was sitting with Ethel and Laura in the verandah, and was at that moment arbitrating, amid much laughter, in an argument which the former had started with Claverton, by way of passing the time.

“Hallo, Armitage,” said that worthy, as the new arrivals drew nigh. “I was expecting to be summoned to your funeral.”

“My funeral! What the dev—er—what d’you mean?”

“Well, you see, it’s such a time since I beheld the light of your countenance that I began to think you must be dead.”

“Wheuw! That’s what I call a cheerful greeting,” replied Armitage, shaking hands with the rest of the party.

The two who had been talking shop now appeared on the scene.

“How do, Armitage? Hallo, Allen, who’s your outrigger?” said Naylor, eyeing the unwonted garb of that luckless youth, which garb bore unmistakable appearance of makeshift from head to foot.

“Er—I stumbled into the river, and—”

“What; boots and all?” There was a joke about Allen’s jack-boots, which he was seldom seen without.

“‘What is good for a bootless bene?’” quoted Claverton. “Never mind, Allen, don’t you let them chaff you.”

Naylor was an inveterate joker. When he and Armitage got together the same room would hardly hold them, and when the two got Allen between them, then, Heaven help Allen. Now this is precisely what happened, for at that moment the dinner-bell rang, and all adjourned to the festive board, when, as luck would have it, the unfortunate youth found himself—partly owing to that curious practice which is, or was, so often found in frontier houses, of all the men hanging together on one side of the table, leaving the other to the fair sex—in the neighbourhood of his tormentors; but he was a good-natured fellow, and took chaff very equably.

“I say,” began Armitage, “here’s a riddle—a regular Sunday one.”

“Is there? Roll it up this way,” said Claverton, from the other end of the table, where he was seated between Mrs Naylor and Ethel, for he resolutely defied the dividing custom above mentioned.

“Here you are, then. Why is Allen like Moses?” asked Armitage.

“Oh, villainous!” laughed Claverton. “Don’t anybody attempt it. I really think you might trot out something a little more original, Armitage.”

Of course, every one then and there tried hard to solve the conundrum, and, of course, half of them gave it up, and, of course, the reply came even as was to be expected: “Because he was drawn out of the water.”

“Oh-h!” groaned the whole party; while the object of the aqueous jest sat and grinned placidly, and made play with his knife and fork as though he were the perpetrator of it instead of its butt.

“I say, Allen,” put in Naylor, on the other side, “has that shooting match between you and Hicks come off yet?”

“What are the conditions?” asked Armitage.

“Dollar a side—Target, the shearing-house door—Distance, five yards—Hicks to be allowed four yards on account of his want of practice. I’ll bet on Hicks;” and the speaker roared at his own sorry wit.

“Eh! what’s that about me?” called out Hicks from the other end of the table, which was longer than usual, by reason of the advent of the Naylors with their five olive-branches. He had just caught his name.

"Nothing, old man, nothing; we were only talking of those three guinea-fowl you shot this morning, coming up," replied Armitage, grinning mischievously.

"But bother it, I had no gun," said Hicks, thrown off his guard for the moment by this bare-faced accusation of Sabbath-breaking, and fairly losing his head as he caught a reproachful glance from Laura, which seemed to say: "Didn't you promise me you'd leave your gun at home when you went out this morning?" For he had confidentially imparted to her his intention to take the trusty shooting-iron, as he was starting so early that there would be no one about to be scandalised; and Laura, who had her own ideas of right and wrong, had peremptorily forbidden his doing anything of the kind.

"I say!" exclaimed Armitage, with admirably-feigned amazement. He had taken in the other's look of confusion, and, incorrigible joker as he was, resolved to turn it to his own mischief-loving account.

"But, confound it!" began Hicks, wrathfully; for that mute upbraiding glance made him really savage with his tormentor, who he thought was carrying the joke too far. Chaff was all very well, but this kind of thing went beyond chaff, and he would give him a piece of his mind by-and-by.

"Er—n-no—of course—you hadn't a gun—I forgot—er—I—was thinking of yesterday," rejoined Armitage, with the well-simulated air of a man who has "put his foot in it," and is endeavouring to withdraw that unlucky member—and endeavouring deucedly badly, too.

"I say, Jack, what about the scorpion fight, eh?" and Hicks proceeded to narrate how he had found that unscrupulous joker in the thick of the useful and intellectual little amusement at which we saw him in the last chapter, thus drawing upon him the laughter and sallies of the assemblage, under cover of which he said quietly to Laura: "I didn't really take the gun this morning, 'pon my word of honour I didn't; it's only that fellow's lies. He might draw the line somewhere; chaff's all very well, you know, but hang it, that's beyond a joke."

"Yes, I think it's really too bad of him. I oughtn't to have thought you did what you told me you wouldn't do," she replied, with an almost imperceptible stress on "me," and a glance which Hicks thought fully compensated for the former doubt. Leave we them beneath the friendly shelter of the noise at the other end of the table, and turn to the rest.

"Don't care, I won my bet," Armitage was saying.

"What! And so you were betting on it, too—and on Sunday! I think it's disgraceful of you," said Ethel.

"He's come up here to be reformed," put in Allen.

"Oh, you needn't talk," said Armitage, turning off the attack on to the last speaker. "Miss Brathwaite, what do you think of a fellow who comes down to my place on a Sunday, and bothers me to take out a bees' nest; on a Sunday, too!"

There was a great laugh at this. The notion of Allen bothering any one to take out a bees' nest, Sunday or any other day, struck them all as ineffably rich. He would rather travel twenty miles than embark knowingly in that lively enterprise. And then the joke about the stings, and the plunge into the river came out, and poor Allen was roasted unmercifully on the strength of it, and the fun grew apace, when a vivid flash darting in upon them, and playing upon the knives and glasses with a blue steely gleam, brought the conversation up with a round turn.

"We shall have a storm," said Mr Brathwaite, glancing at the window. The deep azure of the heavens had become dark and overcast, and even as he spoke there pealed forth a long, angry roll of thunder.

A general move from the table now took place, and every one adjourned to the verandah, which looked out on the wide sweep of country constituting the great charm of the situation of the house. But now the joyous sunlight had disappeared, and the earth slept in a dread and boding stillness. Tall pillars of cloud, black as night, moved steadily on, their jagged edges taking the forms and faces of hideous and open-mouthed monsters. All nature seemed waiting for the battle of the forces of the air, the discharge of the pent-up cloud artillery which was to strike the awed surface of earth with its blasting fire. Then, athwart the hot, listening deadness of the atmosphere comes a dazzling flash, bathing the valley in a sea of flame; and a roll of thunder, long, loud, and close at hand, makes the expectant group, which is standing on the verandah to watch the storm, involuntarily start, and the silence is more intense than before. And now a great chain of fire shoots from the blackness immediately overhead, and before you could count one, an appalling crash shakes the solid old house to its very foundations, while the windows rattle like castanets.

"Let's go inside," suggested Ethel; "I don't like this."

"It's getting wicked," said Armitage. "It was just such a shot as this that killed old Simmonds. That was up in Kaffraria, where the storms are about as bad as anywhere. He and I were standing in the doorway watching the fun; I went in to light my pipe, and while I was fumbling about for the matches something knocked me clean over, and I heard a bang and a crash enough to wake the dead. At first I thought I had upset the crockery shelf on top of me; but no, there it stood; then my head felt queer, and there was a smell of burning about the place. Then I remembered, and got up and went to the door. There lay poor Simmonds, half in and half out, as dead as a log. The lightning had caught him bang on the head, burnt his coat and waistcoat to rags, and mauled him about horribly. I can tell you it wasn't a nice thing for a fellow to see, having just narrowly escaped the same luck himself—Ah!"

Again a sheet of flame darts down, and a roar and a crash as of the discharge of a dozen eighty-one-ton guns follows upon it. This time they beat a retreat indoors; and when they had a little recovered from the momentary shock, Armitage goes on.

“Well, as I was saying, poor Simmonds was so knocked about, that his early sepulture became a matter of necessity; besides, the first thing to do was to get him into the house. He was enormously heavy, and I couldn’t get a Kafir on the place to give me a hand. Not for the cattle upon a thousand hills will they so much as touch anything that has been killed by lightning with the end of their little fingers, and the nearest neighbour was twenty miles off. However, I managed to lug the poor fellow in, and the next day we buried him.”

“That’s a cheerful old yarn of yours, Jack, and well calculated to reassure Miss Brathwaite,” struck in Claverton.

“I believe he’s only trying to frighten us,” said Ethel.

“’Pon my word of honour, every word of what I told you’s true,” protested Armitage; and with that love for the horrific implanted in the human breast, one story led to another, and the storm raved and flashed without, and a few preliminary hailstones rattled at intervals upon the roof.

Volume One—Chapter Ten.

Caveant!

“Well, you’ll have a fine day for your ride. Hicks, leave a buck or two up at Jim’s in case I should be coming over. I suppose you’ll all be back the day after to-morrow. Good-bye.”

The speaker was Mr Brathwaite; the spoken to, an equestrian group of four, consisting of Claverton, Hicks, and the two girls, who were starting on a long-promised visit to Jim Brathwaite’s place, where a bushbuck hunt was to be organised on the following day. It was the morning after the narrow escape of the luckless Allen from a watery demise—he and Armitage had returned home to fetch their guns, and were to rejoin the others at the farm of a certain Dutchman who abode half-way. The Naylors had gone on ahead in their trap, and the four equestrians were the last to start. And such a morning! The rain had cleared away, and the great deep vault overhead was unflecked by a single feathery cloud. The sun shot his golden darts from his amber wheel, and the outlines of the mountains slept in soft-toned relief beneath the liquid blue. A perfect day, with exhilaration in every breath of the fresh, healthy atmosphere, now cooled by the thunderstorm and rain of the previous evening. And the glorious freshness and radiant sunlight communicated itself to the spirits of the riders, as they cantered gaily along, chatting and laughing in thorough enjoyment of the unclouded present.

“Now, Mr Claverton,” cried Ethel, as their horses bounded along over a smooth level stretch, “we’ll have our race—I’m to have a hundred yards start, you know. Shall we begin?”

“On no account. I received strict injunctions from your aunt not to let you do anything rash, and I intend exerting my authority to the uttermost.”

“Do you? Well now, why don’t you say you’re afraid of being beaten? You are, you know. I’ll tell you what. *You* shall have the hundred yards start. We shall easily walk in before that lazy old ‘Sticks,’ shan’t we, Springbok, my beauty?” she said, banteringly, patting the neck of her steed, a light, elastic-stepping animal with blood and mettle in him, who arched his neck and shook his mane in response to the caress. She sat him to perfection, the little hand bearing ever so lightly on the reins; and in a habit fitting her like a glove, and a coquettish straw hat surrounded by a sweeping ostrich plume, beneath which the blue eyes danced and sparkled in sheer light-heartedness, she made as pretty a picture as ever one could wish to look upon. At any rate, so thought her companion.

“Well, Sticks is lazy—at times—I grant you; but there’s method in his laziness. Don’t abuse Sticks.”

“Never mind, I know you’re afraid. Don’t think any more about it. Now I suppose you’re dying to. You men always want to do a thing directly you’re told not to.”

What will be the upshot, by-the-bye, of this standing arrangement of quartette? This is not the first ride by any means that those four have taken together. Together! It has been shown that one of the party, at any rate, had reached the “two’s company, three’s a crowd” stage—or for the present purpose four. Thus it followed that however often the group may have started together, it was bound to split up before going very far. Frequently Hicks would manage to drop behind with one, and that one was not Ethel. Frequently, also, Ethel would, manoeuvre to rush ahead in a swinging gallop, in which case she could not be suffered to ride alone, but whoever undertook to superintend her on these occasions, certainly it was not Hicks. Whether she was wont to execute these manoeuvres at Laura’s previous instigation, or whether her motives were less disinterested, deponent sayeth not. As for Claverton, he accepted the situation with, characteristic indifference. Yet what could be more fraught with elements of possible combustion? As for the man, he was perfectly unsusceptible, and wholly devoid of vanity. He looked upon his beautiful companion as a spoilt, pretty child, fond of teasing and chaff, and who amused him, and if he thought anything about himself in the matter, he supposed that he managed to amuse her. This is how he looked at it—but how did Ethel herself?

“Hallo! There goes a buck!” cried Claverton, suddenly. “May as well have a shot,” and he made a movement to dismount.

“No, don’t—please don’t! Springbok won’t stand fire, you know, and he’ll bolt with me.”

“Oh, all right. Then that lazy old Sticks has his good points after all?”

“Yes; a steady old arm-chair has its good points too. You can shoot from it,” she replied, scornfully.

“What a wooden comparison! Why not say a clothes-horse?”

Bang! The report of a gun behind them. “Hicks to the fore,” remarked Claverton, shading his eyes to watch the effect of the shot. But the buck held on its way, caring not a straw for the bullet which buried itself in the earth with a vicious thud some ten or a dozen yards behind.

In this way they rode on in the pleasant sunshine, and eventually drew rein in front of a prettily situated though roughly built house of red brick, with thatched roof and high *stoep*. This was the abode of a Dutchman, Isaac Van Rooyen by name, and here they had arranged to stay and have dinner, for on the frontier a standing hospitality is the rule, and in travelling every one makes a convenience of his neighbour and is made a convenience of in turn. The Boer, a large corpulent man of about sixty, advanced to welcome them as the clamorous tongues of a yelping and mongrel pack gave warning of their approach, and consigning their horses to a dilapidated-looking Hottentot, they entered the house. A long, low room furnished with the characteristic plainness of such an abode; a substantial table, several chairs, on some of which none but a lunatic or an inebriate would venture to trust his proportions for a single instant. In one corner stood an ancient and battered harmonium, another contained a sewing-machine and a huge family Bible in ponderous Dutch lettering, while the walls were garnished with sundry grievous prints, high in colour and grisly in design, representing Moses destroying the Tables of the Law, Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and so on. The *vrouw* arose from her coffee-brewing as they entered—the absorption of coffee is a *sine qua non* in a Boer domicile on the arrival of visitors—and greeted them with stolid and wooden greeting, and a brace of great shy and ungainly damsels—exact reproductions of their mother at twenty and twenty-one—looked scared as they limply shook hands with the new-comers. But others were there besides the regular inmates, for the Naylors had arrived, as also Armitage and Allen, and our friend Will Jeffreys, and these were keeping up a laborious conversation with the worthy Boer and his ponderous *vrouw*, whose daughters, aforesaid, eat together in speechless inanity, now and again venturing a “Ja” or a “Nay” if addressed, and straightway relapsing into a spasmodic giggle beneath their *kapjes*.

“Doesn’t Miss Brathwaite play?” inquired the Boer, with a glance at Ethel and then at the harmonium.

“‘England expects.’ Go now and elicit wheezy strains from yon venerable and timeworn fire-engine,” said Claverton, in a low tone.

She drew off her gloves in a resigned manner, and was about to sit down at the despised instrument, when some one putting a book on the music-stool in order to heighten the seat, that fabric underwent a total collapse and came to the ground with a crash. Another seat was found, and she began to play—but oh! what an instrument of torture it was—more to the performer than to the audience. Every other note stuck fast, keeping up an earsplitting and discordant hum throughout; and the bellows being afflicted with innumerable leaks, were the cause of much labour and sorrow to the player.

“I can’t play on this thing,” she said. “Every other note sticks down, and the bellows are all in holes, and—I won’t.”

Naylor explained to the Dutchman that Ethel was a great pianist but was nothing at harmoniums, which excuse covered her somewhat petulant retreat from the abominable instrument, and just then dinner was brought in. Then it became a question of finding seats, many of the chairs being *hors de combat*.

“Here you are, Allen; come and sit here,” called out Armitage. In a confiding moment, and the table being full, the unsuspecting youth dropped into the seat indicated, and then—dropped on the floor, for the rickety concern forthwith “resigned,” even as the music-stool had done before it. A roar of laughter went up from the incorrigible joker at the success of his impromptu trap, and Allen arose from the ruins of the chair, like Phoenix from the ashes.

“I say, though, that’s better than the cruise down the river with the bee in your bonnet, isn’t it, old chap?” said Armitage, exploding again. Allen looked rather glum, and another seat, not much less rickety than the other, was found for him.

When he was settled, the Boer stood up and with closed eyes began a long, rambling oration, presumably to the Creator, which was meant for grace, and having discoursed unctuously on everything, or nothing, for the space of several minutes, he set the example of falling to.

“Going up to Jim Brathwaite’s for the hunt to-morrow, Oom Isaac?” asked Armitage of his host. (Note 1.)

“Ja,” replied old Van Rooyen. “Can *he* shoot?” designating Claverton—the popular idea on the frontier being that an “imported” Briton must necessarily be an ass in all things pertaining to field pursuits.

“He just can. Didn’t you hear how he licked the Pexters down at my place?”

“Yes, I did hear that; I remember now;” and the Dutchman looked at Claverton with increased respect.

“But that’s the fellow to bring down a buck at five hundred yards,” went on Armitage, indicating Allen, who, regardless of what went on around him, was making terrific play with his knife and fork, and who, although seated next the speaker, remained in blissful unconsciousness of being the subject of any chaff, by reason of his ignorance of the Dutch language.

“Is he now? I shouldn’t have thought that,” was the deliberating reply; the matter-of-fact Boer not dreaming for a moment that the other was gammoning him.

And the ball of conversation rolled on, and the unseasoned stew was succeeded by a ponderous jar of quince preserve, then another lengthy grace and the inevitable coffee.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Van Rooyen, with the freedom of his countrymen, was discussing “present company.”

“What a pretty girl she is!” he was saying, referring to Ethel. “Is she another of Mr Brathwaite’s daughters?”

“No, a niece,” replied Naylor, to whom the remark was addressed. “Her father is George Brathwaite, the M.L.A.”

“‘Ja,’ I know him,” replied the Dutchman. “He isn’t a good man (in the sense of ‘a good politician’). He voted against our interests in several things. But she’s a pretty girl, a very pretty girl. And the Englishman’s a good-looking fellow, too. Are they engaged?”

“Damned fool!” angrily muttered Claverton, who, while talking to Ethel, had overheard the above conversation and wondered whether Ethel had too.

“What’s the matter now?” said she, and the frown left his brow as the question convinced him she had not heard. But he turned and suggested to Armitage that it was time to saddle up.

“Well, yes—I think it is,” replied that worthy, who was busily debating in his own mind whether it would be carrying a joke too far if he inserted a burr or prickle of some sort beneath the saddle of Allen’s steady-going old mare; and forthwith a general move was made for the horses, which were duly brought to the door.

“Now, Allen, old chap, keep those awful spurs of yours out of my horse’s flank, or there’ll be the deuce to pay,” called out Armitage, as the absent-minded youth backed his steed violently into that of the speaker—whereupon a kicking match became imminent. Meanwhile Ethel was waiting to be put on her horse, and glanced half involuntarily and somewhat angrily in the direction of Claverton, who, whether by accident or of set purpose, was still on the *stoep* beginning to fill his pipe from Van Rooyen’s pouch, and apparently as ignorant of his actual ungallantry as though the fair sex formed no ingredient of the party. With concealed mortification she resigned herself to Will Jeffreys, who advanced to perform that necessary office, and eagerly seized the opportunity of riding by her side.

“Mr Armitage,” she called out, speaking over her shoulder, “do tell me that story about Spoek Krantz.”

Armitage ranged his horse on her unoccupied side and began his narrative, enlarging to an appalling extent as he went on.

“Don’t take in all he says, Miss Brathwaite. He’s cooking up a yarn for the occasion,” said Jeffreys.

Armitage vehemently protested that nothing was further from his intention, but to the jocular recrimination which followed, Ethel hardly listened. She thought that Claverton should be punished for his neglect by being made to ride behind. A punishment to which, by the way, the delinquent seemed to submit with exemplary patience, for he puffed away at his pipe, discoursing placidly to Allen, whom he was just in time to prevent from inflicting himself on Laura, thereby rendering Hicks a substantial service. Nevertheless Ethel, before they had gone one-third of the way, began to wish that Armitage was less garrulously disposed, and would vacate the place to which she had summoned him, and once when he dropped behind a little to light his pipe, she half turned her head with a strange wistfulness, and her pulses beat quicker as she hoped that the hoof-strokes which she heard overtaking her were not those of *his* steed. But they were, and as that light-hearted mortal ranged up beside her and launched out into a fresh stream of chaff and jocularity, and the end of the ride drew near, it seemed to her that the sunshine had gone out of the day, although there was not a cloud in the heavens and the whole beautiful landscape was bathed in that wondrous golden glow which precedes a South African sunset; and shall it be confessed, she felt sore and angry, and snubbed poor Jeffreys, and irritably checked the flow of Armitage’s running fire of small wit, till at last they drew rein at Jim Brathwaite’s house and were received by its jovial occupant in person.

“Hallo, Ethel; so you’ve come to help us shoot a buck. But where’s your gun?” chaffed he. “Keep quiet; get away you *schelms*,” he went on, shying a couple of big stones into the midst of some half-dozen huge rough-haired dogs, which rushed open-mouthed towards the equestrians, baying furiously. The rude but serviceable pack, stopped in their career, thought better of it and turned back, one of their number howling piteously, and limping from the effects of another “rock” hurled by Jim’s forcible and practised hand. “Well, Arthur,” as the other two came up, “we’ll show you some fun to-morrow. But come inside; I’ll send Klaas round to off-saddle.”

Note 1. “Uncle.” Among the Boers, “Oom” and “Tanta,” “Uncle” and “Aunt,” are used as complimentary prefixes when addressing elderly people, though these stand in no relation whatever to the speaker.

Volume One—Chapter Eleven.

Venatorial.

It is early morning, and a party of mounted men, consisting of our friends of the previous day and their genial host, is riding along the high ground away from Jim Brathwaite’s homestead. All carry guns, mostly of the latest and most improved pattern, though one or two still hold to the old-fashioned muzzle-loader, and a pack of great rough-haired dogs, the same which greeted our travellers with such hostile demonstration last evening, careers around and among the party, now and then getting a paw or a tail under the horses’ hoofs, and yelping and snapping in consequence. The horses step out briskly in the fresh morning air—for the sun is not yet up—which briskness will, I trow, have undergone considerable abatement when they return at the close of the proceedings, laden with a buck apiece—perchance two—and their riders to boot. And the dogs break out afresh into a mighty clamour, leaping and curvetting, and each striving to outbay his fellow as he realises more and more fully the important part which is to be his in the coming destruction; and as the full-mouthed chorus rings over hill and valley, many a graceful spiral-horned antelope starts in his dewy lair far down in the tangled brake, where yet a white curtain of mist hangs, waiting till the rising beams shall disperse it into warmth and sunshine, and listens, it may be, apprehensively to the distant baying.

"Here. Spry! Tiger! Shut up that infernal row, you brutes. A fellow can't hear himself speak!" And loosening a strap from his saddle, Jim makes a sudden cut with the buckle-end at one of the chief contributors to the shindy, who, starting back hurriedly to avoid the infliction, unwarily places his tail beneath the descending hoof of Naylor's horse, and yells in frantic and heartrending fashion for the next five minutes.

"Noisy devils, they'll scare away all the bucks in the country-side before we get near them," remarks that worthy, shading a match with his hand and lighting his pipe without reining in.

"They haven't had a hunt for some time now, you see. I've been away a good deal, and now they're letting off steam a bit," says Jim. "Hallo, Allen! Look out! If you dig your heels into that horse like that, he'll have you off as sure as his name's Waschbank."

For Allen, whose weedy nag had gone lame, is now bestriding a mount which his host has provided for him—a youthful quadruped, given to occasional bucking. And at the time of the needed warning the playful animal is going along with his back stiffly and ominously arched.

"Then it'll be a case of Allen washing the bank with his tears—to say nothing of tears—for he is bound to *rend* his 'bags' if he falls among these stones," strikes in Armitage.

"Jack, Jack! I trust I may yet live to see you hanged," says Claverton. "Jim, I put it to you as a man and a brother. Can any success possibly attend the steps of a hunting-party in whose midst is the perpetrator of so outrageous a sally?"

"Name isn't Sally," promptly replies the joker; "I was christened Jack, not John, mind—Jack; and Jack I'll live and die."

A laugh is evoked by this repartee, and they break into a canter, while Allen's steed, the exuberance of whose spirits is in a measure let off in the increased exercise, ceases to cause his rider more than a dormant uneasiness. And now the sun is rising slowly and majestically over the eastern hills. Birds are twittering, and the dewy grass shines beneath and around. Then the great beams dart forth over the rolling plains, bathing them in first a red, then a golden light, and the firmament is blue above, and the earth glows in a warm rich effulgence, the glory of a new-born summer day.

Seated under a bush are three persons evidently awaiting the approach of our party. Their horses saddled, and with bridles trailing on the ground, are cropping the short grass hard by. The conversation is being carried on in Dutch for the benefit of half the group, which owns to that nationality, being in fact our portly friend, Isaac van Rooyen, and one of his sons. The other one is Thorman, a bearded, surly-looking fellow, little given to conversation, but greatly addicted to the use of strong language when he does speak. He is a neighbour of Jim Brathwaite's.

"Well, Jim," began Thorman, in response to the other's greeting. "At last! We've been waiting here a whole damned half-hour."

"Never mind, old fellow," laughed the other, "patience is a virtue, you know—especially in these piping times."

"And you've had an opportunity of seeing a most splendid sunrise," added the incorrigible Jack.

"Sunrise be damned," growled Thorman, surlily.

"I thought we were to begin by sunrise, and now we've wasted half the damned day. Better get to work at once," and he turned away to catch his horse.

The others took no notice of his ill-humour, and chatted among themselves. Then with its fresh addition the party moved on a quarter of a mile or so lower down, where, in an open space in the bush, about thirty Kafirs—boys and men—were assembled. These were the beaters, and many of them were accompanied by their dogs—slim greyhounds, rough-haired lurchers, and curs of all shapes and sizes, and of nondescript aspect. The natives stood up and saluted the new arrivals, and forthwith plans were laid for the operations.

"Now then, Jolwane," said Jim, addressing one of them, who, from his age and standing, had constituted himself, or been constituted, head of his countrymen there assembled, "we'll sweep down this bush first," indicating the long deep kloof which sloped away in front of them. "Send half your fellows on the other side and I'll take my dogs and beat this. We'll take it straight down."

"Ewa 'nkos," (yes, chief), replied the Kafir, and he straightway issued directions to his followers, involving much discussion and voluminous explanation.

"Now then—confound it all, are you fellows going to stand jawing all day?" said Jim, testily. "Off you go," and the Kafirs gathering up their kerries—a few of them carried assegais as well—moved off in twos and threes, still chattering volubly. "Jeffreys," he went on, "take Arthur where he'll get a shot; better go on to that open place yonder, that'll be exactly where I shall be driving down, and a buck always runs out there. Naylor, you put Allen up somewhere, better go the other side. The rest of you can *voerlay* (lie in wait) anywhere down in the bottom. Thorman, you know the place as well as I do, so can go where you like."

"Ik zal mit you ryd, ou kerel," (I shall ride with you, old fellow), said Isaac van Rooyen. "The younger ones want all the shots."

"All right, Oom Isaac," replied Jim. "Now then, look sharp and get to your places, and we'll begin."

All move off as directed, making a détour to get well round the tract to be driven, so as not to alarm the quarry; and at length, now cantering, now scrambling down some awfully steep and stony bit of ground, they reach a tolerably open space about one thousand yards from where they started. Here they leave the horses, and, descending the steep hillside, they separate. A cordon of shooters is thus formed across the valley, each man ensconcing himself in some snug ambush, where he lies in wait with piece cocked and ready, silent and alert, waiting for the quarry to break cover.

And now the whole ravine echoes with loud and discordant voices, the yelling of the native curs in full cry mingles with the deeper bay of the larger dogs; and the shouts of the Kafirs and the crashing of the underwood as they force their way through it, beating to right and to left with their sticks, draw nearer and nearer. Bang! The report of a gun in the thick of the scrub is answered by a terrific yell from the dogs, who rush to the spot. A buck has got up in front of Jim, who, with the Dutchman, is riding through the bush, hounding on his pack. The path here is fairly open, consequently the animal has not gone many yards before it falls in a heap, for an unerring eye is behind the barrels that covered it.

“Got him,” says Jim, putting a fresh cartridge into his smoking barrel. “Bring him on, some of you fellows, I must go on driving;” and the Kafirs, beating the dogs off the fallen animal, perform in a trice the necessary preliminaries, while a loud exultant whoop, from one to the other of them, tells that blood has been drawn.

“Look out, Allen,” says Naylor, in a quick warning whisper, “there’s something coming out by you.” They were about a dozen yards apart, Allen being of the two far the better placed, as his range commanded a large open space, a clear sixty yards beneath him, across which something was almost sure to run, while Naylor’s only covered a higher bit of ground where a snap shot was all he could hope for; but like a good-natured fellow he had placed the other in the better position.

Allen starts, rigidly grips his gun in his excitement, and eyes the brake in front of him. The crashing of the underwood draws nearer and nearer, and a large bushbuck ram breaks cover. As it does so it catches sight of Naylor half hidden behind a tree, shears off at a tangent, and comes charging down nearly on the top of Allen, whose heart is in his mouth, and he wildly bangs away with both barrels point-blank, as the animal bounds past him within a yard, missing it clean. In a moment it will have reached covert, the dread open safely crossed, when—Crack! the buck rolls over and over with three or four loopers from Naylor’s shot barrel fairly in his carcase. But “many a slip”—he recovers himself, leaps up and bounds away into the bush.

“He’s hard hit,” says his slayer, running to the spot; “it was a devil of a long shot, though. Look what a lot of blood he’s dropped! We’ll put the dogs on him directly. He’s a gone coon, anyhow.”

“I can’t make out how I managed to miss him,” is Allen’s doleful remark. He is terribly mortified, poor fellow.

“You didn’t get a fair shot at him. I thought he was going clean over you. Never mind, you’ll get a better chance soon,” says good-natured Naylor. He thought the other rather a muff, but was too good a fellow to say so.

Bang! Bang!

Who is in luck’s way now? Bang, bang! again. A couple of bucks have dodged the ambushed shooters, and are making off along the high ground outside the line, making for the adjacent kloof, and Armitage and the younger Dutchman, who are nearest to them, are having rifle practice at long range. Four hundred yards—then the sights are altered to five. Bang! bang! the animals still keep on, though the last shot has thrown up a cloud of dust perilously near the hinder one. Then the six hundred yards is reached. Another minute and they will be over the hill and safe, at any rate for the present, when a ball from young Van Booyen’s rifle strikes the hindermost, which halts in mid course with a spring and a shudder, and rolls over, dead as a door-nail.

“Well done, Piet. By George, that was a good shot!” exclaimed the unsuccessful competitor.

“*Ja, kerel*,” replied the Dutchman, with a complacent grin, as he fished out his tobacco-pouch.

Claverton is standing where he and Jeffreys had been directed to. He has refused to avail himself of his privilege of guest and to take the best place, so they have split the difference by standing near each other. It is a fine open bit which promises two or three shots at least, for whatever comes out on that side of the kloof is bound to break cover there. At last Jeffreys gets tired of waiting; he is of opinion that everything has run across, and all the fun is on the other side, so he makes for his horse and announces his intention of waiting up above for Jim. Claverton however, remains. He is standing under a mimosa tree and is partly sheltered from view by a large stone, and has a beautiful clear space for at least eighty yards on either side of him.

Haow!—ow—ow! The shouts of the Kafirs come nearer and nearer, and the loud-mouthed chorus of the dogs in one incessant clamour which is never suffered to die, so quickly is it taken up by fresh throats, rings from the steep hillsides as the rout sweeps down the kloof. A gentle rustling approaches, and a graceful animal bounds into the open, and its ambushed foe can mark the glint of its soft eye and the shiny points of its straight horns. It is a young bushbuck ram, and as it crosses the open Claverton waits till it has just passed him and fires. It is scarcely twenty-five yards from him, yet it is unharmed, and disappears in the opposite cover with a rush and a bound.

Claverton shakes his head and whistles softly. “*What* a shot!” he says. Then he looks up and catches sight of Will Jeffreys watching him with a sneering smile upon his face, and the sight angers him for a moment.

“Look out—look out, Arthur,” sounds Jim’s voice close at hand. “There’s a buck coming out, right at you.”

He starts, throws open the breech of his gun, but the cartridge jams half-way, and will neither come out nor go in again, and at that moment another antelope breaks cover and crosses the open, if anything rather nearer than the first. It is a female and hornless, and its dappled skin gleams in the sun like gold as it bounds along. Immediately afterwards Jim emerges from the bush.

“How is it you didn’t shoot?” he asks, wonderingly, reining in his horse. “Why, the buck ran right over you.”

“Look at that!” showing the state of the defaulting piece, in which the cartridge was yet jammed.

“Oh! What a nuisance! And didn’t you get the first one?”

“No. Missed him clean. You see, Jim, you build all your bucks eighteen inches or so too short hereabouts.”

Jim laughed. Jeffreys, who had also come up, did likewise, but sneeringly. “Well, you’ve had the two best shots of the day,” said the former.

“My dear fellow, I’m aware of the fact. Spare my blushes,” answered Claverton, nonchalantly.

And now dogs and beaters straggle out of the bash, the latter vehemently discussing the ins and outs of the recent undertaking. Kafirs are inveterate chatterboxes, and when a number of them get together the amount of promiscuous “jaw” that goes on is well-nigh incredible—and the shooters assemble, preparatory to making a fresh start.

“How many came out?” says Jim. “Let’s see—two went up above, one of them we got—two passed Claverton—one I got inside, and one went out by Naylor—six. Not bad for the first draw. How is it Naylor didn’t get his?”

“He did,” said the voice of that maligned person at his elbow. “Just bring some of the dogs up—there’s a blood spoor as wide as a footpath. It’s a thundering big old ram, too.”

They put the dogs on the track and followed as quickly as they could, for the bush was thick, but before they had gone far an awful clamour and a frenzied scream told that the quarry had been found. The bushbuck is the largest of the smaller antelopes, the male standing higher than a large goat. When wounded and brought to bay he is apt to prove dangerous, as his long, nearly straight horns, from twelve to fifteen inches in length, can inflict an ugly enough wound. This one was striking right and left with his horns as they came up, but being weakened by loss of blood was soon pulled down, though not before he had scored the sides of a couple of his canine foes with a nasty gash.

“By Jove, that is a fine fellow,” said Jim, as he surveyed the brown-grey hide with its white specks, and measured the long, pointed horns. “Who hit him first?”

“I didn’t hit him at all,” said Allen, somewhat ruefully.

“Never mind. We’ve got him, anyhow. Let’s get on again.”

On the ridge, overlooking the next large kloof which is to be driven, Hicks joins them. He isn’t best pleased, isn’t Hicks, for the simple reason that he has seen nothing to empty his piece at, which to his destructive mind is a very real grievance indeed. It is quite likely that, had he seen anything, the animal or animals in question would have passed him unscathed, albeit rather startled by a double detonation; but he has not had the chance, and meanwhile is dissatisfied, wherefore he makes up his mind to strike out a line for himself. Again the bush is alive with the sinuous red forms of the Kafirs, and the dogs thread through the underwood, giving tongue and rushing hither and thither as they strike upon a passing scent, and the shooters ride off to *voerlay* at their various posts, but Hicks quietly slips away from them all and makes for a point far below, where the kloof merges into a number of others. It is a narrow defile, overhung with *krantzes* on either side; forest trees twined with monkey creepers rise apace, and beneath their shadow, in the gloom of the thick scrub, a tiny stream trickles along. Whatever leaves the kloof will pass this way, and our friend knows that he is likely to get several shots in the ordinary course of things.

He conceals his horse, fastening him up among the bushes, then, with piece all ready, he takes up his position in a cunning ambush, and waits for whatever may appear. At present all is still as death, except where the whistle of a spreuw sounds from the overhanging cliffs; but the sunbeams are focussed into the hollow as through a burning-glass, and the distant shouting of the beaters, and an occasional shot, now and again breaks the silence. Nothing moves in grass or brake, and at last Hicks begins to wax impatient.

“Whew! how hot it is!” he exclaims, taking off his hat to wipe his forehead. “They’ll be a long while yet. I’ll have a drink so long.”

He finds out a place where the stream runs through a deep, limpid basin, and lying flat on the ground, takes a long and refreshing pull at the cool water. Then he rises, and something on the ground catches his eye.

“By Jove! Wild pig, I do believe;” and he examines the furrows and ruts in the grass, which has been rooted up by the tusks of something, and not long ago either. “Wild pig or baboons? No, it’s pig all right; there are two distinct spoors. If only I could get quietly among them.”

By this time he has worked his way through the bush about a dozen yards, following up the spoors, and finding fresh “sign” at every step. “If only I could get in among them,” he repeats, bending over the traces.

His wish is gratified. A fierce grunt right at his elbow makes him look up, startled by its unexpected proximity; and within six paces, half out of a bush, are the head and shoulders of a huge old boar, who, with every hair of his dirty red-brown hide erect and bristling, and his wicked little eyes scintillating, stands fearlessly confronting the intruder, while on each side of his hideous snout his great white tusks are champing and churning in an unpleasantly suggestive manner.

Hicks just has time to bring his gun to his shoulder; but the suddenness of the encounter has a trifle thrown him off his equilibrium, and as he discharges his piece, point-blank, instead of rolling the animal over, the ball—for he has fired with his rifled barrel—merely scores its flank, and with a scream of fury it comes at him. Dropping his gun he swings himself into the branches of a small tree under which he is standing, as the ferocious brute rushes by, snapping viciously at empty air, which within a fraction of a second ago was occupied by our friend's legs.

Hicks draws a long breath of relief. "Sold again, old *Baas*," he says, derisively, contemplating the infuriated boar, who is running backwards and forwards beneath the tree, the blood flowing freely from his wounded flank. "Only stay there a little longer, and I'll use your tusks for a hat-peg yet."

The brute shows no signs of leaving him, for it charges the tree in which he has found refuge, ripping off great pieces of bark in its fury; and from his vantage ground, Hicks can see other wild swine making off in the distance through the bushes. And now the voices of men and dogs are drawing near—very near—and the old tusker, wise in time, throws up his head, sniffs the air a moment, and makes off into the cover with a disappointed grunt, while Hicks shouts lustily for assistance.

"Here—Tiger—Punch—Erdwacht—Sah! Sah—in, boys—Sah—Sah!" he calls out, descending from his prison, as several of the larger dogs come running up. Then as they strike the scent of the wild pig, they rush off on the spoor with full-throated chorus.

"What is it, Hicks?" sings out Jim, riding slowly through the bush.

"Pig—pig—He's hit, too!" replies Hicks, wild with excitement, as he drags out his horse and springs into the saddle.

"Pig! Come along; we'll have him," says Jim, spurring up; and the two dash off in the wake of the dogs, whose clamour may be heard far ahead. The bush is thick, and here and there they meet with a check; but thorns and brambles are nothing when such quarry is in view, and Hicks hardly notices a gash left in his ear by a specially wicked *wacht-am-bietje* spike as he is half dragged through the thicket by his horse.

"He's at bay, by Jove!" says Jim, as the clamour becomes stationary just in front of them. "Come on; here he is!" And in an open glade, in an angle formed by two bushes of bristling thorns, stood the boar, the dogs springing and snapping around him, but none of them quite liking to tackle him.

"Wait! I can get a good shot at him now," said Jim, dismounting. "Better let *me* do it; it's a ticklish shot, and you might hit one of the dogs. Besides, it's all the same; he's yours anyhow. You drew first blood."

The creature is hard pressed now, and the foam lies on him in flakes as he chums with his tusks and snaps at his crowding, yelling foes. Crack! He sinks lifeless, the blood pouring from a hole in his forehead where Jim's bullet has found its mark; and then the dogs throw themselves on the carcase, snarling and tearing in their excitement.

"Off, you brutes, off!" sings out Jim, coming up.

"Off! You're plucky enough when the pig's dead. Maarman—Spry—you *schelms*! What's come over you?" And dispersing them with a kick or two, he and Hicks proceed to inspect the quarry.

"I'll make something out of those tusks," says Hicks. "No, I won't, though; I'll keep the whole skull."

"It's devilish lucky you had that tree handy," says Jim. "He'd have cut you to ribbons."

"Hullo! Where's the pig?" asks Armitage, who, with the others, appear on the scene; and the Kafirs, standing round the defunct animal, fire off a volley of astonished "whaows," and Thorman is heard to mutter something about "not having got a shot the whole damned morning, and that the damned Britishers seem to get all the fun."

"By Jove! Those brutes of dogs have wallowed in all the water!" exclaimed Jim, in consternation, as the party arrived at their midday halting-place. "Faugh! It's quite spoilt," he added, surveying the fluid in question, which at no time specially inviting to any but a very thirsty man, was now positively nauseous, as the tired animals had rolled and splashed in it before any one had come up. "What will we do? Wait—there may be a little in the hole higher up; let's go and see. Ah! it's all right?" he called out, his exploration having proved satisfactory. "Jolwane, keep the dogs away from this, whatever you do."

"That's fortunate," said Claverton. "On a day like this, brandy without water is pretty much the same as mustard without beef."

They sat down to eat their lunch in true hunter fashion. Mighty sandwiches, hastily rolled in a bit of newspaper, strips of *biltong* (Note 1), and hunks of cheese, began to make their appearance from the capacious pockets of shooting-coats, while the contents of the spring were rendered more palatable by the addition of those of sundry flasks which passed from hand to hand.

It was a picturesque scene enough. The roughly-clad group lying and sitting about in various attitudes, their guns resting against a tree, and in rows upon the grass were the spoils, prominent among which was the huge carcase of the boar. Dogs lay panting in the shade, a few of them sitting on their haunches behind the hungry sportsmen, waiting for stray scraps which might be thrown them, and in the background squatted the red forms of the Kafirs, whose deep voices kept up a continual hum as they chattered among themselves and smoked their quaint, angular pipes, or devoured a mess of cold mealies, while their kerries and assegais lay on the ground beside them. Above, a great cliff towered in rugged masses; around stretched the evergreen bush.

"Have a *sopje* (dram), Oom Isaac?" said Naylor, holding up a big flask, and filling out a substantial measure, as the Dutchman replied in the affirmative.

"Ach! Det is alto lekker," (that's awfully good), said old Van Rooyen, drawing his sleeve across his mouth, and Naylor replenished the cup for the benefit of the youthful Piet.

"So you got a buck after all, Arthur?" said Jim.

"Yes, just now—up there."

"He thinks the bucks here are all eighteen inches too short," struck in Jeffreys, with half a sneer.

"That was only in the first kloof, Jeffreys. They're longer about here, you see," replied Claverton, filling his pipe. "Give us a light, Jack."

"Here you are, old Baas. One good turn deserves another, so just throw that flask at me—thanks. Fancy Hicks treed by a pig—eh!"

"You shut up," called out that worthy. "Didn't I see you turn tail when that buck ran right over you?"

"No—you didn't—so help me Moses. But Hicks, you ought not to have missed the pig at no yards."

The other retorted, and so they went on, bandying chaff and fighting the morning's battles over again, till at length it became time to resume operations. Horses were caught and saddled, and the Kafirs calling their curs, started off to beat the bush again—but not with the same spirit as before, for the day was piping hot and the dogs were beginning to flag—some would hardly be induced to enter the bush at all, but trotted along with lolling tongue, panting in the heat, and by the time they had swept down a couple of bits of bush it became obvious that most of the sport was already behind their backs.

"We'll just drive this kloof through and then knock off," said Jim. "Now then, here's every one's last chance. Allen, you haven't got your buck yet."

They resumed the drive, and the slumbrous calm of the quiet valley was broken now and again by a ringing shot, and the blue smoke curled up through the golden haze in the still, summer afternoon; and every living thing was routed out of its hitherto secure retreat before the advancing line of beaters, to run the gauntlet for its life, to fall before its ambushed foe, or haply to escape until some future field day.

Note 1. Biltong is meat which has been dried in the sun till it is quite hard. It is usually made of venison or beef.

Volume One—Chapter Twelve.

A Wild Night.

The morning after the hunt was gloomy and dispiriting, for the weather had undergone a complete change daring the night, and now, instead of blue sky and a sunny landscape, a dense vaporous curtain hung over the kloofs, everywhere thick, heavy and impenetrable, while from the dull grey sky fell a continuous and soaking drizzle.

"I say, but it'll be poor fun riding back in this," exclaimed Hicks, contemplating the spongy ground splashed by the drippings from the iron roof. "We shall have to wait until it clears."

"Shall we? Speak for yourself, Mr Hicks. *We* are not made of sugar," said Ethel, mockingly. She was in high spirits this morning and brimming over with mischief.

"Now that *is* rational," put in a voice behind her. "Hadn't we better start at once?"

She turned. "Oh, so you are afraid of the elements, too. Then out of consideration for you two, we shall have to wait. Or shall we go on and leave them, Laura?"

"They deserve it," said Laura. Then dubiously: "It's a nuisance, though, because I know aunt will be expecting us back."

"Now look here," rejoined Claverton, quietly. "Your aunt specially authorised me to see that you did nothing rash. Getting wet through under circumstances totally unnecessary is an eminently rash proceeding. Wherefore I am constrained to lay an embargo on anything of the kind. More especially as by two o'clock there will not be a cloud in the sky."

"Won't there? Two to one there will. What shall it be?" cut in Armitage.

"Jack never bets. At least I heard him not many days ago striving hard to convince a Methodist parson of that fact," said Claverton, appealing to the company in general.

"Wanted to throw him off his guard and book the devil-dodger for a venture. Besides, it wasn't a parson, it was only that humbugging old Garthorpe, who goes about preaching, and—"

"I should have thought you had found out he wasn't such an ass as he looked, Jack," said Naylor, significantly.

Armitage looked rather foolish at this; and one or two who knew the joke tittered slightly.

"Hallo, what's the jest? Trundle it up, Naylor, we don't often catch Jack napping," said Claverton.

"Oh, I'll tell you myself," exclaimed the victim of it, airily. "Well, you know, I was down at Thorman's place one evening, and old Garthorpe came jogging up on that spindle-shanked nag of his. It was just about feeding time, so he off-saddled and got his head well into the trough in no time. Daring the evening we were talking a lot about the war scare, and the old chap stuck out that it was all bosh, in fact insinuated that we were a pack of funks. *He* wasn't afraid of the Kafirs, he said, not one of them would hurt him, and so on. This rather put our backs up, you know; there was myself, and Johnson, and Gough, and a couple of Dutchmen, so we hit upon a little scheme to give the old fellow a bit of a funk when he left. It was as dark as pitch—"

"'And smelt of cheese,'" put in Claverton. "Why not do justice to the quotation?"

"Confound it, if you can spin the yarn better than I can, do so, by all means," retorted Armitage, in mock dudgeon.

"He wants to get out of it," said Ethel. "It won't do, though, we insist upon hearing it."

"Well, then, as I was saying, when that fellow interrupted me, it was as dark as pitch, but the moon would soon be up. I and Johnson laid our heads together, and arranged that we two and Gough should blacken our faces and go and waylay old Garthorpe in the drift about half a mile from the house. Well, we slipped out one by one and got ourselves up in style, red blankets and all, looked as thorough-paced cut-throats as ever you clapped eyes on—"

"Can quite believe it," murmured the former interrupter.

"There he is again," exclaimed Armitage, wrathfully. "Well, we got down into the drift and soon we heard the horse's feet, and old Garthorpe came mooning along, concocting some sermon or other for the next day, which was Sunday. The moon had just risen, but was not bright enough to betray our identity. We jumped out of the bush. Johnson collared the bridle, and the other two of us drew up in line across the path. What does the old chap do, but quick as lightning pull out a revolver and poke it into Johnson's face. He dropped the bridle like a hot potato and skipped into the bush, and then old Garthorpe levels it dead at us. We looked sharp to follow Johnson's example, and then the old chap rode quietly on, chuckling to himself. Gough swears he heard him say 'somethinged scoundrels,' but that may have been part of the sermon he was concocting. Anyhow, he turned the tables on us most completely."

"Probably the revolver wasn't loaded," suggested Claverton.

"Revolver! Sorra a bit. It was a pipe-case. We three skedaddled for our lives before a preaching old humbug at the fag-end of an old pipe-case."

A roar went up from his auditors at the picture.

"Fact," repeated Armitage. "Tell you what, though; that thing looked plaguey like a pistol in the moonlight. Besides, it's just the sort of thing a fellow would bring out, you know, under the circumstances. Old Garthorpe went bragging about it all over the shop, and very soon the joke got wind. But this is all very well. How about our bet, Claverton?"

"Oh, all right, I'll take you. Two to one in half-crowns there won't be a cloud in the sky by two o'clock."

"Done," said Armitage. "Any one else game?"

But no one was. "We are not going to encourage anything so disreputable as that betting mania of yours," said Ethel.

"Well, good people," called out Jim's jovial tones, as he swung himself out of his dripping mackintosh, and stamped and scraped to rid his boots of the mud before entering, "how about a start this morning? Not much chance of it, is there, unless you are ready to swim for it."

"Well, *we* must," said Naylor; "I must be home to-day. I'm expecting Smith round my way about those slaughter-oxen this afternoon, and if I'm not there, away goes a good bargain."

"Besides, we shall be all right in the trap," said his wife. "Laura, why not come with us, if you are in a hurry to get back? We could manage to make room for you and Ethel, and your horses could be led."

"Thanks; but I don't think we ought to desert our escort in that way," she answered. The plan suggested in no wise fell in with her views—nor, we may add, with those of Ethel.

"It'll be outrageously shabby of you if you do, and in fact we shan't allow it," said Claverton.

"The damned Britishers are made of salt—afraid of a little rain," growled Thorman, in a low tone, at the other side of the room.

Jeffreys, to whom the remark was addressed, and who had reasons of his own for abhorring the "imported" element, acquiesced in the sneer, and just then they were summoned to breakfast. It cleared in the afternoon with startling suddenness, and as the equestrians started for home, the blue sky was without a cloud.

"This is lovely," exclaimed Ethel, as they cantered along; "but,"—and the bright laughing face clouded—"isn't it a nuisance? Will Jeffreys is going back with us."

"What, all the way?" said Claverton. "I thought we were going to choke him off at Van Rooyen's, where we picked him up."

"No such luck. He's going back to Seringa Vale; at least, so Mr Armitage says."

"Oh, that may be only Jack's chaff; but—"

He checked himself as something seemed to strike him. "Bosh!" he thought, "Jack only sees that she rather hates the bullet-headed fool, and is trying to take a rise out of her." Then aloud: "That fellow Jack is a confounded nuisance at times, and yet on the whole I think he's an acquisition."

"Oh, yes; he makes one laugh so often, which is a great thing. Just look at him now, for instance."

Both turned to watch the interesting object of their discussion, who was evidently about to keep up his reputation—for Allen, whose decrepit steed had gone dead lame, and was incapable of carrying him, had received the loan of the volatile Waschbank, which sprightly quadruped was evidently rather more than a handful to him. Armitage perceiving this, delighted to get behind and by dint of sundry clicking noises, softly articulated, to induce the already excited animal to plunge and shake his head frantically, and make violent attempts at bolting, to the dire discomfiture of the rider, who clutched the bridle spasmodically with both hands, holding on, as it were, "by the skin of his teeth."

"It's rather a shame," mused Claverton, as they contemplated the performance. "Why can't he let the poor devil alone, even for half an hour? Allen isn't a bad fellow, although he's an ass in some things."

"Look out, Allen. Hold on, pay out your rein, or, by George, he'll have you off!" Armitage was saying, while Jeffreys rode behind sardonically enjoying the other's discomfiture. And the warning came none too soon, for Waschbank, finding the increased pressure of the rather sharp curb, which his rider was bearing on more and more heavily, defied his frantic attempts at a bolt, sought to vary the entertainment by suddenly rearing. Then as Allen, in a panic, quickly slackened the reins, grasping at the same time a bit of the mane, away went Waschbank with a rush and a snort, his rider still clinging on like grim Death. But this was not to last long, for one of the said rider's long spurs digging violently into his flank, the animal put down his head, and springing into the air, all four feet at once, promptly shot the hapless Allen into space and a thorn-bush which grew handy. Then after vainly endeavouring in the course of half-a-dozen more "bucks" to rid himself of his saddle, the amiable brute gave a loud snort and started for home at a hand gallop.

"Hallo, Allen!" cried Claverton, dismounting to haul him out of the bush. "Jump up, old man. Not hurt, are you? That's it?" as the other staggered to his feet groaning and wincing; as well he might, for his "continuations" were stuck as full of thorns as a well-stocked pincushion is of pins. "Better thorns than broken bones, you know. What's to be done? At the rate that brute's going he'll be within a hundred yards of Buffel's Kloof by now, or we might have exchanged. Sticks is as quiet as a village scold on board the ducking-stool."

"Plenty more thorn-bushes," sneered Jeffreys, in a load aside. "But it's a safe enough offer now that Waschbank's gone home."

"I say," began Jack, in mock concern, "what are we to do? Toss up who shall pursue the absconding Waschbank with a pinch of salt, eh?"

"Humbugging apart, though," said Claverton, "we are only about a mile from Van Rooyen's; the best thing for Allen to do will be to walk on there, and the Dutchman will be able to rig him out with some sort of a mount to take him home."

This was arranged, and they rode on.

"I think Jack carries his jokes too far sometimes," remarked Claverton. "He'll find his level some day."

They soon arrived at Van Rooyen's, and the Dutchman, having enjoyed a hearty laugh over poor Allen's mishap, sent for the steadiest old roadster in his paddock and mounted the dethroned hero thereon; and after resting an hour, which somehow had nearly dragged itself out to two, the party were in the saddle again, bound for their respective homes. But it is the Seringa Vale quartette—for the obnoxious Jeffreys had, after all, left them at Van Rooyen's—whom we shall now follow. It was late when they left Buffel's Kloof, and now, as they rode over the rising ground which shut the Dutchman's farmstead from sight behind, the very short gloaming of a South African day was already drawing in.

"I don't know how it is; as a rule I enjoy a ride at night," said Ethel, "but this evening I can't help wishing we were safe at home, I feel quite low and nervous;" and she shivered.

"I know how it is. You've caught cold," replied her companion. "It's a particularly warm evening, and you're shivering as if it were mid-winter. Here—wait a bit—and put this on."

In a trice he had unstrapped an ample waterproof cloak from his saddle, and, dismounting, wrapped it twice round her, tightly and securely, yet so as not to impede the management of the reins.

"Thanks. No, I wasn't cold—it's very absurd—but I feel as if something dreadful was going to happen. A kind of presentiment."

"Nonsense, child. You have been catching cold; but we shall both be catching it hot soon for being so outrageously late. Come along, here's a nice level bit, and those two are a good mile ahead."

"Yes, it's too absurd of me," she said, as they cantered on; "but—I felt a drop of rain."

They looked up. Sure enough the sky had suddenly clouded over, and several large raindrops splashed down upon the road.

"We are in for a shower, I'm afraid," said Claverton. "Nothing for it but leg-bail. However, that ancient garment will keep you as dry as a chip, unless it has suddenly performed the feat in physiology which Holy Writ associates with the Ethiopian."

They rode on with heads bent forward, for a fierce gust drove the rain, which had now increased to a deluging shower, right into their faces.

“Look at that!” exclaimed Ethel, in a terrified voice, as a vivid flash played around them, causing the horses to start and swerve. It was followed by a deep roll of thunder—long, loud, and startlingly near.

“Who’d have thought it?” said her companion. “It may be just a passing flash or so, and we shall ride through it in a minute.” He spoke cheerfully; nevertheless, there was anxiety in the quick, half-furtive glance which he cast upwards and around.

“Do you think so? It may not be much, after all; and I’m an awful coward,” she answered, trying to laugh; but her voice shook with apprehension, and her face was pale in the vivid gleam which fell around them, and faded, leaving the gathering gloom almost pitchy from contrast. “Do let’s go back,” she added.

“Too late. It would take almost as long to get back to Van Rooyen’s, as to reach home. Besides, we should get into the thick of it—it’s all behind us.”

They rode on. The path lay along a high ridge, and the surrounding *veldt* looked indescribably desolate as a furious blast tore and howled over the wild waste, driving the rain into their eyes. But suddenly wind and rain alike ceased; and lo! a great stream of jagged fire shot down upon the road in front, accompanied by a terrific crash—a crash as though the earth had yawned asunder and they were floating in a sea of flame. The horses, affrighted by the appalling sight and the strong smell of burning which was plainly perceptible, snorted and plunged, and then stood still, trembling in every limb.

“We had better leave the road,” said Claverton. “We shall be safe enough down in the kloof; though here it *is* a trifle nasty.”

“Shall I dismount?” she asked.

“No; sit still and follow me. Can you steer your horse all right, or would you rather I led him?”

“Oh, no; I can manage.”

They went down and down, deeper and deeper through the long, wet grass and dripping bushes; and now and again a flash would light up the far depths of the great, dark kloof with a blue gleam, and the thunder roared and reverberated among the rocks and krantzes beyond. Before they had gone far, Claverton dismounted and kept a firm hand on his companion’s bridle, for the horse slipped and stumbled over the wet stones on the steep side of the kloof. Ethel did not speak, but her lips would convulsively tighten with fear as each vivid lightning-flash played around them, with its terrific accompaniment. She was horribly afraid of thunderstorms, even when safe at home, but to be benighted thus in the open *veldt*, in the midst of such a one as this, was simply appalling.

“At any rate we are safe enough here, though it is infamously wet,” said her escort, reassuringly; “and—by George, we are in luck’s way—there’s a house!”

A roof became apparent at the bottom of the ravine, and in a few minutes they had reached it. But disappointment was in store, for the welcome haven of refuge turned out to be an old disused shanty, formerly run up for the accommodation of some road party, or possibly had served as an out-station for those in charge of grazing stock. Nevertheless, though a tumble-down and sorry-looking tenement, yet it would afford a tolerably substantial shelter from the drenching fury of the storm. Claverton lifted his companion from her saddle, and pushing open the mouldering door, which creaked with an unearthly noise on its rusty hinges, they stood inside.

“Not exactly the marble halls of the poet’s dream—deuced cold they must have been at times—but it’s wet outside and dry in here, which makes all the difference,” he remarked, as he struck a match and surveyed the interior of the sorry apartment. The dilapidated thatch hung in cobwebbed festoons, throwing out ghostly, waving shadows in the flickering light; and a cockroach or two, alarmed by this sudden intrusion, scurried along the worm-eaten beams. “Wait half a second,” he went on, “while I just go and hitch up the horses, and then we’ll proceed to make ourselves as comfortable as circumstances will allow.”

“Oh, Arthur, don’t leave me alone, even for a moment! I am so frightened!” she exclaimed, clinging to his arm. The name slipped out in her terror, but she was quite unhinged, and noticed it not.

“Frightened? You foolish child,” he answered, reassuringly; “there’s nothing to be afraid of now—Look. We can afford to laugh at the storm here, and will be as snug as anything directly.”

“But it’s so dark, and—”

“Dark. Well, yes; unfortunately the last tenant forgot to leave any candles for our benefit, which was uncivil of him, to say the least of it. However, ‘the Heaven above’ is kindly doing its best to supply the deficiency, and we’ll meet it half-way by starting a famous blaze.”

So saying, he gathered together some old bits of board which lay about, and, chipping them into small fragments, built up a fire well in the middle of the room—for the fireplace was choked up with dust and fallen bricks—and, lighting it, the flames darted up, crackling and sputtering, and diffusing a genial and revivifying warmth.

“There. The smoke will go out through the thatch, and at any rate it won’t be worse than in a Kafir hut. You’re not very wet, are you? No, I thought my old poncho hadn’t lost its cunning. And now you won’t be afraid to stay by yourself a minute while I look after the horses. It’s dark as pitch outside, and the brutes will be wandering Heaven knows where if I don’t make them fast at once.”

He went out, and leading the horses round to the back of the house proceeded to secure them in a sheltered place. While thus engaged a low scream, emanating from the room he had just quitted, fell on his ear.

Left alone, Ethel drew the cloak tighter round her, and crouched over the bright, dancing flames; but in spite of their cheery glow she shivered. How long would it be before he came back? He had hardly been gone a minute, and it seemed an age. Then a flash and a loud thunderpeal made her start, and her face blanched, and she hid it in the ample cloak, and cowered down in mortal dread. How long would he be? Supposing the horses had strayed, and he had gone after them, and had lost his way, and should be unable to find the hut again. Oh, horror of horrors! if she were to be left alone there all night, alone, in the silence of that deserted place—a silence only broken by an occasional and mysterious rustle or creaking—and at the very thought of it her brain reeled and sickened, and the muffled patter of the rain upon the thatch sounded like the dull roar of many waters, and—Oh, Heavens! what was that?

For a growl, as of some wild beast, fell upon her terrified ears. She dared not raise her head, and again that grisly sound arose—long, low, and menacing.

Opposite to where she sat was a doorway leading into another compartment of the hovel. This was nearly concealed when the door by which they had entered stood open, being behind it; but now that the entrance was shut the gap yawned, dark and shadowy. And as Ethel glanced towards it, her gaze fell upon two glaring eyes in the blackness beyond. Was she dreaming? No, there they were—two scintillating green stars—their awful gaze fixed upon her with a terrible stare. The blood curdled in her veins; she tried to scream, but her tongue refused to fulfil its office; her limbs shook, and had she been standing she would have fallen to the earth prone as a log. And still that piercing, baleful stare shone through the blackness—and—God!—was she going mad? Her heart beat as if it would burst; every second was a lifetime; every pulsation of her throbbing temples seemed like the blow of a sledge-hammer, and her glance was fixed upon those terrible orbs with basilisk fascination. Then the sound of Claverton's voice outside apostrophising the horses, broke the spell, and she uttered the scream of helpless terror which caught his attention.

Quickly, yet quietly, the door was opened, and he stood beside her.

"What is it?" he asked, in the calmest of tones.

"Look!" was all she could reply; but there was no necessity for following the direction of her dilated eyes, for at that moment the dreaded sound came through the doorway louder than ever.

"Oh!—That all?" he said. "Now, look here, child, don't be in the very least afraid, there's nothing to be afraid of, and we'll soon put an extinguisher on that. It's only some half-starved Kafir mongrel that's got in." His ear detected fear rather than rage in the snarl which to her overwrought senses had sounded so dread and menacing. He stretched out his hand towards the gun, which he had placed against the wall on entering. "Now, sit still, and don't be afraid," he reiterated; but before he could bring it to bear, there was a loud yell and a rush; something large and heavy sprang into the room, cannoning against his legs, and nearly overturning him, then sped out through the half-open door into the rain and the darkness, while poor Ethel, who had had as much fright as she could stand, fell backward in a dead faint.

Quickly he held his handkerchief beneath the dripping thatch before the door, and in a moment it was soaked through and through. Then, supporting her head, he placed the cold wet bandage upon her temples, and drawing forth his pocket-flask, which was about a third full of brandy and water in equal proportions, he poured a little of the potent mixture between her lips. A deep sigh of returning consciousness, the long lashes unfolded, and the blue eyes looked wonderingly into his. Then, with a start, she made as if she would rise, but he restrained her.

"Don't be in a hurry," he said. "Take it easy for a little while longer—there's lots of time."

She shivered. "Oh, I've had an awful fright! What was it?" she said, with a shudder.

"Nothing. Nothing whatever, except that your too-lively imagination ran riot with you. Anyhow, it's all right now, so what you've got to do is just to keep perfectly still until I tell you to move. By-and-by I'm going to read you a lecture."

"But you won't leave me alone again," she entreated.

"No, not as long as you do what I tell you!"

She was silent, for she felt very weak and helpless after her fright.

"Take some more of this," he said.

"No, thanks."

"But you must."

She obeyed him passively. Then revived by the invigorating spirit, she sat up.

Her companion looked at her.

"Ethel," he said, "you're an awful little coward. You're worse than any town-bred English girl, getting into such a fright about nothing—absolutely nothing—upon my word you are. I shouldn't have thought it of you, you know, I shouldn't, really."

He spoke in a serio-jesting tone of expostulation, not actually meaning what he said, or that she had had no real cause for alarm. But he did not want her mind to revert too much to what had happened; wherefore he treated the occurrence as a mere hallucination. The line he adopted had the desired effect, for a gleam of her old self shot from the blue eyes as she answered:

“You had no business to leave me all alone, then. And, do go and see that there’s nothing in that other room.”

“All right,” and he got up to comply; but she followed him.

“I can’t remain here by myself,” she pleaded.

“Can’t you? Well, but you see, you can’t go with me. So we’ll solve the difficulty by fastening up both doors, and we’ll make ourselves comfortable here till that jolly old sun sneaks up again;” and in a moment he had secured the doors, and was beside her again.

“But—I am so hungry,” she laughed.

“H’m, that’s unfortunate, because there’s nothing to eat unless we fall to on the stirrup-leathers. Wait a bit, though. By Jove!” He fumbled in one of the numerous pockets of his shooting-coat, and produced a packet done up in whitey-brown paper, which being unfolded, disclosed a large and somewhat demoralised sandwich, considerably the worse for wear. “Not a very inviting morsel,” he remarked, surveying the battered comestible. “Yet it may do at a pinch to keep the wolf from the door. Though,”—he added to himself—“that amiable quadruped is likely to give the door a deuced wide berth considering the mortal funk he was in when he shot through it just now.”

The girl laughed, quite in her old joyous, light-hearted way. “I should think so,” she cried. “We’ll go halves.”

“We’ll do nothing of the sort,” said her companion. “I’ll give you ten minutes, and if there’s a crumb left of that antique sandwich by then I’ll—well, I’ll go out again and see how the horses are getting on.”

“But—”

“No ‘buts.’ Really I’ll go.”

This awful threat was effective, and being ravenously hungry, Ethel speedily made short work of the sandwich, protesting to the last against the other’s decision. But he was firm.

“Two people under one umbrella, both get wet,” he observed, sententiously. “What will feed one will starve two. I’m going to have a pipe instead. Lucky that greedy beggar Jack didn’t know I had any more provender yesterday, or he would inevitably have cadged it. I had forgotten it myself till this moment.”

“I wonder what has become of the others,” said Ethel.

“Safe at home, long ago. They’ll think we went back to Van Rooyen’s,” he replied.

“But we might, you know; the storm seems to be over now.”

“Not to be dreamt of,” answered he, decisively. “It’s pitch dark, and raining in a way that would set the patriarch Noah spinning yarns about old times if he were with us. We should be wandering about the *veldt* all night, instead of being snug by a good fire.”

“I suppose so,” acquiesced the girl, “and, do you know, I’m getting so sleepy.”

“Glad to hear it,” was the reply; and placing one of the saddles near the fire, Claverton arranged a corner of his ample cloak over it so as to form a pillow. “Lie down here,” he said, “you can imagine yourself in a railway carriage or anywhere else that’s infamously uncomfortable;” and as she obeyed he wrapped the cloak well round her, and returned to his former place.

Presently she opened her eyes—“Arthur.”

“Well?”

“Promise you won’t leave me—or I shan’t be able to sleep a wink.”

“Why, I thought you were fairly off. It’s twelve o’clock.”

“No—I’m not—Promise!”

“All right—I won’t budge.”

“Thanks;” and in a few moments her regular breathing told that she had forgotten her troubles in sleep.

Claverton piled some more wood on to the fire and drew in closer, shivering slightly, the fact being that he was nearly wet through—having given up his cloak as we have seen. Then he proceeded to fill his pipe.

“Poor little thing,” he mused, contemplating the slumbering form of his companion in adversity. “What a fright she was in—and small blame to her. Wonder what the beast could have been,” and getting up, he went and examined the soft ground by the door to see if it had left any spoor. “Yes—I thought so: a wolf, and a damned big wolf, too.” (Note 1.)

He returned to his seat by the fire and sat dreamily smoking. “What a pretty picture she makes,” he thought; and in good truth she did, as the long lashes lay in a dark semicircle on the rounded cheek, while the full red lips were parted ever so lightly, and the firelight danced and flickered with a ruddy glow on the golden head of the sleeper.

“Very good fun now, no doubt, that is if it were not so infernally cold,” he went on, “but the situation may begin to look awkward in the morning, when we are besieged by the kind inquiries of friends. However, the gentle sex knows devilish well how to take care of itself, that’s one comfort. ‘Self-preservation is the first law of woman,’ I truly believe to have been the original rendering of the proverb—the reason of its alteration is but too obvious. But assuredly the child would have been dead, or deuced near it, by morning if we hadn’t found this place, whereas now, in half-a-dozen hours’ time she’ll wake up fresh as paint, and probably abuse me like the prince of pickpockets, and swear it would have been much better to have slept out in the *veldt* all night. That’s the way of them.”

A flash of lighting lit up the room with a fitful gleam, and a loud roll of thunder shook the old house to its very foundations. The storm, as frequently happens in those regions, had been travelling in a kind of circle, and was now returning in all its former fury.

“Will it wake her? She has had enough scare for one night,” he thought, uneasily glancing towards her. But no; thoroughly wearied out, Ethel never moved as the rickety casements rattled to the fierce gusts which howled round the building, and Claverton felt relieved. Presently he got up and went to the window. All was pitch dark outside, but every now and then the sky would be ablaze with a sudden flash—blue, plum-coloured, and gold, in its vivid incandescence—the hill tops stood out as if cut in steel against the misty background, while beneath yawned the intersecting rifts of black, chasm-like kloofs, every leaf and twig wet and shining, as clearly definable as at noonday. A panorama of weirdness and desolation. Then pitchy blackness and the long heavy roll of the storm king’s artillery. Claverton resumed his seat, and the thunder crashed and roared outside, the lightning played in vivid gleams, and the rain fell in torrents with a noise like the rush of many waters; but within, silence, only broken by the soft, regular breathing of the sleeper, and the plash of a big drop on the floor, for the tattered thatch was not so watertight as might be wished. And the night wore on. The fire burnt low, leaving the angles of the ghostly old room in shadowy darkness, while now and again a scratching noise might be heard as some creeping thing made its way through the thatch or along the beams. The storm lulled, and then passed, and, save for the murmur of falling rain, perfect silence prevailed outside, and still the chilled watcher sat there, upright and motionless. Then he fell into a doze. The dismal bark of a jackal was now and again borne from the lonely bush; but not a sound escaped him as he sat there, till at last the first faint shiver of dawn thrilled upon the hushened air; a red glow in the east, then a blood-coloured streak on the few light clouds which,—but for the soaked earth, were the sole traces of a night of fierce tempestuousness.

Claverton rose and went out softly, so as not to arouse his companion, to where he had tied up the horses. Those long-suffering animals pricked up their ears and whinnied at his approach, and, except that one of them had got its leg over the reim, were just as they had been left the night before. Then he went back to awaken Ethel. A smile was upon her lips, and as he stood over her a gleam of sunlight shot in at the open door and played upon the beautiful face. He lingered a few moments, for he could hardly bring himself to arouse her; but time was flying, the sun was up, and they must be going. So he said, quietly but distinctly: “Time to be off, Ethel.”

The girl started slightly, opened her eyes, then started again in bewilderment. He watched her with an amused expression.

“Where am I?” she exclaimed, sitting upright and looking round. “Oh, I remember. I thought it was all a dream.”

“Well, we must be getting home. I’m just going to take the horses down into the kloof and give them a drink, and then we’ll make tracks.”

He went out, and Ethel got up and looked around. “What a selfish little wretch I am!” she thought, as her eyes rested on the relics of the night’s doings, the dying embers of the fire, beside which lay the empty pocket-flask, and the bit of paper and string whence the opportune sandwich had been extracted, and then on the cloak which she had just thrown off. “I took everything from him, and left him to sit there all night, cold and wet and hungry. I wish it had to come all over again, that I might sit out in the rain and the thunder and lightning all night. That’s what I’d do, I swear I would,” she ended, vehemently.

A trampling of hoofs outside showed that the object of her meditations was returning.

“Now then, I’ll just put the saddles on and we shall get home in nice time for breakfast,” he said; “but, first of all, we’ll see how our friend of last night got in.”

“What, did that actually happen? I thought I dreamt it.”

Claverton laughed. “I intended you should,” he said. “It would never have done for you to have thought about it all night long; but it was a fact, nevertheless. Come and look here.”

He pointed out three great footmarks just inside the doorway, left by the terrified animal as it rushed out; then bursting open the door of the other room, they went in.

“There’s no outlet,” he said, looking around. “Stay—yes, here’s a hole behind the fireplace; but it could never have got in there. No; here’s the key to the mystery,” as they came upon the mangled carcase of a half-grown kid. “This little brute must have got in somehow, and the wolf, attracted by its yelling, charged through that door,” showing one which opened into the room from without; “then it must have banged to and caught him in a trap. Pity I wasn’t able to shoot the scoundrel!”

Ethel shuddered at the recollection. “Let’s start,” she said, turning towards the door.

He put her into her saddle and they left their opportunely-found shelter. The sun was now up, and, as they ascended the side of the kloof, the whole landscape sparkled and glowed beneath the scorching beams, every leaf and blade of grass studded with diamonds; and the birds carolled forth gaily in the glad morning air, and doves shook out their soft plumage, and cooed to each other on the wet sprays, and it was difficult to realise such a culmination to a night of storm and terror. Just before they reached the road a strange fancy moved Claverton to turn and look back upon their late haven of refuge, and then a clump of bush hid it from view. He little thought when and under what circumstances he should see it again.

“What was the joke just now, when I woke you up?” he asked, as they rode along.

“Joke? Why—when?” she exclaimed, wonderingly.

“Oh, only that you were having a downright good laugh all to yourself. I thought it a pity to disturb you, so had the grace to give you a few minutes longer, in reward for which I claim to know what it was about.”

She looked at him curiously for a moment, and a faint flush suffused her cheek; then she broke into a ringing laugh. “I don’t believe I was laughing at all,” she said; “and, if I was, I intend to keep the fun all to myself this time. But what will uncle and aunt say when we get home?”

“Say? Oh, that the very best thing we could do was to have—gone back to Van Rooyen’s—got under cover like sensible people,” answered he, in a cool, matter-of-fact tone.

Ethel was silent for a few moments. She was not quite easy in her mind. “I was in a great hurry to get home last night, but now it doesn’t seem quite so delightful,” she thought, with a sort of strange bitterness; and she wondered how in the world she could ever have allowed herself to be so frightened. But meanwhile there was Seringa Vale, and the adventure, or misadventure, was at an end.

Greatly to Ethel’s relief, neither anxiety nor surprise were manifested on their return.

“Hullo!” sang out Hicks. “You were fortunate in being so far behind. We thought of going back, too; but it seemed no use, so we rode on as hard as we could, and got here in the thick of the storm, wet through.”

“Ethel doesn’t like Dutch houses, but she had to sleep in a worse one than Van Rooyen’s once,” said Mrs Brathwaite. “There were only two rooms, and five of us had to turn into one, while all the men took possession of the other. But it was such a place! We couldn’t sleep all night.”

“I suppose not,” said Claverton. If they were at cross purposes, it was not his business to go out of his way to enlighten them, especially as, in this instance, cross purposes were best.

And Ethel evidently thought so too.

Note 1. The large striped hyaena is called “wolf” in South Afrioa, just as the panther is always referred to as “tiger.” Both terms are, of course, zoologically erroneous.

Volume One—Chapter Thirteen.

“Like Thunderbolt from a clear sky.”

“Drive on, Piet, Mopela! Sharp’s the word; don’t give them time to think. Look alive, now!”

The speaker is Mr Brathwaite; the scene the wash-pool. A long line of fleecy backs is moving over the *veldt*, propelled by the shouts of three or four Kafirs, whose naked bodies glisten in the sun as they advance swiftly behind the flock, brandishing their red blankets and whistling shrilly. For it may be that the leaders of that sturdy mass of fat wethers, over a thousand in number, may take a sudden freak into their woolly heads, and refuse to go any further when once within that *cul de sac* of thorn-fence gradually narrowing down to an outlet, and that outlet the water—which will mean that each particular animal must be thrown in separately, not once, but four or five times. Therefore they must be kept on the move and run down as quickly as possible. Once they begin jumping all will follow, but should the foremost happen to jib, then the morning’s work will be a hard one indeed.

A pleasant spot is this; bush and open *veldt* about in equal proportion. Yonder, across the river, rises a ridge of high ground whose slopes are well wooded, and over the wash-pool, which consists of a long, smooth reach, the finks are flitting about their pendulous, swaying nests, and twittering in the sunshine; while that shadowy krantz overhanging the stream further down echoes back the long-drawn piping of spreuws and the “coo” of a solitary dove.

Mr Brathwaite and his two lieutenants are evidently got up for business—rough shirts and trousers and broad-brimmed hats, the last a very necessary safeguard, for the morning, though still young, is unconscionably warm.

“Don’t think these will give us any trouble, they always take to the water like ducks. It’s the next lot, the ewes, that are brutes to funk; and once on that tack the devil himself won’t make them jump. Bles, you *schelm*!” he exclaims, with a crack of his whip to hasten the decision of the *voerbok*, who is slackening pace dubiously at the entrance to the *cul de sac*. The old goat gives a start and resumes his course, trotting down towards the water; the sheep stream after him, and before he has time to think better of it, even if so disposed, his woolly followers press so closely upon him that there is no help for it; he springs from the rock into the water, about two feet and a half beneath, and the whole flock hastens to follow by threes and fours, and swimming across emerges dripping on the other side. Indeed, so fast do they press forward that it becomes necessary for some one to stand at the water’s edge and check them, lest they should injure themselves or their neighbours by jumping upon each other’s backs.

“That’s how I like to see them jump. Fine sheep like that ought never to want throwing in,” says the old farmer, watching his well-bred flock with some pride.

On they come, their drivers keeping them well at it, and in a short time the last jumps in. The whole lot are through and scattering slowly over the *veldt* on the other side, the steam arising in clouds from their dripping fleeces.

“Bring them on again,” calls out Mr Brathwaite, after a little time has been given them to rest and get warm again. The animals are driven through at a shallow place lower down the river, and brought round to the jumping place again. Then they are headed once more for the water, going through this time even better than the first.

“Hallo!” cries Hicks, running down to the edge and scrutinising the surface all alive with panting heads and spongy fleeces. “One’s down. Yes, there it is,” pointing to four kicking legs above the surface, but which immediately disappear. “In with you, Mopela—Piet—look sharp!” The first addressed pretends not to hear, but Piet, throwing aside his kaross, takes a header, and as he reappears he just catches sight of the drowning animal. In a twinkling he has seized it, and holding its head above water, he strikes out for the bank, dragging his cumbersome and struggling burthen. The animal had been suddenly taken with a fit and gone under—an occurrence which now and then happens, and but for Hicks’ promptitude would have been drowned. As it was, it lay upon the ground, and after some gasping staggered to its legs, tottered a little way, then lay down again, and finally picked itself up and began nibbling a little grass, and in a few minutes had quite recovered.

The operation is repeated in precisely the same way as at first, and after the flock had been through four times, it wore a very different appearance to what it had done before; every fleece looking almost snowy white by contrast as the animals are slowly driven off to their ordinary pasturage, nibbling as they go.

“Piet, go and tell Umgiswe to bring on his lot,” says Mr Brathwaite. “There are under five hundred, and it won’t take us very long,” he adds, for the benefit of his lieutenants, “that is if they jump well. ’Tisn’t twelve o’clock yet, so there’ll be lots of time for them to dry.”

Twenty minutes’ rest, and then a sound of approaching bleating told that the other flock was at hand.

Then arises a deafening and hideous din as the sheep are driven into the *cul de sac*. Yelling, and shouting, and whistling, white and black alike contributing towards the general row, waving karosses, cracking whips, and beating the ground with branches. The *voerbok* spasmodically rushes on ahead, plunges into the water and swims through; but the sheep, suddenly deserted by their leader, stop half-way down the passage, and, in spite of the pressure from behind, and the earsplitting shindy, steadfastly refuse to budge.

“We’ve bungled it somehow,” says the old farmer, in a cool, matter-of-fact tone. “No use bothering them any more just now. Bring round the goat, and we’ll try again.”

Two of the Kafirs start off on that intent, but it takes some time to “collect” the truant, who runs hither and thither, bleating idiotically. At last he is brought back to his post of honour at the head of the flock; the driving and the row recommences, and the goat leaps into the water manfully; but he is leading a forlorn hope, indeed, for not one of the sheep will follow him—devil a sheep—though they are on the brink of the water. There they stick, firmly and stubbornly.

“Come on, Claverton, we must pitch some of them in,” cries Hicks, and the two promptly shove their way through the closely-wedged flock, which stands packed like sardines, wheezing and panting in the heat. In a twinkling they have seized half-a-dozen of the obstinate brutes and shied them in; but the rest show no signs of following, and so they go on, till at last they pause, breathless and bathed in perspiration, for two of the Kafirs to take their places; and finally, by relays of labour, the whole flock is through.

“Whew! but that’s warm work,” exclaims Claverton, as, after a short rest, the word is given to bring them on again. “Perhaps they’ll jump this time.”

His conjecture proves correct. Whether it is that they find their plunge cool and refreshing on this hot day, or that they are tired of resistance, or a little of both, is uncertain; but as again, amid whistling and din, the stupid animals are driven down to the water’s edge, they follow their leader, at first gingerly and by twos and threes, and then so fast that Hicks takes up his position at the jumping place to check them; in process whereof, having imprudently got too near the edge, he is upset bodily into the water, and disappears from mortal view, to emerge, spluttering and puffing and making awful faces, as he scrambles up the bank, dripping like a half-drowned rat.

I know of nothing more funny than the sudden and unexpected descent of any one into deep water. The utter woefulness, combined with an indignant air of injured innocence, which the sufferer’s countenance invariably assumes on emerging, should make a cat laugh; anyhow, nothing human can stand against it. And the savagely furious way in which the patient hisses between his chattering teeth, “What the devil is there to grin at?” While the *tout ensemble*, his garments clinging to his shivering carcase, is in no wise calculated to invest his just exasperation with the majesty of outraged dignity.

Poor Hicks formed no exception. Everybody was convulsed; one of the Kafirs to such an extent, that he could do nothing but roll on the ground in the exuberance of his glee, though he managed to recover sufficiently to dart out of the way just in time to avoid a mighty kick aimed at his nether quarters by the infuriated object of his mirth.

“There’s something for you to grin at, you sooty son of a Cheshire cat!” exclaimed Hicks, savagely; but, as we have seen, he missed his aim, and in a minute had recovered all his wonted good humour.

The sheep gave no more trouble, but went through after that as if they liked it. Two or three turned over in the water, and were rescued as previously described, while one died; but these accidents were inevitable, and soon the flock was straggling away across the *veldt* to its feeding ground—white, clean, and freshened up.

When they reached home, the dining-room table was strewn with letters and newspapers. The postbag, which was fetched from the nearest agency once a week, had just arrived, and as they entered, Mrs Brathwaite was reading a letter aloud for the public benefit. The writer stated her intention of profiting by an unexpectedly early opportunity, and availing herself of a long-standing and oft-repeated invitation to visit them at Seringa Vale, in about a fortnight from then, and subscribed herself: "*Lilian Strange*."

"Poor thing!" said Mr Brathwaite. "We'll soon bring the roses back to her cheeks. A couple of months of this splendid air, and she'll be that strong and sunburnt they Won't know her when she goes back."

And the kindly, hospitable old couple went on discussing their prospective visitor and her joys and sorrows, past, present, and to come; projecting all manner of schemes for making her stay an enjoyable and a happy one.

There was one present whom this letter had set thinking, and that was Claverton. The name seemed familiar and yet not, for he couldn't for the life of him fit it to an individual.

"Lilian—Lilian Strange—Lilian," he kept repeating to himself. "Now where the deuce have I come across that name before? Lilian—it's a pretty name, too. No, I can't remember for the life of me." He could see the writing as the letter lay open on the table. It was rather large and very distinct, but not masculine. But neither it nor memory seemed to aid him, and he gave it up.

"What is she like, aunt?" asked Ethel. "And what sort of age is she? Young or middling?"

The old lady laughed. "Young or middling? Gracious me, child. She's only twenty-three, is sweetly pretty, and has the loveliest eyes I ever saw."

"Present company excepted—ahem!" cut in Hicks, thinking he had said an excessively smart thing, and colouring and looking an ass on the strength of it.

"We must make her enjoy her visit," went on Mrs Brathwaite. "Poor girl, I feel so sorry for her. Her mother is dead, and her stepfather was a country gentleman in England and a wealthy man. When he died all his property went to his own family, and Lilian was left without a penny. Her relations on the stepfather's side were not kind to her, and she was thrown on the world to get her living as best she could, and now she's teaching."

"Universal refuge for the destitute," murmured Ethel. "What brought her out here?"

"A ship," chimed in Hicks, intent on being funny. But Ethel looked angrily at him, and he collapsed.

"She came out as a companion to some lady," answered Mrs Brathwaite. "Then the McColls at Port Elizabeth engaged her to teach their children, and a nice handful she must find them. I fancy her health has rather broken down. She looked anything but strong when we saw her last June."

"It'll be a great nuisance," said Ethel afterwards to her sister when they were alone together, "to have to be always trundling this girl about. She'll probably give herself no end of airs and try to patronise us all."

"I don't know," answered Laura, "I have an idea she'll be rather nice. Her letter reads like it."

"Perhaps so," rejoined Ethel, a little ashamed of her inhospitable speech; "let's hope so, anyhow."

In due course the shearers arrived, and all being ready, operations were begun at once. No more long rides or bushbuck bants or anything of the kind, time was too valuable; and for about three weeks Mr Brathwaite and his two lieutenants had their hands full in superintending and otherwise furthering that most important phase of farm routine—shearing; and from rosy morn till dewy eve, and often till late within the latter, were they strictly on duty.

Yes, those were busy times indeed. There were the Fingo shearers to be set to their work and kept to it, wool bales to be pressed and sewn up, rationing to be attended to, and a hundred and one things, large or small, to tax the mind and employ the hand. Moreover, a sharp eye had to be kept on the natives aforesaid, lest in their laudable anxiety to make the largest possible tally, they should inflict grievous bodily harm upon the animals under operation, and haply remove the cuticle as well as the fleece. But those there employed were old hands at the craft, and gave no trouble to speak of. They would clip away by the hour, chatting among themselves in that seemingly disjointed way wherein these people are wont to exchange gossip. Now and then they varied the pastime by humming a barbarous tune on about three notes, whose terrible monotony would be distracting were it not that the ear gets accustomed to the wretched crooning, even as to the hum of a threshing machine or the ticking of an obtrusive clock, but through this, as through all other sounds, the clip, clip, clip of the shears went steadily on, from morning till night, from day to day.

"I've just had another letter from Lilian Strange," said Mrs Brathwaite, one evening towards the close of the busy time above mentioned.

"What does she say?" asked the old settler, who was nodding in a roomy arm-chair, tired with the heat and exertion of the day.

"She says she won't be able to come to us this week after all, because the McColls have put off their start. She may have to wait another ten days in consequence."

"H'm. Don't know that it isn't just as well. It would have been difficult to send for her during shearing time—means two days away from home. Hicks might have gone to fetch her, or Arthur, but they are both wanted here. Naylor's busy, too, and so is Jim. Yes, it's just as well, as things go."

“She thinks she will have an opportunity in about a fortnight, which will save us the trouble of sending.”

“Well, that’s better still. Besides, who’s going to bring her?”

“She doesn’t say,” answered Mrs Brathwaite. “She only promises to let us know.”

To one, at least, of the auditors of this dialogue, the postponement of the expected guest’s arrival was not a source of unmixed grief. That one was Ethel. She would not own to herself that so commonplace a failing as jealousy had anything to do with it; still the fact remained that they were all very jolly together as it was. “Two’s company, three’s a bore,” applies in principle to circles, and now it was horribly likely that this Miss Strange would be, from Ethel’s point of view, *de trop*. Her aunt had spoken in warm terms of the other’s beauty and attractiveness. But Ethel herself was conscious of the possession of a larger share of those commodities than most people. Had the other been of the colourless and inane order she could have tolerated her—bore as she might be. As matters stood, however, it was not in feminine human nature that Ethel should be prepared to welcome the unexpected guest with open arms.

“What has become of Arthur?” asked Mrs Brathwaite, as they sat down to supper.

“Oh, he’ll be here in a minute,” said Hicks. “I left him yarning with Xuvani. He says the old chap’s teaching him Kafir, and I’ll be hanged if ever I knew a fellow pick it up so quickly. He didn’t know a word when he came here, but Xavani says he must have really, and was keeping it dark. He let drop two or three idiomatic expressions which showed that he must have known something about the language or the structure of it.”

At that moment the door opened, admitting the object of their discussion.

“Late, I’m afraid,” he said, sliding into his place. “That long-legged humbug, Ntyesa, swore he had left his jacket in the shearing-house, and I had to go and unlock it again for him. Awfully sorry.”

“Mr Claverton can’t tear himself away, even at half-past eight,” said Ethel, maliciously. “He will soon be quite glued to the wool bales.”

He glanced up with an amused look. “While there is light, there is work—in shearing time,” he replied.

“Bother shearing time!” rejoined she, pettishly. “I wish you’d be quick and finish it. We can’t get about at all, because there’s no one to take us. Laura and I have wanted to go over to Thirlestane, and to Jim’s, and a host of places, but we can’t. We are just as much shut up in here as you are in there. Aren’t we, Laura?”

“Ha—ha—ha,” laughed her uncle, with whom she was a prime favourite, and who spoilt her outrageously. “You’d better come and give us a hand, Ethel. You and Laura. We shall get it over ever so much sooner then. You shall have six shillings a hundred. Eh?”

“They oughtn’t to have more than five, because they don’t bring their own shears,” cut in Hicks.

“They’ve got nail-scissors, though,” murmured Claverton.

“Ah, I could see you were going to say something horrid,” cried Ethel.

“There are those two sparring again,” was Laura’s comment, “as usual.”

Now there was a good deal more underlying Ethel’s impatience with the shearing time than appeared on the surface. It deprived them of their usual escort on their journeyings abroad, even as she had said, and with her own particular body-guard on those occasions she found herself less and less able to dispense. And yet, as her sister had just remarked, they two were always at daggers-drawn. She had begun by cordially detesting this man, as she thought. In reality, there had been more of resentment than of dislike in the matter. She had resented his coolness, his utter indifference to her charms, his way of treating her like a spoilt child; laughing at her petulance, and turning off her most pointed shafts on an impenetrable shield of mild satire, mingled with surprised amusement. She, Ethel Brathwaite, at whose shrine, when she shone in the society of the capital, all crowded and fell down and worshipped, to be thus treated! She counted, among her sworn admirers, more than one whose name was in many mouths, who boasted much-prized decorations, well and fairly won, and yet here on the distant frontier this man, whom, in reality, no one had ever heard of, treated her with a sort of good-humoured indulgence! And in spite of it—shall we not rather say, because of it?—she was not angry with him. It was a new thing to find one who, instead of looking up at, if anything, looked down to her; and to the wilful little beauty the change was positively refreshing. Then how helpless she had been in his hands on one or two occasions—that of the storm, for instance, and the subsequent terrifying episode—and he had not been wanting. There were many men within and without the circle of her admirers whom she could snub capriciously and ruthlessly tyrannise over, but Arthur Claverton was not one of them, and this she knew full well. And now she had discovered that his society was becoming very necessary to her, and what had forced that discovery irresistibly upon her mind was the announcement, two weeks ago, of the arrival of a new character upon the stage whereon she and one other were the chief actors. Verily it seemed to Ethel as if a bomb had emanated from that harmless-looking postbag, and was destined shortly to explode in their midst.

Then had come the shearing, and, except on Sundays, from dawn till dark, Mr Brathwaite’s two lieutenants found the whole of their time taken up. In the middle of the day they would come in, by turns, to get their dinners, but it was a case of off again directly after. No more long rides home in the twilight, or quiet strolls in the sunny afternoon, at least not for some time to come, and then—another would have appeared on the scene, thought Ethel, with a dire presentiment that those times which now she looked back on with a sinking kind of regret would never come round again. Will it be better for her—for both of them—if they do not? We shall see.

She is looking bewitchingly pretty to-night as she sits throwing her bright shafts of laughter and mockery at those around, and at Claverton in particular—at the latter, indeed, to such an extent as to call forth Laura's remark. But a very close observer might have detected a kind of latent wistfulness beneath the brilliant, lively manner, and only then if he had specially looked for it.

"So you have been trying your hand at shearing, I hear, Mr Claverton?" she said.

"I have."

"How did you get on, and how did you like it?" asked Laura.

"Hicks will best tell you how I got on. As for liking it, the occupation would be a wholly delightful one had a beneficent Providence but seen fit to arrange the small of one's back upon hinges. By the way, Armitage wasn't here to-day, was he? We could have sworn we heard that laugh of his; couldn't we, Hicks?"

"No; he hasn't been here—and a good thing too," rejoined Mr Brathwaite. "He'd only have got playing the fool, or something. He carries that habit of his rather far at times. You heard what he did over at Naylor's the year before last?"

"No. What was it?"

"Well, Naylor was hard at work with his shearing, and one day, in turning out a lot of old hurdles to fence in the yard with, they came upon a snake—a thundering big ringhals—and killed it. Jack Armitage dropped in just afterwards, and Edward showed him the snake, rather crowing over having killed such a big one. Jack said nothing at the time, but a little while after, when they were all in the shearing-house, they heard a yell, and a big black brute of a ringhals came scooting in among them all, and there stood that villain Jack in the door, grinning and chuckling, and nearly splitting his sides with laughter."

"The beggar!" said Claverton. "Did he scare them?"

"Didn't he! You never saw such a commotion as it made. The shearers gave one 'whouw,' dropped their sheep, and made for the door with a rush—they're mortally afraid of a snake, you know—and there were sheep rushing about the place half shorn, and kicking against the shears which the fellows had let drop, and making a most infernal clatter. And the niggers were all crowding to get out, and raising a hubbub, and all the rest of it. The worst of it, though, was that they got so mad that they one and all struck work—flatly refused to come back—and it was some time before Naylor could persuade them to."

"The mischief! And what did Jack do?"

"Do? Jumped on his horse and rode away, laughing fit to kill himself. Naylor was very savage with him though, and now he vows he won't have Jack on the place at shearing time, not at any price. By the way, that long fellow, Ntyesa, was one of them. You ask him to-morrow if he remembers the snake in the shearing-house."

Volume One—Chapter Fourteen.

Lilian.

"There. I'm quite ready now. I'm so sorry if I have delayed you, and I fear I have."

"Not at all. We are starting in very good time as it is, and have the whole day before us."

The place is the drawing-room of an hotel in Grahamstown; the time, rather early in the morning; and the first of the two speakers, a tall, beautiful girl, who has just finished fastening together two or three articles of light hand-baggage as the second enters to tell her that the conveyance is all ready at the door. She wears a close-fitting dress of cool white, which, though making her appear taller, sets off to the fullest advantage a graceful, undulating figure. Waves of dark hair, touched, as it were, with a glint of bronze, half conceal the smooth brow, and the beautiful oval face, with its straight, delicately-chiselled features, is most killingly and becomingly framed in a large garden hat, lined with soft lace. The eyes are of that difficult-to-determine hue which is best defined as green hazel, and a sensitive curve about the lips imparts to the whole face a tinge of melancholy when in repose. In fact, there is a trifle of coldness about its normal expression. But when it lights up—when its owner smiles—as she now does very sweetly upon him, who is to be her travelling companion and escort throughout that day—then its charm becomes dangerous, so inexpressibly captivating is it.

"*Is sweetly pretty, and has the loveliest eyes I ever saw*," had been Mrs Brathwaite's dictum. And Claverton there and then mentally acquitted the old lady of one jot of exaggeration as his glance rested for the first time upon Lilian Strange when she entered the room prepared for the journey—fresh, cool, and in all the composure of her stately beauty. She greeted him perfectly naturally and unaffectedly, and apologised for delay, real or imaginary, as we have seen.

He had called at the hotel the evening before, to deliver a note from Mrs Brathwaite, and to inform Miss Strange in person about her journey. In the latter object he was disappointed. Miss Strange sent down a message, apologising for being unable to see him, on the ground of fatigue. She would, however, be quite ready to start at the hour named. And Claverton, beyond a slight curiosity to inspect one who would be for a considerable time an inmate of the same household as himself, didn't care one way or another. Miss Strange would be there all right on the morrow, and he meanwhile would go and look up a friend at the very poor attempt at a club which the city boasted.

He had expected to see a pretty girl, possibly a very pretty girl, but nothing like this. As it has been said, he was not a susceptible man. In point of fact, he rather looked down on the fair sex, a few individual members of it excepted. Yet now, as he handed his charge into the light buggy which stood waiting at the door, he was conscious of an unwonted quickening of the pulse. Not then was he able to analyse the subtle fascination of her beauty and of her manner, the extraordinary charm of her voice—such a voice as it was, too; low, rich, musical; the kind of voice that could not by any possibility have belonged to a plain woman.

“Thanks; they are not in my way in the least,” said that bewildering voice as Claverton was making impossible efforts to move certain parcels in the bottom of the trap—impossible, because of the very limited space afforded by the confines of a buggy—at the same time keeping a firm hand on the rather fresh pair of horses which were bowling down the street at a fine pace. Early as it was, the streets were filling with traffic; huge loads of wool on buck-waggons from up the country crawling in behind their long spans of oxen; farmers’ carts and buggies; horsemen; and everywhere the inevitable native, male and female.

“The worst of it is that the bare fact of coming to the town entails upon one multifold commissions, utterly regardless of space or carrying power,” he answered. “Look at those bundles, for instance. Not a third of what I was to have fetched, and shall catch it for not bringing out.”

Lilian laughed.

“Never mind. I’ll bear witness in your favour. And now tell me, when do we reach Seringa Vale?”

“Not before sundown. I’m afraid you’ll be dreadfully done up. It’s very spirited of you to travel two days running like this. I wonder you didn’t allow yourself a day here to rest after coming up all the way from Port Elizabeth yesterday.”

“It was tiring, certainly. But I’ve had a good night’s rest, and this sort of travelling is quite luxurious after the passenger-cart. Is it going to be very hot?”

“I’m afraid it’ll be warm, but not dusty, which is something to be thankful for. The heavy shower in the night has done that much for us. Look! Grahamstown shows well from here.”

A curve in the road brought the city into full view, lying beneath, embowered in its bosky gardens.

“Yes. But I don’t see anything to admire in these colonial towns. They are not even picturesque. Frightfully dusty, oppressively hot, and streets and buildings absolutely hideous.”

“I agree with you. Look at this one, for instance. That mound of baked clay, plastered up wet and left to dry, which we passed at starting and which can hardly be distinguished now, doesn’t look much like a cathedral, does it? Yet it is. Then that fifth-rate mongrel Corn Exchange you see—there—is the Eastern Districts Court, second temple of Justice in the land. That square barn-like wool-store, beyond the clay cathedral, is a Methodist chapel with a truly appalling front. It is the prize barracoon of that connexion, and its habitués fondly cherish the conviction that it is a second Milan. The building away there against the hill is to be admired, isn’t it? Built for a barrack it remains a barrack, though it is now a public hospital. The town is pretty, thanks to its situation and trees, but there isn’t a decent-looking building in it.”

“I want to see something of the country,” went on Lilian. “It ought to be lovely, judging from what I saw of it coming along in the post-cart yesterday. And I’ve seen nothing of it as yet.”

“Here we are, then. What do you think of that?” said her companion, as, having crested the hill which shut the city from view, he whipped up his horses and they sped merrily along an elevated flat, dashing aside the dewdrops which lay thickly studding the short grass like a field of diamonds. The sun was not long up, and a white morning mist hung here and there among the sprays of the bush, but overhead all was dazzling blue. The view was extensive. Wooded ridges melted away afar in the soft morning light, and in the distant background the crescent range of the Great Winterberg rose purple and dim.

“Oh, but this is lovely!” cried Lilian. “Don’t laugh at me, Mr Claverton, but it is like drinking in new life after being pent up in a dusty town.”

“I’d rather be shot than laugh at you,” he answered, with an earnestness very unwonted in him. “I am only too glad you should find anything to enjoy in what I feared would be to you a very tedious journey. Still more glad am I that it has been my luck to escort you.”

It was about the first genuine compliment he had ever paid to a woman in his life, and yet he seemed totally unconscious of intending any compliment at all. He could hardly take his glance off the beautiful, animated face beside him. And how was it that this same escort duty had fallen to his lot? When Lilian Strange found out at nearly the last moment that the opportunity on which she relied of getting to Seringa Vale had fallen through, Mr Brathwaite had made arrangements to go to Grahamstown and fetch her himself. But a sharp attack of rheumatism precluded this, and Hicks, who otherwise would have been told off on this mission, and who had his own reasons for not wishing to be away from home two days, easily prevailed on his friend to go instead of him.

On they sped, now ascending a hill at a foot’s pace, now bowling briskly down the next declivity, as the road wound over the rolling country. To Lilian the journey, so far from being a tedious one, was wholly delightful. She was vividly interested in everything. Even the little meercats, which sat upright on their hind legs a few yards from the road and then bolted into their burrows at the approach of the horses, came in for a share of her notice and admiration. A solitary secretary bird, stalking away down in the hollow, became the subject of numerous inquiries, and she gazed with awe upon a cloud of great white vultures soaring overhead bound for some defunct horse or sheep, appearing from nowhere and disappearing as mysteriously. To the English girl, with her keen love of Nature, even these insignificant representatives of wild African animal life were full of interest.

They passed a large ostrich farm lying beneath them on the slope, and she could hardly believe her companion's statement that the distant black specks at the farther ends of their respective enclosures were as formidable as the traditional mad bull, until a large troop of ten-months-old ostriches, under charge of herds, swept past, and he drew her attention to their size, and the strength of those long legs terminating in a sharp, horny toe, capable of ripping a man up. But the birds looked very handsome, very picturesque as they careered by, their snowy plumes extended and waving, and she was delighted with the picture they made, though her enjoyment was tempered with alarm as the horses showed signs of restiveness. But Claverton reassured her, and the ostriches and their keepers were soon left far behind.

"You live at Seringa Vale, do you not, Mr Claverton?"

"Well, yes; I do at present. I am jackarooing there, as they say in Australia, which is to say that I am imbibing instruction in the craft in consideration of my valuable services."

"And are you going to settle out here, then?"

"To settle! H'm! How do you know I wasn't born and bred out here?"

"I suppose because there's some sort of secret sign by which one importation can detect another," answered Lilian. "I don't believe you have been out here as long as I have."

"Do I look so thoroughly the 'new chum,' then? Point out the conspicuous sign of 'rawness,' that I may at once eradicate it, if it is worth eradicating, that is."

"No. I refuse to reveal my masonic sign," she answered, gaily; "but I know I am right in my conjecture. I could tell the moment I saw you. Am I not right? Now confess!"

"Yes and no. That is to say, it is only three months since I left England this time; but before that I was out here in South Africa for several years."

"Then I cannot claim seniority of standing, after all. Are there any more 'importations' at Seringa Vale?"

"Yes. Hicks. But he's so thoroughly acclimatised that he don't count. You and I are exiles and sojourners in a far country. I foresee we shall be talking British 'shop' to a grievous extent," said Claverton, not that he cared a rush about England, or had any great reason to, for the matter of that, but it would establish an *entente* with his beautiful travelling companion, a something quite between themselves. He was surprised to notice a wearied and even pained expression flit across the lovely face, like the shadow of a cloud passing over the bright smooth surface of a mountain lake.

"I don't know. I think I would rather forget all about England," she replied, sadly. "It is a subject with no fascination for me. As I'm here in this country I want to like it, and it is highly probable that I shall, at any rate during the next two months. By-the-bye, what dear old people Mr and Mrs Brathwaite are!"

"That they are," assented the other, heartily. And then for the life of him he could not help subsiding into silence. She had a history, then. She would fain forget the land of her birth. It was not wholly the stern law of necessity that had banished her to a distant land to fight the rough, hard battle of life. There was another cause, and glancing at her as she sat beside him, Claverton thought he could in a measure guess at the nature of that cause. His pulses were strangely stirred, and even then he was conscious of a longing to comfort her, of a wild, unreasoning resentment against some person unknown. Remarkable, wasn't it, considering he had only seen her for the first time in his life that morning, and that now it was still far short of midday?

But two persons of opposite sexes, both young, both goodly to look upon, and under circumstances situated such as these two, will, I trow, find it difficult to preserve silence for long—seated side by side in the circumscribed space of a buggy. Lilian was the first to break it.

"What was that?" she asked, eagerly, as a loud resounding bark echoed forth from the hillside above them.

"Only a baboon. Look, there he is—that black speck up there; and the others are not far off."

They were driving through a wild and narrow pass. High overhead great masses of rock cut the skyline in fantastic piles, castellated here, riven there, and apparently about to crumble in pieces, and hurl themselves down upon the road. Thick bush grew right down to the road winding along the side of the hill, which here and there fell straight away from it in rather an alarming and precipitous manner.

It was just at the most alarming of these places that a few puffs of dust and a crack or two of a whip betokened the approach of waggons, and the next moment the foremost of them appeared round a jutting corner of rock. Claverton muttered an imprecation as he noted that the oxen were without a leader, straggling across the very narrow road at their own sweet will, and bearing down upon him and his charge a great deal faster than he liked. The waggon, loaded sky high with wool bales, was still a couple of hundred yards off, but the road from it to the buggy was a brisk declivity; there seemed very insufficient brake on, and no sign of any one in charge. One of two things was likely to happen: either the buggy would be splintered into matchwood against the inner side of the road, or hurled into perdition over the outer one, by the ponderous mass now bearing down uncontrolled upon it. Claverton reined in his horses and hallooed angrily.

An ugly, mud-coloured head rose from the apex of the pile; then apparently subsided.

"Where's your 'leader,' you *schepsel*?" he shouted in Dutch. "Get off and stop your fore oxen, or, by God, I'll shoot them dead on the spot."

The situation was critical, it must be remembered. A sooty imp of a boy glided to the front of the span, and succeeded in bringing them up just in time. The huge, unwieldy machine rolled creaking past the buggy, narrowly grazing it with the wool bales. The Hottentot driver raised his ugly head and leered insolently.

“Hey, you, Engelschman! Don’t you know how to pass a waggon yet?” he shouted.

Quickly Claverton stood up, and by dint of a dexterous “flick,” cut the fellow with his driving-whip in such wise as to chip a weal of skin out of his face, and then the pace of the passing vehicles carried him out of reach.

The Hottentot yelled and cursed with rage and pain; but there was something so threatening in Claverton’s face and the sudden movement he made as if to descend and make a further example of him that the fellow thought better of it, and dropped the empty grog bottle which he had been about to shy after the trap. He solaced himself, however, with a shower of parting curses.

“Lord, Lord! To think that I should have to sit still and be cheeked by a dirty drunken Tottie,” said Claverton to himself yet aloud, as if oblivious of his companion. Yet he had to. He could hardly drop the reins and leave her there in the middle of an excessively narrow and dangerous bit of road, with a pair of very fresh and somewhat restive horses on hand, while he went to wreak further vengeance on the impudent rascal whose carelessness might have been productive of a serious catastrophe. He was handicapped altogether.

It was an earnest of real life. By himself, with only himself to think of, he could take care of himself. In charge of another, would he not have to swallow tons and tons over and above the traditional peck of “matter in the wrong place” without a murmur? He would be handicapped altogether. Philosopher as he was, it was hardly likely that such a consideration should obtrude at this moment.

The other waggon was engineered by a couple of quiet-looking and civil Kafirs, who gave them plenty of roadway and the good-morning as they passed.

Claverton stole a glance at his companion’s face. She had been not a little startled, he could see that, yet she kept her composure, and the fact pleased him. Most women under the circumstances would have let fly exclamations of alarm, perhaps shrieked, possibly even might have grabbed convulsively at the reins—that most blindly idiotic and utterly exasperating phase of feminine scare upon wheels. This one, however, only changed colour ever so little, but did and said nothing.

“Here we are at an ‘hotel,’ as they call it in this country,” he remarked, pointing out a seedy-looking domicile, like unto a fifth-rate Dutch farmhouse, which hove in sight before them. “We can either stop there, or drive on a little farther and outspan in the *veldt*, whichever you prefer.”

“Oh, do let us outspan in the *veldt*,” answered Lilian, gleefully. “The drive is lovely, and a picnic in the middle of it will be quite the right thing.”

“Of course it will—or rather two picnics, for we shall have to outspan again. Look, we don’t lose much by giving that barracoon the go-by,” he went on, as they passed the edifice in question. “Goat chops very tough, pumpkin and rice, and Cape sherry, are about the only items in its bill of fare, I venture to predict.”

“Horrible!” declared Lilian, with a laughing grimace.

They drove on a little farther, and halted in a beautiful spot, by a pool of clear, but brackish water, thickly overhung with bush and trailing plants, where Lilian was delighted with the colony of pendulous finks’ nests swaying to and fro as their startled occupants dashed in and out, chirping volubly. Claverton took the horses to the water, then knee-haltered and allowed them to roll while he placed on the ground one of the couple of bundles of oat-hay which were carried in the buggy for their benefit. Then he returned to his charge.

“I must apologise, Miss Strange. The rule of the *veldt* is not that of society. Here it is, ‘horses first.’”

He spread the wraps, which kind, thoughtful Mrs Brathwaite had sent for Lilian’s use, under a shady tree, making her a comfortable seat. Then he unearthed the commissariat, of which the staple articles were a chicken and a bottle of Moselle.

“But this is far too luxurious,” protested Lilian, her beautiful face sparkling with animation. She was thoroughly enjoying the unconventionally of the whole thing. “I declare it does not seem like camping in the bush if we are to revel in luxury.”

“Take it easy while you can. That’s the secret of true philosophy. The goat chops and pumpkin and rice will come, all in good time.”

She laughed gaily. Then she threw off her large straw hat, and pushed up her dark hair as if to ease it of the weight. Not a detail of the movement or its effect escaped her companion. He had not yet seen her without her hat. It is surprising what a difference this outdoor appendage makes in the appearance of some women. He noted, without surprise, that Lilian Strange looked equally beautiful either way.

“Mr Claverton, why don’t you smoke?” she asked, as, having lunched, there was a dreamy pause in the conversation.

“I thought you might object. But—how do you know I indulge in the chimney trick?”

“Object? No, I’m not so selfish as that. And as for how I knew, I might answer all men do, but I won’t. The fact is, you made a quite unconscious and mechanical dive at your pocket, and brought out half a pipe. I’ll give you credit that the move *was* quite unconscious.”

"It was, upon my honour. What a magician you are—you notice everything."

It has been stated that Lilian Strange possessed an extraordinarily dangerous and captivating smile. She was in one of her softest moods now, thoroughly enjoying the fresh air and wild, extensive scenery; and the drive, the impromptu picnic *à deux*, and above all her late emancipation from distasteful drudgery amid uncongenial surroundings, and the prospect of two months' rest from the same. Then she had taken a great liking to her travelling escort; short as had been the period of their acquaintance. So that now as she lay back, laughing over the quaint dryness of the said escort's remarks, it could not be but that her winning and attractive spell should weave itself around him to the full. This girl was something quite new in Claverton's experience. The soft, sweet tones of her voice, her glorious beauty, her very ways and movements, seemed to cast a glamour over him such as he had never known before in the course of his life. Bright, teasing Ethel Brathwaite, blue-eyed, sunny, impulsive, seemed poor clay when contrasted with this new arrival with the lovely, expressive face and the undulating, sensuous form—so stately and yet so unaffected and appreciative—so cold of demeanour, at times, and withal so sweet and considerate. Yet nineteen men out of twenty would have given the preference to Ethel; but then it may be that this other one would have favoured the nineteen with the coldness devoid of the consideration.

Be this as it may, Claverton was certainly the twentieth in both senses, and, as they sat there, resting in the golden sunshine, the drowsy air around them made musical by the whistling of spreuws and the hum of summer insects, he, at any rate, found himself wishing that that hour might last throughout an eternity.

And the curious part of it was that he had not known her for hours enough to make a double figure.

But time cannot be trifled with, and they were due at Seringa Vale before dark. So the horses were put to in a trice.

"Can't I help you in any way?" said Lilian. "It seems so hard that you should have all the trouble while I sit still and look on."

"It's no trouble at all," answered the other, tugging vigorously at a refractory strap. "I wouldn't let you bother about this sort of thing for the world. In fact, I am only too glad that you are not tired to death with the long, hot ride. And I think we'll put the hood up, for there's no shade between this and the next outspan."

Now came the hottest stage of the journey. The full glare of the sun focussed down into the broad valley, beat fiercely upon the tent of the buggy, and, but for the rapid movement creating its own draught, there was not a breath of air. Lilian began to feel drowsy and could have pleaded guilty to an incipient headache, but she did not complain. Her companion, however, detected the tired look in her eyes, and was greatly concerned; but she laughed it off. She would be all right again when it got cooler, she said. It was really very silly of her, but she was just a trifle below par.

On this point he rather vehemently reassured her. Why, he himself often felt as if about to get a sunstroke riding through these long, hot valleys, just in the middle of the day—and he was a tolerably well-seasoned traveller. But it is to be feared that, for once in his life, he forgot to spare the horses in his anxiety to reach the end of that stage.

Lilian, however, forgot her fatigue, as after the next outspan they wended up the rugged, but picturesque bush-road, in the golden light of the waning afternoon. They were in shade for the most part now, and the air grew cooler as they ascended gradually out of the stifling valley, where the river they had crossed a little while ago, flowed sparkling in the sun like a silver thread. Opposite, a row of stiff euphorbia reared their plumed heads, their stems, straight and regular as a line of organ-pipes, standing out from the darksome, rocky glen behind them like the bars of a gloomy cage enclosing some ferocious beast. There, a great cliff, overhung with lichens and monkey ropes, starting capriciously from among the greenness, and everywhere a shining sea of bush; not silent, either, but resounding with evidence of animal and insect life. Far away, almost inaudible, the harsh bark of the sentinel baboon; close at hand, oppressive in its vociferation, the shrill chirrup of crickets. Hoopoes were softly calling to each other from the tangled recesses of some cool and shady nook; and a bright louri, in all the pride of his crimson wings and glossy plumage, darted across the road.

When they arrived at Seringa Vale, all its inmates were at the door to welcome Lilian.

"I hope Arthur took great care of you, my dear," said Mrs Brathwaite, the first genial greetings over.

"I have to thank Mr Claverton for taking the greatest possible care of me," answered Lilian, flashing at him one of her sweetest smiles.

For a brief second their eyes met. One standing there noted both those glances and read them like an open book—read in one, possibility; in the other, certainty. And Ethel was forced to admit that her aunt's description of their visitor's attractions was not one whit exaggerated.

And it had all come about in a single day.

Volume One—Chapter Fifteen.

In a Single Day.

"Mopela, what on earth have you been doing all this time? I sent you for that water half an hour ago."

There is menace as well as wrath in the tones of the speaker as he confronts the individual addressed, who is calmly squatting on the ground between two pails containing water just drawn out of the dam. It is midday, and a blazing sun pours down upon them, to the delectation of certain mud turtles basking on the hard, cracked surface of the baked ooze, and who, alarmed by the sound of angry voices, scuttle away into the water as fast as their legs can carry them; while, in the noontide stillness, the smooth surface of the reservoir glows like copper beneath the burnished rays. Again Claverton—for it is he—repeats his question in a more irate tone than before.

Mopela rises and eyes his interlocutor in a manner that betokens mischief. He is a huge Kafir, tall and broad-shouldered, and his bronze, sinewy frame, whose nudity shows the development of great muscular power, looks formidable enough. He hates Claverton, who has more than once had occasion to be "down on" him for careless herding, or other derelictions, and never loses an opportunity, whether by covert insolence or neglect of orders, of showing it. And for some time past the relations between the two have been—in the language of diplomacy—a trifle "strained."

"I *haven't* been half an hour," he replies, defiantly, "I only stopped a minute to light my pipe."

"You infernal blackguard, do you mean to give me the lie direct?" says Claverton; and his voice shakes with pent-up fury as he advances a pace nearer the last speaker. "Take up those buckets and get away at once!"

The savage gives an exclamation of disgust, and his eyes glare. Then throwing back his head contemptuously, he says with an insolent sneer: "You are not *Baas* here."

"The devil I'm not!" Crack!—woof!—a right and left-hander straight from the shoulder, and the huge barbarian goes down like a ninepin. "You dog! you've played the fool with me long enough, and now you've come to the end of your tether. Get up," he continues, spurning with his foot the prostrate man, from whose mouth and nostrils a red torrent is gushing. "Get up, and I'll floor you again!" His fierce temper is now completely beyond his control, and for the moment he is as thoroughly a savage as the dusky giant lying at his feet.

How it will end Heaven only knows, but at this juncture a low cry of horror behind him causes him to turn, and what he sees brings a hot flush to his face, up till now livid with rage. For there stands Lilian Strange, and her white face and dilated eyes betray that she has been a terrified witness of the whole scene.

Claverton started as if he had been shot.

"I fear you have been dreadfully frightened," he said. "Needless to explain I had no idea of your presence."

He felt very concerned, and his face flushed hotly again as he thought what an awful ruffian he must seem in her eyes. This was the second time within twenty-four hours that she had seen him lose his temper, though yesterday, anxiety for her own safety had been the justification. His clothes were plentifully splashed with sulphur and lime, in which salutary decoction he had been dipping sheep when the *fracas* occurred. At his feet lay the hulking form of the Kafir, breathing stertorously and bleeding like a pig. Yes, what a cut-throat he must seem to her!

But Lilian could not have been of this opinion, for the startled expression faded from her eyes and a delicate tinge showed in the warm paleness of her cheek.

"I had been for a walk in the garden, and came suddenly upon you. I couldn't help seeing it all. He seems badly hurt; can't we do anything for him?" she pursued, going up to look at the prostrate barbarian, and again growing pale at the sight of the blood. For Mopela lying there, with all the results on his countenance of the punishment he had received, was not an exhilarating object to gaze upon.

"Do anything for him? Oh, no; he's all right. Look."

The Kafir opened his eyes stupidly and staggered to his feet. Then, with a glance of deadly hatred at his chastiser, he took up the buckets and walked away, his gait rolling and uneven.

"You don't know what I've had to put up with from that bru—that rascal for some time past. Well, he's got it now, at all events. I knew it was only a question of time. The only thing I regret is that it should have been at so inopportune a time," he added, in tones of deep concern. He was exceedingly vexed and disgusted with himself. Mopela might have inflicted upon him a whole vocabulary of impudence before he would have afforded Lilian such an exhibition had he but foreseen.

"I suppose you find these natives very trying?" she said.

"Not as a rule. On the contrary, I always pull well enough with them. But that chap's defiance had reached such a point that one of us had to knuckle under. It would never have done for that one to have been myself."

"I suppose not," answered Lilian, with a little smile at the idea of her escort of yesterday "knuckling under" to anybody. "And now I must not delay you. I see you are busy—but—would you mind walking back to the house with me? I am easily frightened, and these savages do look so dreadful when they are angry."

"Would I mind? But don't *you* mind being seen in such ragged company?" he added, drily, with a glance at his rough and besplashed attire.

"In Bond Street it is just possible that I should. On an African sheep farm the escort is appropriate," she answered, with a flash of merriment in her lovely, changing eyes.

The distance to the house was not great, but Claverton contrived to render it as great as possible.

"How is it you are out all alone?" he asked, as they walked along.

"Oh, the fact is, Mrs Brathwaite and the girls were busy, very busy. I wouldn't for the world abuse my guest's privilege, so I slipped off on a solitary voyage of discovery."

“And a pretty sort of discovery you made! By-the-bye, I have had no opportunity of asking if you had quite recovered from yesterday’s fatigue, and it has been lying heavily on my conscience. You did not appear at breakfast, and we have been desperately busy all the morning.”

There was a tender ring in his tones as he made this very commonplace observation which could hardly have escaped the other. She answered very sweetly:

“I am afraid I was dreadfully lazy. But I was a little tired this morning. It shan’t occur again; there!”

“You must rest to-day, then, because they are getting up a dance to-night in your honour. You are literally to make your *début* here. Didn’t they tell you?”

“Now I think of it, they did. Here we are at the house, Mr Claverton. Thanks, so much, for accompanying me.”

“And now I shall catch it. The dear old man hates any of us to thrash a nigger. Stand by and support me under my castigation.”

Claverton had seen Mr Brathwaite in the hall, and lost no time in telling him what had happened. The old settler shook his head as he listened.

“It won’t do,” he said. “You’ll never get any good out of them if you take to hammering them. They cut off to the district town and lay an information against you, and you’re summoned before the magistrate, and put to no end of bother. And that’s not all. It has a bad effect on the others. They know they’ll get the better of you in court, and invariably do get it; and once a black fellow thinks he can get the better of you in any way, then good-bye to your authority. Besides, it earns you a bad name among the Kafirs, which means a constant difficulty in obtaining labour, and when you do obtain it you only get the refuse. There’s Thorman, for instance. He used to lick his Kafirs for the least thing, and he never kept a decent servant on his place two months at a time. I advised him to knock off that plan, and he did; but for years afterwards he suffered from its effects, in the shape of a constant lack of decent labour. No; it doesn’t pay, take my word for it.”

“Well, but you’ve no idea how cheeky that fellow was, and has been for some time past,” urged Claverton.

The other merely shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man unconvinced, and repeated as he turned away: “It doesn’t do.”

Claverton shot a glance at his late companion as much as to say; “There, I told you how it would be,” and caught a bright, rapid smile in return. Then he went back to his work.

Hard by the scene of the recent row was the dipping tank, oblong in shape, fifteen feet by five and about eight in depth. It was two-thirds full of a decoction of lime and sulphur, and into this the sheep were dropped, and after swimming about for a couple of minutes or so were suffered to emerge, by the raising of a sliding door at one end. This end, unlike the other, was not perpendicular, but the floor was on a sufficient slope to enable the animals to walk out, which they did, and stood dripping in a stone-paved enclosure also with a shelving floor so that the liquid that drained off them should run back into the tank. At the other end was a larger enclosure containing several hundred sheep, which four or five Kafirs, among them the recreant Mopela, were busy catching for the purpose of dipping them in the unsavoury but scab-eradicating mixture. Over which operation presided Hicks and Claverton, each with a forked pole in his hand, wherewith to administer the necessary ducking to the immersed quadrupeds. At last Hicks proposed that they should knock off, and come back and finish after dinner.

“Not worth while, is it?” was the reply. “Let’s finish off now we’re at it, then we can take things easy, clothed and in our right minds. We can hardly go inside the house, even, in this beastly mess.”

Claverton carries his point, as he generally does. So they work on and on in the heat and the dust, and the air is full of splashes as the kicking animals are dropped into the tank, and redolent with the ill savour of sulphur and lime and perspiring natives; and the contents of one of the great cauldrons simmering over the fire are thrown in to replenish the medicinal bath, and the number of sheep left undipped waxes smaller and beautifully less, till at length the last half-dozen are disposed of and the job is at an end.

Then Hicks suggested a swim in the dam, and the proposal was soon carried into effect. After which, in renewed attire and presentable once more, they appeared among the rest of the household.

To some at least in that household has come among them a change; an element of upheaval certainly not even dreamed of by all whom it shall concern. A change. The acquisition of a beautiful and agreeable young lady visitor by this circle? No, something more than that.

Mrs Brathwaite playfully upbraided Claverton for being the unconscious cause of frightening her visitor on the first morning of her arrival. Then Lilian came to the rescue. If she had been startled it was her own fault or ill fortune for going where she was not wanted. Here vehement protest from him whose cause she was pleading. Then, she urged, he who had been the means of startling her had made all the amends in his power by seeing her safely home, coward as she was to need it. Here more vehement protest.

What does this vehemence mean on the part of a man to whose nature it is wholly foreign, who is calmness and equability itself?

This question—partly its own answer—flashed through Ethel’s mind. She was to all appearances deep in discussion with Laura and Hicks as to certain debatable arrangements for the coming festivity. In reality she was performing that extremely difficult feat, keeping an ear for two distinct conversations. In the course of which difficult feat Ethel was wondering how it was that these adventuresses (yes, that is the word she used) with nothing on earth to recommend them, should have the power of taking everybody by storm in the way their visitor seemed to be doing.

Lilian was wondering how it was that her visit seemed likely to be far more pleasant and enjoyable than she had at first anticipated, which was saying a great deal. Also what there was about this man, now talking so unconcernedly to herself and her hostess, that raised him on a pedestal considerably above the residue of the species.

Claverton was wondering how it was, that his life seemed to have been cut in two distinct halves since yesterday.

And Ethel again read both faces like an open book. And this time she read in the one, greater possibility; in the other, absolute certainty. Such was the situation.

And it had all come about in a single day.

Volume One—Chapter Sixteen.

“Mingle Shades of Joy and Woe.”

The long dining-room is in a blaze of light, such as it has not sparkled with for some considerable time, and only then on rare and special occasions such as the present one. The polished floor reflects the glow of numerous candles, and, as Hicks vigorously puts it, the decks are thoroughly cleared for action. Expectant groups stand about the room or throng the doorways—for the fun has not yet commenced, and meanwhile talk and laughter goes on among the jovial spirits there foregathered, and the graver ones, when not the subjects of rally, are intent on contemplating the floor, the ceiling, the fireplace, or anything or nothing. The party might be an English one to all appearances. You may descry the usual phases in its ingredients. There is shy humanity, confident humanity, blatant humanity, fussy humanity, even pompous humanity. There, however, the resemblance ends. Of stiffness there is none. Everybody knows everybody, or soon will—meanwhile acts as if it does. Then, in the little matter of attire, many of the “lords of creation” are arrayed in orthodox evening costume and white-chokered, others in black coats of the “go-to-meeting” order, while three or four Dutchmen, bidden to the festivity on neighbourly grounds, sport raiment fearfully and wonderfully made, whose effect is enhanced by terrific neckties, varying in shades from scarlet to green. The company is composed almost entirely of the settler class. Jolly old fellows who have come to look on at the enjoyment of their extensive and well-looking families in various stages of adolescence, and who, in spite of their white hair and sixty or seventy summers, seem more than half inclined not to remain passive spectators of the fun. One or two of these, by the way, judging from nasal rubicundity and other signs, will, I trow, be found more frequently hovering around the charmed circle where flows the genial dram, than in the immediate neighbourhood of the giddy rout. Middle-aged men, bronzed and bearded, looking serious as they contemplate what is expected of them, for assuredly we English, in whatever part of the world we be, “take our pleasures sadly.” Young settlers are there, stalwart fellows, several of whom have ridden from far, carrying their gala array in a saddle-bag, and who by the time they return will have been three days away from home. But distance is nothing; their horses are strong and hardy, and the roads are good, and if not, what matters? Life is nothing without its enjoyments, and accordingly they intend to enjoy themselves, and do.

Of the fair sex there is a goodly muster—though fewer in proportion to that of the men, as is frequently the case at frontier dances—consisting of the wives and daughters of the settlers. Some are pretty, some plain; some are bright and lively, and nicely dressed; others again are badly attired, and neither bright nor lively; and at present they are mostly gathered together in the room opening out of the one which is to be the scene of the fray.

“Now then, Hicks, Armitage, some of you fellows, let’s set the ball rolling,” cried the jovial voice of Jim Brathwaite, as a volunteer pianist (the orchestral department must be worked entirely by volunteer agency) sat down at the instrument and dashed off a lively galop. “Come along, Arthur, give these fellows a lead,” he went on.

Claverton was standing in the doorway. He turned as Jim addressed him. “Well, if it’s all the same, I think I’ll cut in later. Fact is, I’m not much of a dancer. Besides, it’s a ridiculous exercise.”

“Aren’t you! ‘England expects,’” said Ethel, maliciously, as she floated by, a dream-like vision in pink gauziness. Her golden hair, confined by some cunning device at the back of her head, flowed in shining ripples below her waist, and the deep blue eyes flashed laughingly into his as she made her mocking rejoinder.

“Does it? Expectations are notoriously unsafe assets,” was the quiet reply.

“Well, we must make a start or we shall never get these fellows to begin,” said Jim. “Come along, Ethel, you promised me the first dance. If you didn’t you ought to have.”

They glided off, and Claverton stood and followed them mechanically with his glance; but, as a matter of fact, he hardly saw them. He was wondering what on earth had become of Lilian Strange. The dance wore on, and then the next, still Claverton stood in the doorway, which coign of vantage he held conjointly with an uncouth-looking Dutchman and a burly but bashful compatriot, and still *she* did not appear. At length, while crossing the inner room with a vague idea of putting an artless and roundabout inquiry or two to Mrs Brathwaite as to why Lilian did not appear, he heard himself hailed by his host. Turning quickly he perceived the latter sitting in confab with a contemporary in age, but vastly different in appearance.

“Arthur, this is an old friend of mine, Mr Garrett.”

Then arose a queer-looking old fellow, short, rotund of person, and whose exceeding rubicundity of visage betokened, I fear, anything but aversion for ardent spirits. Running one stubby hand through his bristly grey hair, he extended the other to Claverton.

"'Ow do—'ow do? Not been long in the country, have you? My word, but it's a fine country, this is—fine country for young fellers like you."

Claverton thought the country contained also some advantages for the speaker; and he was right. Here was old Joe Garrett, who never knew his father, if he had one, and who, having early in the century deserted from a two-hundred-ton merchant brig lying in Algoa Bay, had started in colonial life as a journeyman carpenter. By hook or by crook he had made his way, and now, by virtue of the four fine farms which he owned, he deemed himself very much of a landed proprietor, and every whit the equal of Walter Brathwaite, "whose ancestors wore chain-armour in the fourteenth century," as some one or other's definition of a gentleman runs.

"I was jest such a young feller as you once," went on this embodiment of colonial progress. "I landed in this country in nothin' but the clothes to my back, and look at me now. Now, I'll tell you what I did," and the oracle, slapping one finger into the palm of the of her hand, looked up into his victim's face with would-be impressive gravity, "I worked; that's what I did—I worked. Now, you may depend upon it, that for a young feller there's nothin' like a noo country—and work!"

"I suppose so," acquiesced Claverton, horribly sick of this biography.

"Now a noo country," went on the oracle, "a noo country, sez I, ain't an old one. 'Ere you're free; there," flinging out a stubby hand in the imaginary direction of Great Britain, "nothing but forms and sticklin'. Now, 'ere I can sit down to dinner without putting on a swallow-tail-coat and a white choker, for instance. No; give me a noo country and freedom, sez I."

"Quite right, Mr Garrett. A swallow-tailed coat plays the mischief with the digestion, and science has discovered that a white choker tarnishes the silver. Something in the starch, you know—arsenic, they say."

"No! You don't say so now?" returned the other, open-mouthed, and not detecting the fine irony of his banterer's tone.

"Yes, of course. And now excuse me. I must go and find my partner."

"Certainly—certainly. You young fellers! I was a young feller once, ha, ha, ha!" And old Garrett winked, and contorted his visage in the direction of his recent interlocutor in such wise as should mean volumes.

"This is ours, Miss Strange."

Lilian had just come in. She had passed close behind the speaker while he was talking to old Garrett, and her entrance did not remain long undiscovered.

"Do you know, I had quite begun to fear you were not going to appear to-night—that you were tired or unwell," he said, as they made their way to the dancing-room.

"Bight and wrong. I was tired, and so rested instead of dressing earlier. Now I am all right again, and never felt so well in my life."

"Nor looked it."

It slipped out. The slightest possible flush came into Lilian's face.

"You must not pay me compliments, Mr Claverton," she said, gravely, but with a smile lurking in her eyes. "They are what you men call 'bad form.'"

"But consider the provocation."

"Again? What am I to do to you? I know. I shall scold you. This is the second time to-day that you have reproached me for being late. This morning and now."

Certes the provocation was excessive. She was looking surpassingly beautiful this evening, in creamy white, with a velvety rose of deepest crimson on her breast; another bud, a white one, nestling among the thick coils of her bronze-tinted dark hair. Many a glance of astonished admiration greeted her entrance, and followed her about the room; but the quiet repose of the lovely face was devoid of the least sign of self-consciousness.

"By Jove!" remarked Armitage to his partner, a chubby little "bunch" with big blue eyes and a button mouth. "Claverton's a sly dog. *That's* why he was in no hurry to begin. Oho, I see now."

"She *is* pretty. How well they look together!" was the reply, as the two stood against the wall to watch them.

Ethel, whirling by with the Civil Commissioner's clerk, caught the last remark. She would have given much to have been able to box poor little Gertie Wray's ears severely, then and there. That young lady babbled on, utterly void of offence.

"I say, though," said her partner. "She cut you out. Claverton was just on his way to ask you when she came in. He was, really."

"Was he? Then he should have asked me before. My programme's full now."

Meanwhile let us follow the pair under discussion.

“Who was that poor old man you were chaffing so, just now?” Lilian was saying.

“Only a curious specimen of natural history. But how do you know I was chaffing anybody?”

“Because I heard you. Who is he?”

“What perception you have got! ‘He’ is old Garrett, hight Joe, who migrated hither in the year one, to escape the terrible evil of having to dress for dinner.”

Lilian could not speak for laughing.

“Fact, really; he’s just been telling me all about it. Bother! This dance is at an end. We are down for some more together, though.”

“Too many.”

“I claim priority of right. I claim your sympathy as a fellow sojourner in a far country. I appeal to your compassion to rescue me from standing out in the cold, in that you are the only one with whom I can gravitate round this festal room without peril to my neighbours’ elbows and shins, and they know it, and shunt me accordingly.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” laughed Lilian. “It is you who shunt them.”

“No, I am telling you solemn truth. And now have I not made it clear to you that it is your bounden duty to take pity on me and help the proverbial lame dog over the ditto stile?”

“Well then, I’ll see what I can do for you. Now find me a seat—there, thank you—and go and ‘victimise’ some one else,” she added, flashing up at him a bright, mischievous glance.

“Not yet. Have pity on—the public elbow and shin. I want to rest, too, after discharging my recent heavy responsibility without disaster;” and he made a move towards the seat beside her.

“No. You are not to shirk your duty. Go and do as I wish, or I shall consider it my duty to lose my programme. That means a new one, blank, and then memory is not a trustworthy guide.” And as at that moment some one came up to ask her for a dance, Claverton was constrained unwillingly to obey, or rather, partially to obey, for he fell back on his old position in the convenient doorway, whence his eyes followed her round and round the room, to the complete exclusion of the other score of revolving couples.

“Mr Claverton, do prove a friend in need, and save me from the clutches of that awful Dutchman bearing down upon me from over there,” said a flurried, but familiar voice at his elbow. “I promised him in a weak moment, and now he’s coming. Say you’ve got me down for this, and persuade him it’s his mistake. Quick! here he comes.”

“All right. But you told me once you’d rather go round with a chair, you know, than with me.”

“Did I? Never mind; don’t be mean and rake up things,” replied Ethel, and away they went, while the defrauded Boer, thinking his own sluggish brain was at fault in the reckoning, adjourned to a certain corner of the other room in order to solace his wounded feelings with a *sopje* (dram).

“How about England’s disappointment?” said Ethel, maliciously, during a pause.

“That affliction has been indefinitely averted. By the way, I never thought to see Allen so screwed.”

“Er—I’m not screwed,” mildly objected that long-suffering youth, who had pulled up with a swaying jerk alongside of them.

“Aren’t you? My good fellow, a man who is capable of mistaking my substantial and visible means of support for this exceedingly well-polished floor, must be in a critical condition.”

“Oh—ah—er—was that you I trod upon? I didn’t know—I’m awfully sorry.”

Half-a-dozen bystanders exploded at this, and the dance over, Claverton began to think he had done a considerable share of duty, and sought an opportunity of claiming an instalment of the promised reward; but his turn had not yet come. Presently he overheard a girl near him say:

“What do you think of that Miss Strange?”

He recognised in the speaker one Jessie Garrett, a daughter of Joe of that ilk.

“Well, she’s very pretty, there’s no doubt about that,” answered her partner, a stalwart young ostrich-farmer from the Graaff Reinet district.

“Should you admire her as much as Ethel Brathwaite?”

“No; I don’t think she’s a patch on Miss Brathwaite; but there’s something awfully fetching about her, for all that.”

“Well, there’s no accounting for tastes. I think she’s too colourless—washed-out looking,”—a fault the speaker herself could in no wise plead guilty to. She was a pretty girl herself, in the florid, barmaid style, but as different a creature to Lilian Strange as a plump dabchick to an Arctic tern.

Claverton's lips curled as he looked from the offending couple to the object of their remarks.

She to be discussed according to the clod-hopping ideas of louts and scullery-maids. He turned away disgusted. Suddenly he heard himself hailed in loud and jovial tones, and, looking up, found himself in the vicinity of the refreshment table, where three or four ancient settlers were exchanging reminiscences, and occasionally clinking glasses. Prominent among them was old Garrett, his rubicund visage now nearly purple.

"I sh-shay, C-Claveringsh!" called out this worthy. "C-come and have a what-sh-may call a eye-opener—hic!"

"All right."

"Thas righ'sh. Told yer 'ee ain't proud," cried the old fellow, beaming triumphantly on the rest, and attempting to bestow upon Claverton a friendly slap on the back, which the latter quietly evaded. He contemplated the individual before him with vast amusement, and speculated as to how soon this worthy's early retirement would become imperative.

The rout went on, and presently Naylor and his violin were pressed into the service to second the piano. In the passage outside a number of the Hottentot servants, emulative of their betters, had got up a dance of their own and waxed merry, and laughed and chattered exceedingly, till at last Jim Brathwaite, hearing the row, sallied forth and cleared them all out summarily.

The hours wear on apace. In the silence of the garden the air is fragrant with the cool breaths of night distilling from the myrtle and the flowering pomegranate. High in the heavens hangs a gold half-moon whose lustre pierces a leafy canopy, scattering a network of filmy light upon the shaded earth. In and out of the gloomy shadows of the orange trees a firefly or two trails in mid air a floating spark. All is rest. Now and again a burst of voices and music is borne from the house, yet here it penetrates but feebly, and Night—silver, moon-pierced, star-studded Night—is queen amid the mysterious silence of her witching court.

Two figures wandering down the orange walk in the alternate light, and gloom, and dimness. Listen! That low, melodious voice can belong to no other than Lilian Strange.

"I am so glad we came out here for a little. I had no idea there could be such a night as this except in books."

"Perhaps it strikes you the more, contrasted with the row and junketing indoors," said her companion.

"No. In any case it would be delicious. And yet there is something of awe about a night like this—don't laugh at me—it always seems a mysterious shadow-land connecting us with another world."

"Laugh at you! Why won't you give me credit for a capability of entering into any of your ideas?"

"But I do. You are more capable of it than any one I know. There."

"Thanks for that, anyway."

"Don't stop my rhapsodies, but listen. Doesn't it seem—standing here in this stillness—as if the world lay far beneath one's feet; that all the littlenesses and prosaic worries of every-day life could not enter such an enchanted realm? Ah-h!"

She uttered a little cry and instinctively drew closer to him as the sudden, yelping bark of a jackal sounded from the bush apparently within fifty yards of them, but really much further off, the stillness and a slight echo adding loudness to the unlooked-for and ill-sounding "bay."

"Don't be afraid," he said, reassuringly. "It's only a jackal. What would you have done if it had been a wolf?"

"I should have been dreadfully frightened. What a coward I am!"

"At any rate, this time I am not the author of the scare, which is subject-matter for gratulation," he said.

She laughed. "No; but the interruption came in most opportunely, in time to stay my flights. Here am I, inveighing against, and thinking to rise superior to the prosaic commonplaces of life, when a sound, a mere sound, fills me with an overwhelming impulse to rush headlong back into the despised prose. What a step from the sublime to the ridiculous!"

"I was thinking something of the kind," replied Claverton, with a half smile; and his voice grew very soft as he looked at her sweet, serious face. "But don't be in the least afraid. A jackal is about as formidable or aggressive as a tabby cat, though he does make a diabolical row; and as for wolves, they are very scarce, and even more cowardly; and a yet bolder animal would flee from two such unwonted apparitions in the South African bush," he added, with a laugh, as he glanced at the regulation "evening-dress" of his companion and himself. "Come this way."

He opened a small gate in the high quince hedge, and they passed out into a narrow bush path which, wound along through the *spekboem* and feathery mimosa.

"Don't be in the very least afraid," he repeated, as they wandered on. "I want you thoroughly to appreciate and enjoy about the most perfect night I ever knew—and I've seen a good many—and you can't do so if you're expecting a wolf or a tiger to spring out of every bush."

She laughed. "I'll try and be less of a coward, and keep my too-vivid imagination under control." Yet the light hand which rested on his arm seemed to lean there with ever so increased a pressure of trust or dependence, or both.

Is it the movement of bird or beast in the adjoining brake, or is it the tread of a stealthy foot, that makes Claverton suddenly turn and gaze behind him? “I could swear I heard some one,” he thinks to himself; but not a word of this does he say to his companion. Then he laughs at himself for a fool. But he sees not a tall, shadowy figure standing back beneath the shelter of a mimosa tree, watching them over the sprays of the lower scrub. He hears not again that cautious footfall following—following silently as they wend their way along the moonlit path. And what should be farther from his thoughts than danger, real or imaginary?

Presently the plash of falling water is heard, and they emerge from the path on to a high, open bank. Beneath, the moon is reflected in the depths of the still, round pool, whose rocky sides throw a black shadow on the surface, while a small cascade slides from a height of ten or twelve feet, and, glancing like a silver thread through festoons of delicate maidenhair fern fringing the polished face of the rock, plunges, with a bell-like plash, into the glassy depths.

“That’s pretty, isn’t it?” said Claverton. “In the daytime it isn’t much to look at, but by moonlight it shows up rather well.”

“It’s lovely! A perfect picture!”

“I thought you’d like it. Sit down there,” he continued, pointing to the smooth, sloping sward, which he has narrowly scrutinised to make sure that no noxious reptile, whether serpent or centipede, is at hand. Yet may he have overlooked the presence of deadlier foe than serpent or centipede, ay, and wolf or leopard, in that peaceful retreat. “How do you think you’ll like being here?”

“Very much. I like it already. It is so different to any kind of life I have ever known before—so strange, and wild, and interesting. And then every one here is so kind. Why, I might be a very near relative instead of only a recent acquaintance! The worst of it is, I fear it will spoil me by the time I have to go back to my work.”

Her listener bit his lip until the blood flowed. His quick perception had detected the faintest possible sigh of wearyful import which escaped her.

“It shall be no fault of mine if you do go back to that same miserable drudgery,” he thought. But it was too early yet to utter the thought aloud, even he felt that. So he only said—and there was a world of tender sympathy in his tone:

“I’m afraid you have been working much too hard, and I don’t believe you are in the least fitted for it.”

“You must not try and make me discontented, Mr Claverton,” was the answer, with a sad little smile. “The fact is, I do feel the change a great deal more than I ought. Only lately I had a very dear and happy home, now I am entirely alone in the world.”

Again that irresistible impulse came over her auditor. Was it really too soon? Why, it seemed as though he had known her for ages. Yet forty-eight hours ago he had not set eyes upon her. For a few moments he could hardly trust himself to speak. Then he said, gently:

“Tell me about your old home.” The bush behind them parts, suddenly, noiselessly. A head rises; a great grim black head, with distended eyeballs rolling in the moonlight. Then it sinks again and disappears, but they have not seen it.

“I suppose I have no right to feel leaving the old place as I did,” went on Lilian. “We were in a way interlopers, for it belonged to my stepfather, not to our family. I lived there, though, ever since I can remember, and my mother died there. We were very happy but for one thing: I had a stepsister about my own age who detested me. In short, we couldn’t get on together, hard though I tried to like her. So when Mr Dynevard died—”

“Who?”

“Mr Dynevard. My stepfather,” repeated Lilian.

“Of Dynevard Chase, near Sandcombe?”

“Yes. Why, you don’t mean to say you know it?” cried Lilian, lost in wonder.

“I wish I did. I’m afraid my utmost acquaintance with it lies in having driven past the place once or twice. Some distant relatives of mine lived not far from Sandcombe years ago. So that’s where you used to live?”

“Yes. This is a surprise. I shall make you talk to me such a lot about it,” she cried, gleefully. “You will soon be heartily tired of the subject, and will wish you had preserved a discreet silence.”

Claverton remembered the reluctance to dwell upon home topics which she had expressed when the two of them were driving up from the town, and it was with an extraordinary sense of relief that he did so. There was nothing more behind it than the painfulness of her change of circumstances to a proud and sensitive nature.

“After my stepfather’s death,” went on Lilian, “I thought it best to relieve Eveline Dynevard of my presence, and did so. There you have the whole of my history.”

“And then you struck out a line for yourself, and thought to open that miserably hard old oyster, the world, with the blade of a miniature penknife. How enterprising of you!”

“No, not at once—at least—at the first, that is—” and she hesitated slightly and the colour rose to her face, as at some painful recollection. Her trepidation was not lost upon her listener, on whom it threw a momentary chill.

Again that grim head rises from the bushes, ten yards behind the unsuspecting couple, followed this time by a pair of brawny dark shoulders bent forward in an attitude of intense watchfulness—the attitude of a crouching tiger. Again the moonbeams fall upon a fierce visage and eyes glaring with vengeful hate. They fall on something more—on the gleaming blade of a great assegai, and then the mighty frame of a gigantic savage slowly begins to emerge from the covert.

Claverton sees not the baleful stare of his deadly foe, for he is too intent upon gazing at the lovely preoccupied eyes before him, and wondering what is their exact colour, changing as it ever does in the varying light. His companion sees it not, for she is living again in the past. And no zephyr quivers through the silvered leaves or ruffles the pool at their feet, no cloud comes over the calm, fair beauty of the night, no shadow warns of a secret and terrible death hovering over those two, who sit there beneath the witching influences of restful calm, of moonlight, and to one of them—of love.

“Confound it!” angrily exclaims Claverton, half rising as the sound of approaching voices and laughter is borne upon the stillness. The threatening form of the watcher disappears—but they have not seen it—and the voices draw nearer. “Our retreat is a retreat no longer. The whole lot of them are bearing down upon us. Always the way.”

“Always the way.” So it is. As in small things so in great; we see not the finger of Providence in fortune’s hardest knocks. Yet it must be admitted that these seldom wear the guise of blessings, and we mortals are weak—lamentably weak—and our foresight is simply nil. You two, who resent the intrusion of your fellows into this slumbrous retreat, you little reck that that intrusion is the saving of the life of at least one of you.

“But anyhow we must be going back now. As it is they will be wondering what has become of as,” said Lilian, rising.

“I suppose we must,” assented her companion, ruefully. He thought he could have sat for ever in that enchanted glade, gazing into the beautiful face and listening to the modulation of that low, tuneful voice. “Ah, well. Now for the madding crowd again.”

He wrapped her shawl around her, and they wandered back along the narrow path and beneath the orange trees again. Then as they gained the last gate and the sound of music and laughter betokened that they were close to the house, Lilian lingered a moment to look back towards the moonlit pool.

“It is a sweet place, and we have had a lovely walk,” she said. “I did enjoy it so. Thanks so much for bringing me.”

What did she mean? Was she blind? He paused with his hand on the half-open gate, and glanced at her with a curious expression.

A small runnel of water coursed along at their feet, shining and glowing in the moonlight, and she was standing on the single plank that spanned it. Was she blind, that she failed to read even one-tenth of what that look expressed? But he made some ordinary remark, and they passed on.

“Why, where in the world have you two been?” said Mrs Brathwaite as they entered.

“Playing truant. Miss Strange had a slight headache, and I recommended fresh air as a counteracting influence. Then we discovered that we had been near neighbours for some years without knowing it, and got talking English ‘shop’,” answered Claverton. The latter half of his statement was not strictly historical, but the speaker salved his conscience with the trite reflection that “all’s fair in love and war.”

“How curious!” said the old lady, in her interest in the coincidence losing sight of the delinquency and forgetting mildly to scold him therefor. “But it’s astonishing how small the world is, when one comes to think of it.”

“Mr Claverton,” said Lilian, reproachfully, an hour later. “I’m surprised at you. How could you say we were neighbours for ‘some years’ when you knew we were not?”

He laughed. “Were we not? Then we ought to have been. It was the merest accident of time and place that precluded it.” He could not make to her the excuse he had made to his own conscience—at least—not yet.

* * *

Pass we again to the silence of the garden. Who is this leaning against yonder fence alone and gazing with stony, set face straight in front of her? Can it be Ethel? Yes, it is. The laughing, saucy lips, so ready with badinage and repartee, are closed tightly together, and the blue eyes, erewhile flashing and sparkling with light-hearted mirth, now start forth with a hard stare. Must we, in the interests of our story, partially withdraw the curtain from her reflections? Even so, let us do it as gently as possible.

“He never looked at *me* like that,” she murmured, referring to the two on the little plank bridge. “Ought I to have betrayed my presence? I don’t know. I couldn’t, somehow; and they weren’t saying anything. But that look—how plainly I saw it! O, God! if only it had been given to me—to *me*,” she went on, passionately, “I would cheerfully have died at this moment.”

She paused, and slowly the tears welled to the swimming eyes, and glistened in the moonlight. “All the walks and rides we’ve had together; all the time we have been thrown together! Good God! if I could but live it over again! Since the very moment I saw him come in, and he looked me up and down in that calm, searching way of his—it seems only like yesterday. He never thought of me but as something to amuse him—a pretty plaything—to be thrown aside for a better. No, I am wronging him; never by word or look did he deceive me. It is I who am a fool—an idiot—and must pay the penalty of my folly; but—how could I help it?”

And the sounds of revelry came ever and anon from the lighted windows; and, without, all nature slept in a tranquil hush, and the pale stars gleamed in the sky—gleamed coldly down upon the lonely watcher.

“How I flouted you, and said hard, sharp things to you, darling; every one of them goes through me like a knife as I remember it. Yet that was at first, and—how could I tell?” and a great sob shook the delicate frame. “But help me, my pride! Oh, love, you will never know. The same roof will cover us, and I must talk and even laugh with you as before—and see you and her together; but—you will never know. Ah! what a deal it takes to break one poor little heart! And—how I hate *her*!”

A voice intrudes upon her reflections, quick, gruff, and horribly familiar. “Oh, there you are, Miss Brathwaite,” it says, “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

The voice acts upon her even as the trumpet blast upon the proverbial charger. Not a trace of any recent emotion is visible as she turns and faces her persistent but unwelcome admirer, Will Jeffreys.

“And you’ve found me. What can I do for you?”

The young fellow is staggered. The fact is that, warmed by the exhilarating exercise and the yet more exhilarating stimulant which he has imbibed pretty freely in the course of the evening, he has screwed up his courage to the sticking point, and intends to throw the dice of his fate with Ethel before the said exalted quality has time to cool, which process of refrigeration, it may be remarked, has already begun.

“Well, there *is* something you can do for me,” he says.

“What is it? Do you want a partner for the next dance?—because, I’ll be in directly,” she asks, quickly.

The very tones of her voice ought to have brought home to Jeffreys the inexpediency of pursuing his subject for the present; but some persons are singularly deficient in a sense of the fitness of things or of times, and he was one.

“No; it isn’t that. I want to say something—something about me—and about you,” he blunders, lamely; but she will give him no help, “and—I must—say it—to-night—Ethel!” he jerks out.

“For goodness’ sake don’t say it to-night, or at any other time,” replies she, decisively, putting out her hand, with a gesture as if to stop him. It has the desired effect. Even Jeffreys’ dull wits are alive to the conviction that his is not merely a losing game, but a lost one; and the reflection exasperates him.

“Oh, I might have known,” was the sneering reply. “Of course—no one has been fit to speak to since that fellow Claverton came.”

She turned upon him, her face white with wrath in the moonlight. “Wilfred Jeffreys, you are a brave fellow. You have found me here alone, and have taken the opportunity of insulting me. Now what do you think I am going to do?”

“What?”

“I am going in to ask uncle to put away the brandy decanter,” said she, in tones of bitter scorn; and without another word she walked away, leaving him standing there looking and feeling, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, a thorough fool.

Within doors the fun is kept up with a zest characteristic of such entertainments. There are no shy ones left now, all are merged in the ranks of the confident.

Crash!

Down comes Hicks like a felled tree, right in the middle of the room. Matters are at a momentary standstill, and the unlucky one slowly and shamefacedly picks himself up, red and wrathful and covered with confusion. He is muttering maledictions on the head of the guileless Allen, which ass, he declares, not content with cannoning against him, tripped him up.

“Never mind, jump up. Lucky it’s *before* supper,” laughs jovial Jim Brathwaite.

“Hicks, old man, I *told* you to draw the line at that fourth glass,” says the irrepressible Armitage in a mighty stage whisper as he whirls by, grinning with malicious delight. The truth being that Hicks is the most abstemious wight in the world. But the remark does not pass unheeded, and a laugh, varying in tone from open guffaw to suppressed titter, further exasperates and discomfits the luckless stumbler, who vows vengeance on his tormentor.

Then comes supper, which must be attended to in relays, space being limited. A Dutchman is desperately anxious to make a speech, and is with difficulty quelled; while Jack Armitage, who has a bet on with some one that old Garrett being too far gone to detect the fraud, he will make him drink three tumblers of water under the impression that it is grog, is using the noble spur, emulation, to induce that worthy to swallow the third, and winks and grins triumphantly at the loser as he succeeds. Meanwhile piano and violin never flag, till at length the waning summer night begins to hint pretty broadly that it is time to knock off.

Then a great deal of inspanning and saddling up; of hunting for stray saddle-cloths and bridles which have gone adrift; not a little wrangling among the coloured stable hands belonging to the place or to the guests, and finally most of the latter are gone. The residue will tarry for a shakedown and a rest.

“Good-night—at sunrise!”

A pressure from a soft, taper hand; a sweet glance from a pair of rather tired eyes, and the door closes on a tall vision in soft creamy draperies.

The recipient of that pressure of the hand, that playful glance, turns away like a man in a dream. Half instinctively he makes his way to Hicks' quarters. Here he is enthusiastically hailed.

"Hallo, Arthur. Come and blow a cloud before you turn in. All these chaps are asleep already."

"All right," was the reply, and the speaker, picking his way among several slumbering wights who rolled in blankets had compassed impromptu shakedowns on the floor of Hicks' room, seated himself at the foot of the latter's stretcher. "Give us a fill."

Volume One—Chapter Seventeen.

Baulked.

"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," is a good and safe maxim in other senses than the theological, for it goes to the very root of human nature.

Here was a man in the zenith of his strength, at an age when the fire of youth would be tempered and steeled by rare physical powers of endurance; a man to whose lot had befallen stirring and eventful experiences beyond the lot of most men, and in befalling had hardened; a man of cool judgment and keen, clear, reasoning powers far beyond his years; a man to whom the other sex would accord a full share of attention, and who hitherto has been utterly unsusceptible to any such excusable weakness, has hitherto never known a quickened pulse in response to soft glance or welcoming smile. And this man has now surrendered at sight—absolutely, and without the smallest reservation.

And it had all come about in a single day.

Just so. It is your apparent icicle that annihilates itself with the most startling rapidity when suddenly touched by the scorching beam of the unlooked-for sun. It is the unsusceptible one who goes down forehead to the earth, not pausing to spread rug or carpet in the way, when the self-constituted idol appears. And oh, how frequently too, not the feet only, but the head, the hands, and the heart of the image prove to be of the veriest clay!

To-morrow!

Who among us ever gives a thought to this commonplace word? Not, I mean, when we are passing through some momentous crisis of our lives, some care, some expectation for good or for ill, which may either make us, or crush us well-nigh out of existence. Not then, but when our lives are flowing on, smooth and undisturbed, then it is that we practically ignore the possibility of to-morrow bringing with it anything eventful, or being, in short, other than a mere twenty-four hours' repetition of to-day.

To-morrow!

We go to bed lightly with the word on our lips, our arrangements for it are all mapped out, all ordered for the next twenty-four hours, ay, and beyond them, as though there existed not in the sublime philosophy of the Wise King that most portentous of all warnings: "Boast not thyself of the morrow, for thou canst not tell what a day may bring forth."

For an exemplification of both warnings behold it perfected in him who rides abroad this morning. A single day, and his life has been cut into two halves. Nor is it even a day that has wrought this change, nor yet an hour, nor a minute. A moment, a brief flash of time, just so long as that presence took to appear before him, and he was conquered. One look, and he fell prostrate, to rise again a slave. And this man, till the day before yesterday, had not a care in the world.

He rides slowly on. On the high ground which will directly shut the homestead out of sight, he turns for a moment to gaze upon the quiet old place sleeping embowered in trees; to gaze upon it with a lingering and reverential gaze, as pilgrim taking a last look at some deeply venerated shrine. Then he urges his horse along a narrow track which leads down into the wildest part of the farm. Dark bush covers the valley on either hand, broken only by a beetling *krantz*, frowning down as it were upon great jagged rocks which, hurled at some remote period from its face, lie embedded beneath. Yonder, in a sequestered glade, a couple of spans of fine trek-oxen are grazing, the sun glistening on their sleek hides; a bushbuck ewe stalks timidly across an open clearing, and the alarmed note of a pheasant sounds close to the horseman; but he who rides abroad thus early is neither on business bent nor on the pleasures of the chase. He is only thinking—ruminating.

Mechanically his hand grasps the reins, as his steed, which he makes no attempt to guide, steps briskly out, skilfully avoiding the sweeping boughs which here and there overhang the path. Monkeys grin and gibber at him among the branches, and a large secretary bird floats away from its nest of sticks hard by. In the dewy webs which quiver from the sprays of the bushes, and sparkle in the sun like strings of gems, he reads but one name, one name written as it were, in delicate gossamer characters, and the breaths of morning in this fresh cool retreat are fraught with a faint but thrilling harmony—the music of low, tuneful notes which are something more than a recollection, so clearly present are they in the fancy of the thinker.

Then he ponders over the three months which have slipped by in such calm, easy fashion since he cast in his lot here, and found among these kindly and genial friends a home in its best and truest sense. It seems to him a marvellous thing that he could have enjoyed, so much contentment until this new star suddenly blazed forth in the firmament of his life. He was not susceptible, never had been. How much had not he and Ethel Brathwaite been thrown together, for instance! Ethel with her sunny spirits and laughing, wayward moods, and her capacity for working havoc among his own sex. They had been thrown daily, hourly, together, from sheer force of circumstances, yet never a pulse of his had been stirred in the faintest degree by any spell of hers.

“Too soon.”

He is again seated in imagination by the moonlit pool while that shade of unhappy recollection steals across his companion’s beautiful face. Again the longing is upon him to clear up the mystery and learn his own fate. In but a couple of days! Ridiculous! And half aloud he utters his thoughts:

“Too soon!”

Zip!—

A metallic ring on the stones behind him. Something lies gleaming on the sun-baked slope of the hill. It is an assegai.

From the weapon, which has missed his body by about six inches, his glance darts searchingly in the direction whence it came. All his coolness has returned, and now his sole idea in life is the discovery of his hidden assailant. Yet he is unarmed; it is highly probable that there are more spears where the first came from; the spot is a lonely one, and for all present purposes as far removed from human aid as the centre of the Great Sahara.

“Ah, I thought as much. I see you, Mopela, you skulking vagabond. Come down here, you dog, and I’ll brain you.”

For a head had appeared from behind a low rock some eighteen or twenty yards from the speaker, and after watching him for a moment, half the body of its owner followed. A strip of thick bush lay between him and Claverton, who he guessed was unarmed, as no weapon was levelled at him.

“Whaow!” mocked the savage, as he poised another assegai. “Whaow! Lenzimbi (Note 1). Yesterday I; to-day, you. What do you say? Can your fists reach me here? You are as good as dead, and then Mopela will hang you to a tree by the hind leg, and in an hour the aasvogels will be tearing away at your carcase;” and springing upon the rock he again levelled his formidable spear.

Claverton never moved in his saddle, but sat confronting his deadly foe as calmly as though he were asking the road; and there, above, stood the athletic form of the huge barbarian, who, entirely naked, and smeared from head to foot with red ochre, which glistened in the sun, looked a very demon of the forest. He knew that the other’s words were true, and that the chances were a hundred to one that in five minutes he would be a dead man. He was quite unarmed, and his adversary still had two assegais. Yet he replied quite unconcernedly:

“You’re a fool, Mopela. You can’t hurt *me*, and, moreover, let me tell you this—you’re a damned bad shot.”

His coolness rather disconcerted the other, who laughed mockingly. “Can’t I? Mopela’s assegais are too sharp for Lenzimbi’s ‘charm,’ and his God is asleep; *He* can’t help him. Look, I have two more assegais, one for Lenzimbi, and one for his God. His God is asleep, I say.”

“Is he? Look there!” exclaimed Claverton in a sharp, warning tone, pointing behind the other. The superstitious Kafir turned his head, for the moment completely thrown off his guard; quick as thought Claverton slipped from the saddle, and, wrenching off one of the stirrups, dashed into the bush and made straight for his enemy. He was just in time, for the other, having recovered himself, launched an assegai with such unerring effect as to graze the seat of the saddle; the horse, startled by the unwonted proceedings, threw up his head, snorted and backed, and finally trotted off by the way he had come. The Kafir, secure in his point of vantage, awaited the onset, grasping his remaining assegai. Claverton knew better than to hesitate, and, rushing at his adversary, dealt him a violent blow on the leg with the stirrup-iron. Maddened by the pain, Mopela sprang upon him with a wild beast’s roar, but Claverton was ready. Dropping the stirrup he clutched the other’s wrists, and they struggled like fiends. The athletic savage, twice the Englishman’s match for sheer muscular strength, strove with might and main to free the hand which held his assegai; but the other, knowing full well that his very life depended on his not doing so, held firm—firm as iron. Their breath came in quick, short gasps, and every muscle was distended and rigid. Then the savage, with a hyaena-like howl, opened his great teeth and made a mighty snap at his antagonist’s face, but Claverton lowered his head and the other’s teeth met in his slouch hat; then, taking advantage of Mopela being off his guard, he drove his right knee with all the force he could muster into the Kafir’s stomach. The game was now his own. His gigantic foe staggered back ten or a dozen yards, then fell gasping for breath, and dropping his weapon as he rolled and writhed among the bush below. With a fierce shout, Claverton seized the spear and rushed upon his enemy, but it was too late. Mopela had had as much as he could stomach in more ways than one, and hastened to make himself scarce; moreover, the trampling of approaching hoofs was heard and a horseman appeared, leading Claverton’s defaulting steed.

“Hullo! What the very deuce is the row? Is that you, Claverton?”

“It is. Five minutes ago the chances in favour of the same being fact were infinitesimal.”

“Well, you *are* a cool hand,” began the new arrival, when a shout far above them in the bush interrupted him and drew both their attention. They looked up and beheld Mopela.

“Gough, have you got a revolver?” asked Claverton in quick, eager tones. “He’s a long way off, but I think I can pink him. No? Haven’t you? I’d give 50 pounds for a single shot at the beast.” Then, raising his voice: “Aha, Mopela, you dog; whose god is asleep now, eh? Come down here again,” he went on, jeeringly; “come down and have another thrashing; I’ll give you one—I alone. The other *Baas* will see fair play. You won’t? You’re not such a fool as I thought, then. Only, look here, the next time I come across you, wherever it may be, I’ll kill you—kill you, by God. So keep out of my way.”

The savage shook his hand towards the speaker with a menacing gesture. “Whaow!” he called out. “The next time we meet Lenzimbi will sing to a different tune. When the land is red with the blood of the *abelúngu* (whites), and their sheep and cattle are in our kraals, Lenzimbi shall yet hang by the heels, and Mopela will, with his own hand, put out his eyes with a red-hot firestick before he is roasted—Haow! Then the warriors of the Amaxosa will have great sport in hunting out the last of the whites from their hiding-places, and all the white men will be dead; but there will be plenty of white women—ha! ha! ha!—plenty of white women,” went on the savage, in his great mocking tones. “And the dark lily of Seringa Vale,” (jerking his thumb in the direction of that locality), “when Lenzimbi’s body and spirit is burnt up in the slow fire, she and Mopela will—Ha!” He disappeared suddenly, for with a furious oath Claverton plunged into the bush in pursuit; but he might as well have searched for the proverbial needle as for the crafty savage, who simply dodged him in the thick covert, laughing in his sleeve the while. In less than half an hour he returned to his wondering companion.

“Where are you bound for, Gough?”

“Thorman’s—I’m thinking of buying that horse of his.”

“All right. I’ll go part of the way with you and get back round by the *vij-kraal* (Note 2). But let’s pick up these carving-knives first.” He gathered up the three assegais, all well-made weapons with keen blades and long, tapering handles; then, as they mounted and rode off, he told his companion what had happened.

John Gough was a young man of about twenty-three, who had migrated to the colony about a year before in search of employment. This he had found in the capacity of tutor to Naylor’s children—four healthy young romps, as disinclined for their books as frontier children usually are. He was of a quiet and retiring disposition, but a good fellow. For some reason or another he rather disliked Claverton, but was too good-natured to show it; and now, as they rode along in silence—for Claverton had relapsed into a fit of taciturnity—he began to think he had done him an injustice.

“Well, I think I shall turn here,” said that worthy, when they had gone a little way further. “Gough, I’m going to ask you to do me a favour.”

“What is it?” inquired the other, somewhat surprised.

“To oblige me by not mentioning this little shindy to any one—will you?”

“Yes, certainly, if you wish it,” answered Gough, rather reluctantly. He was disappointed as well as surprised; topics of conversation were scarce, and such a jolly row as Claverton had just had would be nuts; even as it was, he had been thinking how he would entertain the Thormans with an account of it, and now it was to be kept dark. Well, Claverton was a queer fellow, but it was his own business. So he gave the required undertaking.

“Thanks; I knew you would. I don’t fancy that scoundrel will come near me again. Good-bye.” They shook hands, and went their respective ways.

A few hundred yards further, and a blue smoke reek above the bush betokened a dwelling. In an open space stood two huts, dome-shaped, and constructed of thatch, and hard by, a thorn enclosure at that moment full of sheep. This was one of the out-stations, where one of the flocks was wont to be kept. A mangy and spindle-shanked cur rushed yapping forth, roused by the tread of the horse’s hoofs. A mighty crack of the rider’s whip, however, caused it to beat a precipitate retreat, and also had the effect of bringing a head to the small, beehivelike entrance of one of the huts. The head was promptly followed by its owner, who stood up and saluted Claverton.

“Well, Umgiswe, it’s some time since any of us have been down here to count, so I’ll do so now. Turn them out.”

“Ewa ’nkos,” (yes, chief), replied the Kafir, curiously eyeing the assegais which the other carried; and opening the kraal he threw off his red blanket and began driving out the sheep, while Claverton stood at the gate and counted.

“Eighty-one—eighty-three—eighty-seven—ninety—ninety-two—ninety-three—six hundred and ninety-three. Why, how’s this, Umgiswe? There are three missing?”

The old Kafir shrugged his shoulders and muttered something to the effect that they had died in the *veldt*. Then he fumbled about with the fastenings of the gate.

“Now, look here, Umgiswe! When sheep die they don’t melt into air. If these three are dead, I must see their skins. Do you hear? If they are not dead they must be found. I shall come down to-morrow and count again; then they must be here,” said Claverton, decisively, looking the man straight in the eyes.

He was a quick linguist, and, during the short time he had been on the frontier, had mastered enough of the Kafir language in its tortuous verbosity, combined with what he had picked up during his former sojourn in the colony, to be able to converse with tolerable ease, an acquirement which added in no small degree to his influence with the natives, who always hold in greater respect a European who can discourse with them in their own tongue.

“Ewa ’nkos,” said the Kafir again. “They shall be found.” Then he asked for some tobacco.

“You shall have some, Umgiswe, you shall have some—when the three sheep are found.”

The man’s countenance fell. Then he asked, quietly and respectfully enough, where the assegais came from.

“I picked them up. Good spears, are they not? Do you know the owner, Umgiswe? If you do, tell him to come and claim them, and the sooner he comes the better.” Then nodding in response to the other’s farewell greeting, Claverton touched his horse with the spur and struck into the bush path. The Kafir stood gazing after him.

“He is a wizard; he knows everything,” said Umgiswe to himself; and then he turned away, intending to restore the two sheep he had hidden away so securely till it should be safe to send them off to his kraal in the Gaika location, there to swell the fruits of his pickings and stealings, and planning how he could doctor up the skin of the one which he and a boon companion had devoured two nights ago, so as to make it appear that the animal had died a natural death.

Note 1. One with the qualities of iron. Kafirs are fond of bestowing nicknames, though frequently of a less complimentary nature than this.

Note 2. An outlying fold for flocks whose range is at a distance from the homestead.

Volume One—Chapter Eighteen.

“At the Full of the Moon.”

Midnight.

The silence of desolation. The river, plashing on its sandy bars, makes faint, tuneful murmur. At intervals the wild weird hoot of an owl, high up on the wooded hillside, breaks startlingly upon the dead, solemn stillness. The air hangs heavy down here in this silent hollow, and above, the dark face of the haunted cliff rises, stern and tremendous, in clear outline against the stars.

What are those shadowy figures ranged in a semicircle round the hollow, motionless as the grave? Are they of earth? Not a whisper, not a movement in that terrible phalanx. Only two hundred pair of eyes fixed upon vacancy, with strained and expectant stare, show that these ghostly shapes have life, or had. But what are they? Grim phantom warriors gathered there to re-enact the tragedy of blood which the dim legend of savage tradition associates with the spot.

And now a glow suffuses the sky, faint at first, then spreading nearly to the zenith. A great golden disc peers above yonder bush-clad height, and slowly mounting upward, soars majestically into space. Half of the valley beneath is flooded with light, but the face of the haunted cliff is still in gloom, casting a long black shadow upon the plashing river whence the mist is rising in white wreathe.

“At the full of the moon.”

A dull, moaning sound is heard in the cliff, seeming to come from the very heart of the rocky wall, now rising, now falling, awesome and mysterious. It is as the voices of the spirits of the dead. There is an overpowering and mesmeric influence in the very atmosphere. Then gleams forth a flickering green light which plays on the face of the rock like a corpse candle. Suddenly the whole of that crouching phalanx starts up erect. A deep-toned murmur, sounding like a muffled roar, goes forth from the throats of two hundred dark warriors, and the ghostly light glints on a forest of bristling assegais.

“At the full of the moon.”

Small wonder that the orb of night, about which poets love to rave, should be constituted the presiding goddess at the gruesome rites of savage and superstitious races all the world over; that its changing quarters should be endued with power to sway their weightiest undertakings in war or in the chase. It would be strange if the great lustrous disc stamped with a cold, impassive, remorseless-looking human countenance, floating silently over the darkened earth, did not appeal powerfully to the spiritual side of untaught and imaginative races. And then, just think of the myriads upon myriads of scenes of violence and treachery—fraud, rapine, murder, and wholesale massacre—upon which that cold, spectral countenance has looked down, and still looks down; ay, and will continue to do as long as this miserable world shall be peopled with countless generations of the tailless and biped demon known as Man.

“At the full of the moon.”

And now the black shadow passes from the cliff, revealing a shape—a shape which seems to have arisen from the earth itself, or peradventure to have sprung from the smooth wall of rock behind, so sudden is its appearance. Amid dead silence it glides into the midst of the expectant semicircle. Truly an appalling monster. The moonlight, now well-nigh as clear as day, plays upon a pair of glittering, wolf-like eyes and a lean, gaunt figure, about whose long limbs are dangling ox-tails and strings of beads. The grinning head-piece of a hyaena rests helmet-like upon this creature’s skull, and from between the open jaws of the beast starts forth the horrible head of a live serpent, whose sinuous coils are wound about the wearer’s body. The latter, smeared from head to foot with a glistening pigment, is hung about with birds’ claws, reptile heads and festoons of entrails. A horrible and disgusting object. The right arm of the wizard is red to the elbow with blood, and in his hand he carries nothing but one short, broad-headed assegai.

“Hear the words of Sefele, the spirit of this place, speaking by the mouth of his descendant, Nomadudwana, the son of Mtyusi.”

Silently the whole phalanx of dark warriors sank back into a crouching attitude, gazing upon the speaker, expectant and motionless.

“There are voices above and voices beneath. There are voices in the air and voices in the water. Lo, I see a mighty host; an army gathered for battle; an army which fills the earth and the air; many warriors with their chiefs and leaders; and their right hands are even as this," (holding up his gore-stained fingers), "and their shields are dinted and their assegais are broken. And the warriors are angry and they are sad, for they have fought and fought, always bravely, and now they are tired and may not rest. And I see another army—an army not of warriors but of women—and they, too, cannot rest; they must take weapons and go forth to battle, for there are no men left."

A deep murmur from the listeners, who, squatted on their haunches, with bodies bent eagerly forward, drink in every word the wizard speaks.

"Again, I look. This time I see another army—differing tribes, but all one host—thousands and thousands and tens of thousands of fighting men; the land is red with them, but they are all asleep. They have arms—they have the sharp weapons which their fathers had, but they have forgotten how to use them. They have more—they have the fire-weapons of the whites, but they know not how to use them. The white fools put their weapons into our hands willingly, joyfully, for money, but we do not know how to use them. We drink of the white men's poisoned strong waters and our hearts melt away—we become children—we wallow like swine upon the ground. The fighting men of the Amaxosa have become dogs and slaves."

A fierce ejaculation here went round the circle, while many a sinewy hand grasped the tough wood of assegai hafts. The grim prophet continued, his deep tones waxing more and more ferocious like the savage growl of a beast:

"We are the dogs and slaves of the white men, even as the cowardly Amafengu were our dogs. Not to the white men only, also to their women. Do not our warriors drop their weapons, and take service, and plough the land, and hoe corn, and milk the cows, and drive waggons for white women? Ha! We, a free, a brave nation, whose fathers conquered the land ages and ages before one accursed white-foot trod these mountains and valleys—our *men* to be dogs to the white *women*! Ha! Ask Ncanda, there, who, at the word of a white woman, was tied up and lashed with whips! Ask Mopela, the brother of Nxabahlana of the house of Sandili the Great Chief, who was beaten and kicked like a dog in the presence of a white woman—Hah!"

A frenzied howl burst from the audience at these words of the wily wizard, while the two savages referred to by name, gnashed their teeth with rage.

"Who are these people that rule us? Who are they? As a calabash of water is to the Nxumba River in flood, as five stones are to the pebbles on the sea-shore, so are the whites in this land to the fighting men of the Amaxosa, to the warriors of the Amanqgika, and of the Amagcaleka, and even of the peace-loving Abatembu. And we call ourselves men!"

Then, raising his voice: "Let the omens be sought."

A stir among the throng. Two stalwart savages rose and stood before the orator. They were magnificent specimens of their race, prior to its deterioration in morale and physique through the destroying agencies of ardent spirits and contagious disease. Of commanding stature and herculean build, these men represented a type, once common enough, but now becoming more and more rare among the border tribes. The wizard muttered an incantation over each, and the two betook themselves to the bush. A moment of dead silence and they reappeared, dragging with them two goats—one spotlessly white, the other, jet black.

The animals were thrown upon the ground in front of the wizard, and securely tied; even their mouths being bound up, lest the sound of their agonised bleatings upon the still night air, should reach unwelcome ears. Then, still chanting his hellish incantation, the cruel monster bent down, and, with his keen assegai, gashed and mutilated the wretched creatures in a manner too shocking for detailment, beginning with the white one. A hoarse rattle, smothered by the precautionary gag, burst from their tortured throats, and their convulsive struggles were frightful to behold. Yet they aroused no spark of compassion in these merciless breasts.

In silence the Kafirs contemplated the barbarous performance; then, unable to contain themselves any longer, they sprang to their feet and burst into a low war-song, rattling the shafts of their assegais as they beat time to the savage rhythm. It was a weird and gruesome scene, such a sight as a man might witness once and remember all his life long. Above, the great beetling cliff looming up against the midnight sky; around, the shadowy sleeping heights; in the midst that band of demon warriors, the green light of the magic fire touching their grim countenances with an unearthly hue as they circled round the hideous wizard and the quivering bodies of his tortured victims, chanting their terrific war-song. Every now and again a convulsive shudder would heave through the bodies of the miserable animals, whose glazing eyes rolled piteously as they writhed their necks and bared their jaws in their terrible agony.

For upwards of half an hour the dance went on, the chief men deeming it necessary from time to time to put in a restraining word, lest the suppressed excitement of their followers should break bounds; for sound travels far at night, and it would never do to attract attention. Suddenly several voices exclaimed:

"The omen! The omen!"

In a moment all gathered round the gory and mangled carcases. One of the goats had ceased its struggles. The wizard pricked it with his assegai, but without producing the smallest sign of sensibility. The poor creature was stone dead. *It was the black one*.

The savages stared at each other in awed silence, then their astonishment found words.

"Ha! The black goat dies! The black goat dies and the white goat lives! Ha!"

This patent fact established, they troubled themselves no more about the other wretched victim, which showed unmistakable signs of lingering for some time to come, but turned attentively to the wizard in subdued and eager expectancy. Nomadudwana's tone was now no longer one of fiery exhortation. When he spoke it was with deliberation, even solemnity.

"The omen is sure. The black goat dies and the white goat lives. This night I have heard a voice—the voice of Sefele whom his brethren cast from yonder height and thought to slay. To slay! One who holds converse with the spirits! This night I have talked with Sefele in that cave which none can find but he who is loved by the shades of our ancestors. These are the words of Sefele: 'The fulness of time is not yet. Though it be long in coming, let not the fighting men of the Amaxosa fall asleep; let them watch the whites with sure and wakeful glance; let them take of their flocks and of their herds, when they can. Let them go and work for the whites and cast dust in their eyes—even as we have led away on a false search the fool who lives yonder,' (pointing to Armitage's homestead, lying silent and deserted on the other side of the river) 'and have made helpless with drink the wallowing Hottentot, his dog. But above all, let them acquire the fire-weapons of the whites and plenty of ammunition.' Thus speaks Sefele. Take his words with you. The fulness of time is not yet, but the omen is sure. Lo, the dawn is not far distant. Return as you came."

An awed murmur went round the band. The magic fire disappeared. They looked wonderingly at each other. Nomadudwana had vanished.

Breaking up into twos and threes the Kafirs rapidly dispersed, eager to be gone from the dreaded spot when no longer under the protecting presence of the powerful magician who communed with the spirit in the unknown cave. They were impatient, but not disheartened. They must continue to deceive the hated and masterful whites with soft words and lying promises. These superstitious souls, with their faith in the assurances of their wizards, saw their triumph ahead. What they did not see was their broken and decimated tribes hunted and starving, driven out of the land of their forefathers, utterly cowed and submissive. What they did not see was the flower and pick of their manhood strewing their native hills and kloofs with stiffened corpses in thousands, to the advantage of the *aasvogel* and the jackal.

There was something else that they did not see. They did not see a recumbent human figure which, from the very brow of the sacred cliff, had watched the uncanny and repulsive rites from beginning to end. They did not see this figure, snugly concealed and motionless, watch till the last of their outlying scouts finally left his post and moved away, and then descend from the airy vantage ground with the dry chuckle of one who has stolen a march on an uncommonly shrewd adversary, and going to where a horse was securely hidden, mount and ride off. Even their keen vision failed to descry this.

By sunrise these fierce warriors, who had borne such eager part in the wild war-dance and the hideous and cruel rites of the night through, would be once more so many quiet, civil herds and waggon-drivers, for, with few exceptions, they were all in farm service in the surrounding neighbourhood. But how came they here, how did they preserve so inviolate the secret of the nocturnal gathering? The whole thing is very simple. Two or three natives, inoffensive of aspect and deferential of manner, provided moreover with unimpeachable passes, had gone the round of the various employers of labour seeking for work here, come to visit a relative there, anxious for a day or two's job in another place, and so on. And wherever they had been they had delivered their "word" among all fellow-countrymen there employed, provided these were to be trusted, that is to say. That "word" was brief if slightly obscure to the uninitiated. Moreover, it occurred quite incidentally in the thick of conversation on ordinary topics. But those to whom it was addressed understood perfectly its import.

"At the full of the moon."

Volume One—Chapter Nineteen.

"What has the World been Since?—Thee Alone!"

One of the most blissful delusions, and unaccountable withal, under which a man desperately in love invariably labours, is the profound unconsciousness of his state wherewith he credits those among whom he lives and moves. What renders the delusion all the more inexplicable is the certainty that its victim himself in his unsmitten days must have frequently spotted more than one of his friends labouring under the ravages of the intoxicating malady, or at any rate his feminine kinsfolk and acquaintance were not slow to make the discovery for him. Yet when his own turn comes he may, with absolute certainty, be counted upon to imagine that his own incoherencies of speech and action, in short, all the symptoms of acute delirium entirely escape the multifold optics of the Argus feminine; and that his Beeret remains all his own, so effectually has he guarded it. Which thing, by the way, no *man* ever succeeded in accomplishing yet.

Lilian was singing; a sweet pathetic ballad, rendered with infinite feeling. The song ended; a final chord or two; and the singer threw it aside and turned away from the piano.

"Thanks, Lilian. Why, my child, you sing like an angel," said her hostess, moved almost to tears by the full, rich voice which, keeping well within its compass, fills the room just so much as it will bear and no more, while every word is as distinctly enunciated as though the singer were reciting it. Even Mr Brathwaite had forgotten to fall into his post-coenal doze, and sat upright in his arm-chair, wide awake and listening.

The three above mentioned are alone in the room this evening—yet stay—there enters a fourth. He had been standing quietly in the doorway during the song, and refrained from entering, for fear of disturbing the singer. He had been obliged to go out after supper to give some orders to Xuvani about the morrow, and returning, was surprised and entranced by the sound of Lilian's voice in song. So he stood in the doorway, drinking in every note.

"Why, you vowed you never sang," he exclaimed, reproachfully, advancing to the piano. "And then you wait until a fellow is out of the way, and this is the result.”

She turned to him with the most bewitching of smiles. “Well, I don’t,” she replied, in a deprecatory tone. “At least, I haven’t for a long, long time, and now I’m only trying over something I picked up the other day. Just by ourselves, you know.”

“Having carefully waited till I was out of the room.”

“Perhaps I was just a little bit shy, from being so long out of practice,” answered she, with a glance that would have melted a stone.

But her auditor, though stony enough in all other respects, was wax in her hands, and her glance thrilled through him like an electric shock. She had penetrated the one weak joint in his armour most thoroughly. Did she know it?

“Shyness, like all other weaknesses, should be conquered,” he rejoined. “The best way of conquering it in this instance is to sing that over again. Just by ourselves, you know.”

“But Mrs Brathwaite won’t thank me. She must have had enough of it,” objected Lilian, with a laugh.

“Enough of it!” exclaimed the old lady. “My dear child, I would have asked you myself but I didn’t quite like to. Now do. Arthur hasn’t heard the first part.”

Thus adjured, she gave way; but this time the shyness to which she had pleaded guilty, made itself manifest by an occasional slight tremor in the sweet, clear voice. Which, however, rendered the pathetic ballad all the more entrancing to her new auditor.

There was silence for a minute when she had ended Claverton broke it.

“That’s the loveliest thing I ever heard.”

“What! Did you never hear it before?”

“Never. But I don’t care how soon I hear it again.”

“Now we must have something cheerful,” said Lilian.

“But it will counteract the other.”

She laughed.

“Just what it should do. What, Mr Claverton? *You* get the dismals over a song? Won’t do at all.” And without giving him time to reply, she rattled off a lively little ditty, doing full justice to the spirit and archness of the composition.

Ethel and Laura were away, spending two or three days with the Naylors, and to-night Hicks had taken himself there, too; thus these two and the old people had the house to themselves. To one of the quartett that afternoon was to be marked with the traditional white stone. A deliciously long walk with Lilian, unhindered and unrestrained by the presence of any third person. She had talked freely about the old home, and her eyes had brightened, and her cheeks had glowed with the loveliest flush, while on that most congenial of topics. Yet a thorn beneath every rose. Never could she revert to the favourite subject without that indefinable moment of restraint coming in. Again this afternoon it had gone home to her companion, strengthening the resolve which he had already formed.

The door stood open. Attracted by the beauty of the night, Lilian went out on the verandah.

“Better have a shawl, my child; you’ll catch cold,” said Mrs Brathwaite.

“A shawl!” she echoed. “Dear Mrs Brathwaite, I should be roasted. It’s as warm almost as at midday.”

“Yes, it’s a regulation summer evening,” said Claverton, following her on to the *stoep*. “And a light one, too, considering that there’s no moon.”

“I do think you get such glorious starlight here,” continued Lilian. “An English starlight night is the feeblest of misty twinkles, in comparison. What’s that?” as a luminous spark floated by. “A firefly?”

“Yes. There are lots of them about. Look! there’s another.”

“What do they look like, close? Couldn’t we catch one?”

“Oh, yes; nothing easier. I’ll get Hicks’ butterfly net, it’s only in the passage. Now then,” he went on, returning with the implement, “which shall it be? There’s a bright one. We’ll go for him.” So saying he made a dexterous cast, ensnaring the shining insect. Their quest had led them some twenty yards from the house.

“They are not so brilliant as I thought,” remarked Lilian, as they inspected the captive. “It’s rather an insignificant-looking thing,” she continued, allowing the insect to crawl over her delicate palm. “Let’s take it to the light.”

This didn’t suit Claverton’s purpose at all. “It won’t shine there,” he said, “and you’ll be disenchanted with it, and—Ah! It’s gone.” For the creature, evidently thinking it had instructed them enough in a new branch of entomology, suddenly opened its wings and soared off among the orange trees.

“It’s a perfect shame to go indoors on such a night as this,” murmured Lilian, half to herself.

“No earthly reason exists why we should,” replied her companion. “At least not just yet. Let’s stroll round the garden.”

“Shall we? But what will Mrs Brathwaite say?” added Lilian, dubiously.

“Say? Oh, nothing. The dear old couple generally drop off in their arm-chairs of an evening, when Ethel isn’t here to make a racket; but to-night you have charmed them back from the land of Nod with those delicious songs. Come along.”

She yielded, and they wandered down the garden path in the starlight.

But Claverton was out of his reckoning, for once. The “dear old couple” in this instance happened to be wide awake, and were discussing him in a manner that was very much to the point.

“Walter,” began Mrs Brathwaite, when the voices outside were out of earshot, “I’m greatly afraid Arthur has lost his heart in that quarter.”

“Bah!” replied her husband, with a good-natured laugh; “not he. Arthur’s made of tougher stuff than that. And,” he added, “you women think of nothing but match-making.”

“But I tell you he has,” persisted she, ignoring the latter insinuation. “Now look here. For the last fortnight he has been a changed man. I can see it, if you can’t. Why, he hardly speaks to any one else when Lilian is there. Every moment that he is not at work he is in the house, or in the garden, or wherever she is. For some days he has been looking pale and worn, and no wonder, for he doesn’t eat enough to support life in a child of three years old. And he has become, for him, quite captious and irritable. Now,” she concluded, triumphantly, “do you mean to tell me all this is only my imagination?”

“Well, perhaps you are right,” answered the old settler, reflectively. “But somehow I’ve almost thought, of late, he was rather fond of Ethel.”

“That’s because you’re not a woman,” rejoined his wife. “Now I never thought so. And I’ve noticed what I’ve been telling you ever since the night of the dance, that is, ever since the day after Lilian’s arrival. You’ll see I’m right.”

“Not sure I don’t hope you are. It would be a good thing for both of them. She’s one of the sweetest girls I ever saw, as well as the prettiest. And to be thrown upon the world like that, gaining her livelihood by hammering a lot of dirty, uproarious brats into shape—it’s abominable; and if it is as you say I heartily congratulate Arthur.”

Mrs Brathwaite laughed rather dubiously. “Not so fast,” she said, “I’m by no means sure that Arthur will find it all plain sailing. Mark my words, that girl has a history, and she isn’t to be won by any chance comer. Ah, well; we shall see.”

Meanwhile the objects of their discussion are wandering on beneath the orange trees, even as they had done barely a fortnight ago for the first time.

“You are highly entertaining, I must say,” remarked Lilian, amusedly, when they had strolled some hundred yards further in absolute silence. “I suppose I ought to offer you the regulation penny.”

“You must make a much higher bid, then. I was thinking of what you have just been singing.”

“Really now? I should never have thought you were so easily impressed.”

“I don’t know. There is a world of pathos in that composition. Those few lines contain the story of two people who might have been happy. Why weren’t they? Because it pleased a beneficent Providence—beneficent, mark you—to decree otherwise, and so Death put in his oar. Now if all hadn’t been going well with them, it isn’t likely that Providence would have been so accommodating.”

There is a brusque harshness in his tones which causes his listener to glance up at him in surprise and dismay, and she can see that his features are haggard. She is even alarmed, for she remembers hearing vaguely that her companion’s life had been a stirring and chequered one. Has she now unwittingly rasped some hidden but unforgotten chord? It must be so, and she feels sorely troubled.

They are standing on the brink of the little rock-bound pool where they lingered and talked on the night of the dance. Almost mechanically they have struck out the same path and wandered down it, but this time no deadly foe dogs their footsteps. They are alone; alone in the dim hush of the African night. Overhead the dark vault is bespangled with its myriads of golden eyes, which are reflected in the still waters of the pool, and the Southern Cross flames from a starry zone. Now and then a large insect of the locust species sends forth a weird, twanging note from far down the kloof, but no sign of life is there among the *spekboem* sprays, which sleep around them as still as if cut out of steel.

He picks up a pebble and jerks it into the pool. It strikes the surface with a dull splashless thud, and sinks. A night-jar darts from beneath one of the fern-fringed rocks and skims across the water, uttering a whirring note of alarm.

“Hadn’t we better be going back?” hazards Lilian, at last. Anxious to withdraw from the dangerous topic, she takes refuge in a commonplace. “It was rather late when we came out.”

Claverton is standing half turned away from her—his face working curiously as he looks down into the water. For a minute he makes no answer; then he faces round upon her, and his voice, hoarse and thick, can scarcely make its way through his labouring throat.

“Lilian, Lilian—my darling—my sweet—my own sweetest love. For God’s sake tell me what I would die at this moment to know?”

He has taken both her hands in his and is gazing hungrily down into the lovely eyes. She gives a slight start of unfeigned surprise, and he can see the sweet face pale in the starlight. Trying to speak firm she gently repeats her former question: “Hadn’t we better be going back?”

Can he read his fate in her eyes? Do those gentle tones echo his sentence? It seems so.

“No,” he replies, with all the vehemence of a foregone cause—the passion of shattered hope. “No—not until you have heard everything.” His arms are around her now, and she cannot stir from the spot if she would, but she does not try. “Listen,” he goes on, speaking in a low, quick, eager voice. “Since the very first day I saw you I have loved you as no woman was ever yet loved. From the first minute, from the first glance I caught of you that day you flashed upon me like an angel of light. Stop. It is true, so help me God, every word of it,”—for she started as if in surprise. “From the very first moment. Couldn’t you see it? Couldn’t you even see it that first day?”

“No—I could not,” is her earnest answer. “I vow to you I could not. I had no idea of—of anything of the kind. I would have gone away from here at once—anywhere—sooner than have wrecked your peace! And now this is what I have done. Heaven knows I never intended it!”

The sweet eyes are brimming with tears as she stands with bent head before him, and Claverton is convulsed with a wild, helpless yearning. The first thought is to comfort her.

“Don’t I know that? Heavens! The intention is a mere superfluity. One has only to see you to love you. Can the sun help shining?”

She looks up at him. “Then you believe me? It would be dreadful to me—the thought that you could imagine I had trifled with you.”

“I could not think so. It would be an impossibility,” replies he. For the moment he almost forgets the death blow which she has dealt to his own hopes, in his great eagerness to set her at ease with herself, to reassure her. Forgets? No. Rather he rises above himself.

“Listen, darling. Every day since you came here I have only seemed to live when with you. I have never been a fraction of a moment away from you if I could possibly have been near you. Night after night through I have lain awake, restlessly longing for morning that I might look upon you again, and then when I have left you to go about the day’s work, how I have treasured up the last glance of those dear eyes, the last ring of that sweet voice, till the very air seemed all sunshine and music. Lilian, darling, I never can live again without you, and—by God, I never will.”

He pauses; his voice failing him. The expression of his face as he hangs upon her reply is terrible to behold. It might be compared to that worn by a convicted murderer when the return of the jury to give their verdict is announced. And this is the man who, at a comparatively early age, has looked upon many a harrowing scene of human suffering unmoved, who has thoroughly steeled himself against all the tenderer feelings of nature, ever presenting a cold philosophical front to the fortunes, good or ill, of himself or of his neighbours. Who would know him standing there, ghastly white, the whole of his being shaken to the very core? Yet but a few days have wrought this change.

She makes no answer at first, for she is silently weeping. Then with an effort she looks at him, and her face wears an expression of unutterable sadness.

“Hush! You don’t know what you are saying. You must never talk to me like this again. Try and forget that you have done so. Remember what a short time you have known me. How can you know anything of me in a fortnight?”

His answer is a harsh, jarring laugh. “Forget what I have been saying? Only a fortnight? Is everything to be subject to the unalterable rule of thumb? Only a fortnight! My love—my life; do you remember the first time we were here together? I could have told you even then, what I am telling you now. Do you remember telling me about yourself; how you were all alone in the world—you? Only say the word and your life shall be without a care—all brightness and sunshine, and such love. Listen, my own! I, too, am alone in the world. I have never found any one to love—it has all been treasured up—kept for you. Now, take it. Lilian, Lilian, it cannot be that—you—will not?”

His voice sinks to a fierce, passionate whisper, and he holds her to him as if he would never let her go. Above, in the sky, a lustrous meteor gleams—and then fades. A flight of plover, rising from the ground, circles in the gloom, with soft and ghostly whistle, and all is still, save for the beating of two hearts. Around float the fragrant breaths of the rich, balmy night.

“I can give you—no—comfort,” she replies, dropping out her words as if with an effort. “Oh, why did you ever tell me this? Do you think it is nothing to me to see you made wretched for my sake? I tell you it is heart-breaking—utterly heart-breaking. Yet it cannot be. You must never, never talk to me like that again. And you have given me all the best of yourself,” she exclaims, the very depth of sadness in her tone, “and I—can give you—nothing!”

“Nothing?” he echoes, mechanically, looking down into the white, sad face, out of which every trace of its usual calm serenity has disappeared, leaving a weary, hopeless expression that is infinitely touching. “Ah, I can see that your life has not been without its sore troubles. It is not for me to pry into them.”

“I can give you this amount of comfort, if it be any comfort,” she says, throwing back her head with a quick movement and fixing her eyes on his. “I look back upon the hours which I have spent in your society as an unmixed pleasure, and I look forward to many more, selfish as I am in doing so. I formed my opinion of you the very first few moments we were together—and our first meeting was a queer one, was it not?" with a sad little smile at the recollection. "That opinion is unchanged, except, perhaps, for the better. I cannot bring myself to forego your society, though it is only fair to warn you that I can give you no hope; and you must never ask me to. Are the conditions too hard?"

"No, they are not."

Her words had a soothing effect upon her listener, and he began to see a gleam of light. He was not indifferent to her as it was, and, given the opportunity, he would make himself absolutely indispensable. Moreover, it was just possible that he had been premature in his declaration. Yes, more time and opportunity; that was what he wanted—and he would succeed. Determination, which had never yet failed him, should effect that—determination, combined with patience. He would not even ask her her reasons for refusing him now. No; he would trust her absolutely and wholly, and take not only her but her cares, whatever they might be. And at the prospect of a contest, a strife with circumstances, though the odds were dead against him, his spirits revived.

"Promise me one thing," he said. "You will not avoid me in any way?"

She hesitated.

"No, not in any way," she repeated at last.

"And all shall be as it has been?"

"Yes." Then after a pause: "We must really go in."

He released her, and they moved away, but her steps were unsteady. The strain had told upon her, and she felt weak and faint. Quickly he passed his arm round her. "No, not that," she said, gently, but firmly. "I will take your arm, if I may." And in silence they retraced the bush path and entered the little gate, then through the orange garden over the runnel of water where they had stood that night when accidentally watched by Ethel. A light was burning in the room as they entered, and in an arm-chair eat Mrs Brathwaite, fast asleep, her lord having retired half an hour ago.

"Why, Lilian!" she exclaimed, starting up. "You have been out a long time! I hope you haven't caught cold, child!"

"Oh, no; it's such a warm night. We have been astronomising," replied she, with an attempt at a laugh which fell mournfully flat; but the old lady was too sleepy to detect its hollowness.

"Well, better get to bed. I suppose you'll do the same, Arthur, now you haven't got any one to sit up and smoke all night with." For Hicks was away, as afore stated.

"No, I don't feel restful. Good-night. Would that to-morrow were here now!" he added, in a low, tender voice as he held Lilian's hand in a lingering clasp. A responsive pressure, and she was gone.

He withdrew to his quarters—to bed, but not to sleep—and hour followed hour as he lay with his gaze fixed upon the square patch of golden stars bounded by the framework of his open window. Well, the die had been thrown at last. He knew where he was now, at any rate. But it was too soon to despair, for had he not close upon two months wherein to make the most of his opportunities? Determination should win, as it always had in his case. Ah, but this was outside all previous experience. Well, they had still nearly two months together. Then he began to wonder whether he was actually undergoing this feeling, or if it were not a dream from which he would presently awaken.

He started up from a fitful and disturbed doze before dawn, and resolved to go for a ride. He would go down to the vij-kraal and count out Umgiswe's flock.

During the night the sky had become overcast, and now, as he rode along in the grey dawn, dark clouds were lowering to the very earth, and the mist swept in powdery flakes through the sprays of the bush. It was a thoroughly depressing morning, and the horseman's reflections were coloured thereby. And through the chill drizzle seemed to echo the far-off tones of a sweet, low voice: "I can give you no comfort. You have given me the best of yourself, and I can give you—nothing."

We allow that to sheep from disappointed love is something of a transition. Nevertheless, the incident which occurred at the shepherd's kraal that morning must be narrated, because it is not without its bearing on the future events of our story.

"Now, Umgiswe, turn out, and let's count," said Claverton, making a slash with his whip at a couple of lean, ill-looking curs, which sneaked sniffing round his horse's heels. "Eh—what's that you've got there?" as the Kafir, having saluted him, began fumbling about with something on the kraal fence.

"Two dead sheep," answered the old fellow, producing a couple of skins, with the air of a man who has triumphantly vindicated his character against all aspersions.

Claverton examined the skins narrowly. Having satisfied himself that their sometime wearers had died of disease, and had not been slain to appease the insatiable appetites of Umgiswe and a few boon companions, he proceeded to count out the flock. The score was correct.

"All right, Umgiswe; here's some smoke for you," he said, throwing the old herd a bit of tobacco. "But I say, though—whose dogs are those?"

The Kafir glanced uneasily at the curs aforesaid.

“A man who slept here last night left them. They are sure to go after him. He has not been long gone.”

“No,” replied Claverton, carelessly, “he has not been long gone, or rather *they* have not been long gone, for they are still here. Turn them out, Umgiswe.” For his ear had detected the sound of several male voices in the hut as he passed its door.

“Whouw!” exclaimed the old man, turning half aside to conceal an embarrassed smile. “They are my brothers, *’Nkos*. They just came to visit me.”

“Of course they are. If the half of Kafirland were to turn up here they would all be your brothers, just come to visit you. It won’t do. So turn them out, you old shuffler, and let’s have a look at them.”

Then the intruders, to the number of three, who had been attentive listeners to the above confabulation, turned out and saluted Claverton. All three were finely-made fellows, but the elder was a man of almost herculean build. His powerful frame, which was scantily clad, was smeared from head to foot with red ochre; above his left elbow he wore an armlet of solid ivory, and from his appearance he was evidently a man of rank. In his hand he held a couple of kerries made of heavy iron-wood; one of his companions was similarly armed, while the third carried a bundle of assegais.

Claverton looked them up and down, noting every detail in their persons and weapons. “Loafers all three, and up to no good,” was his mental estimation of them, “but devilish awkward customers to tackle. Never mind. Off they must go—quietly or the reverse—but go they must.” Then he asked them the usual questions—where they came from, where they were going, and so on—they being ready with an answer of which he knew exactly how much to believe.

“Came only last night, did you? That is strange, because the evening before and all day yesterday there were three Kafirs here, and one of them was a tall man with an armlet on, and *they* had a couple of yellow dogs with them. How queer that exactly the same thing, should happen two days in succession!” he said in a quiet, bantering tone. In point of fact he was drawing a bow at a venture, but could see by the shifty eyes of the man to whom he was speaking that the shaft had gone home.

This fellow grinned and shook his head with an exclamation of intense amusement.

“*Inkos* must be *Umtagati*,” (one who has dealings with magic or witchcraft) he said, “to see all that went on when he was not here.”

“*Umtagati*? Well, perhaps,” was the easy reply. Then, fixing his eyes on those of the tall chief, who had been regarding him with a haughty and indifferent stare, Claverton went on in the same easy tone. “What do *you* think, Nxabahlana?” He addressed, started perceptibly. How did the white man know his name? “What do *you* think of *Umtagati*? But listen. No one has any right loafing here without permission from the *Baas* up yonder. So now, off you go, all three—now and at once, or you’ll assuredly come to grief. And, be careful, for remember: *The black goat dies and the white goat lives*.”

“Whouw!” cried all four, unable to conceal their amazement. Then, without another word, one of the fellows diving into the hut, returned with the light impedimenta belonging to the three, and with their curs at their heels, the Kafirs strode off. Just before they entered the bush the chief turned and gazed fixedly at Claverton for a minute. Then they disappeared.

“All right, my friend. I shall know you again when next we meet.” Then to the old herd, who stood holding his stirrup: “Those men must not come back, Umgiswe. And I tell you what, if you go harbouring any more conspiring loafers you’ll get into trouble.” And he rode away.

Volume One—Chapter Twenty.

One Golden Day.

The clouds were parting and revealing patches of blue through their rifts as Claverton reached home, and with the returning sunshine his spirits revived. It was going to be a lovely day, and he would have Lilian all to himself for two whole hours that morning, for he was to take her over to Thirlestane, Naylor’s place, and return with the rest of the party in the afternoon.

It was just breakfast-time, and Lilian entered at the same time as himself. Her face looked worn and anxious, as if not much sleep had fallen to her lot, and though he would have cut off his right hand to spare her the lightest anxiety, yet he could not feel guiltless of a sense of consolation that she should have sorrowed with him and for him. The voice of Mr Brathwaite recalled him to himself with a start.

“Well, Arthur; where did you go this morning?”

“Down to Umgiswe’s.”

“Was his count all right?”

“Yes. Which is extraordinary, seeing that he had been entertaining visitors,” and he narrated the presence there of the three strange Kafirs.

"Did you find out the big fellow's name?" asked Mr Brathwaite.

"Yes. It was Nxabahlana. Do you know him? He looked as if he held the right of succession to the paramount chieftainship of Kafirland."

"Nxabahlana? Oh, yes, I know him," replied the old man. "He's a kind of sub-chief, and a relation of Sandili's. One of the greatest blackguards that ever stepped. Good thing you turned them out; they were up to no good, that much is certain."

"A chief!" exclaimed Lilian, raising her eyes, "I *should* like to see a real Kafir chief."

"Would you?" said Claverton. "I wish I had known that; you should have seen him. I'd have brought him here."

The others laughed, thinking he was joking, but Lilian knew that he meant it, every word.

"Ah, but," she said in a repentant tone, "you couldn't have captured him, there were three of them; at least I mean—it would not have been worth the risk."

Claverton laughed quietly.

"No such severe measures would have been necessary. If I had promised his chieftainship a glass of grog and an old hat, he would have come trundling up here with an alacrity that would surprise you."

"Really? That quite takes away from the poetry of the idea. I thought these savage chiefs were very proud."

"They are proud enough just as far as it suits them to be so—inasmuch as they affect to look upon us as dust beneath their feet; but they will condescend to accept anything we may think proper to give them, whether it be a 'tickey' (threepence) or a pair of old boots. In fact Jack Kafir, of whatever degree, has the bump of acquisitiveness very highly developed, I assure you. Hullo! who's this?"

For the door opened and a Dutchman entered—the same who witnessed poor Allen's immersion at the taking out of the bees' nest. A good-humoured grin was on his stolid countenance, which looked suggestively warm, and perhaps not too clean, and his beady black eyes sparkled at the prospect of a good feed. His corduroy trousers were tucked into a pair of top boots, and a *sjambok*, or raw-hide whip, dangled from his wrist. Not until he had gone all round, extending a limp, moist paw to each, did it occur to him to remove his hat.

"*Autre pays, autre moeurs*," murmured Claverton in response to a charming little grimace of amusement which Lilian flashed at him from across the table, in reference to the new arrival.

A seat was found for the Dutchman, and a well-garnished plate, and being provided with a knife and fork he began to make voracious play with the same. Then having removed the edge of a very exuberant appetite, he raised his head from the platter and waxed talkative.

"Oom Walter is well?"

"Ja. Pretty so so."

"And Mrs Brathwaite?"

"Also."

"*Det is goed*," and then having given a like satisfactory account of his *vrouw* and *kinders* the Boer informed them that he was on his way to Thirlestane, with the object of purchasing some oxen from Naylor.

"Claverton's going over there this morning," said Mr Brathwaite, unthinkingly. "You can go over with him."

"So," said the Dutchman with a nod of approval. "We will ride together."

This didn't meet Claverton's wishes at all.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "Sticks is rather lame, and I shall have to send for my other horse. They'll hardly find him till the afternoon—if then. It won't be worth Botha's while to wait."

"No. I don't think it will," said good-natured Mrs Brathwaite, who had taken in the situation at a glance. Lilian, not understanding the Boer dialect, was an unconscious auditor of what was going on.

Breakfast over, the Dutchman sat for about half an hour outside, smoking his pipe and talking over the usual subjects with his host—sheep, ostriches, the state of the country, how much longer they could do without rain, and so on. Then, saddling up his small, rough-looking nag, he shook hands all round and departed, thoroughly content with himself and all the world.

"What a queer fellow!" said Lilian, gazing after the awkward, receding figure of their late guest, who, with his feet jammed to the heels in the stirrups, was shuffling leisurely along, pipe in mouth.

"Yes, isn't he?" answered Claverton. "But he's a fair specimen of the typical Boer. Washes three times a year, sleeps in his clothes, and wears his hat in the house."

"Lilian, dear; hadn't you better get ready to start?" suggested Mrs Brathwaite.

“I was just thinking the same,” said Claverton; “but,” he added, in a lower tone, “I couldn’t find it in my conscience to hasten even such a temporary separation, and yet I was racked with apprehension lest some other wayfarer should turn up and make a third.”

She gave him a bright smile as she flitted indoors; then he, having got into his riding-gear, went round to the stable and simply made Jan the Hottentot groom’s life a burden to him over the caparisoning of Lilian’s steed. This bit was too sharp—that too soft—those reins were too hard for the hands—and what the devil did he mean by leaving those two specks of rust on the stirrup-iron? Jan and his deputy—an impish-looking little bushman—couldn’t make it out at all; Baas Clav’ton was usually so easy-going, and now here he was fidgeting worse than the “sir” in the long boots (Allen).

Then Lilian came out, looking lovely in her well-fitting blue habit. There was just a little air of timidity about her which was inexpressibly charming, as Claverton put her into the saddle. She was not a bold horsewoman, she confessed. She was ashamed to say that if anything she was just a wee bit afraid every time she mounted a horse. Nevertheless she sat beautifully, and the somewhat timid hand held the reins as gracefully if not quite as firmly as that of any hard-riding Amazon. To-day she was mounted on a handsome old bay horse of Mr Brathwaite’s, who carried his head well, had a firm, easy walk, and was as safe as a church, while Claverton rode a dark chestnut just flecked with white, a fine, spirited animal which he had bought to supplement the faithful “Sticks,” using the latter for the rougher kinds of work.

“Do you know, nothing but my unblushing mendacity kept that seedy Dutchman from inflicting himself upon our ride?” remarked Claverton, when they had started; and he told her of his little subterfuge.

“Shocking! You had no right to tell such a story,” she answered, with a laugh.

“Hadn’t I? Which would have been best—the lie or the Dutchman? ‘Of the two evils,’ you know, and I thought the lie the least. Perhaps you would have preferred the Dutchman?”

“No, I would not. But I think—well, I think—you did about the very best thing you could have done,” she replied, breaking into a silvery laugh. “But don’t take that as any encouragement to persevere in the art. It’s a dangerous one, and I believe you are quite an adept in it already. In fact, I’ve heard you tell one or two shocking fibs myself.”

“All’s fair in love and war.” Then noting the look which stole over her face he wished the quotation unsaid. “But I promise you I won’t indulge in mendacity any more than I can help.”

“You must not do it at all. Seriously, it isn’t right.”

“Except as a choice of evils. How would society get on without its mendacities?”

“Never mind about society,” retorted Lilian, brushing aside an inconvenient argument in right womanly fashion. “And now promise you’ll do what I’m going to ask you.”

“Oh, cheerfully.”

“I’m going to set you a penance.”

“Consider it performed. But what is it?”

“Well, the next time a choice of evils is offered you, you are to choose the one which does not involve romancing.”

“That must depend upon its nature.”

“Oh, you promised!”

“So I did, and so did Herod, and look what came of it.”

“Never mind about Herod,” was the laughing reply. “I have got you at a disadvantage, and I mean to keep you at it. Look, are not those Kafirs picturesque, in their red blankets, filing through the dark green of the bush?” she broke off, pointing out half-a-dozen ochre-painted beings who were crossing the valley some distance from them. They were walking in single file, and every now and then one would half stop and throw a remark over his shoulder in a deep bass tone. Their necklaces of jackals’ teeth showed white against their red bodies, which glistened in the sun, and as they marched along, head erect and with their kerries over their shoulders, they certainly did look picturesque.

“Yes, and do you notice how clear the air is? I can make out nearly every word those fellows are saying,” answered Claverton.

“Can you really? What are they talking about?”

“What are they talking about? Now look at them. The noble savage on his native heath, looking too, as if it actually did belong to him, striding with free and independent bearing, proud and scornful in mien. You think they are talking of war and tribal greatness, and the extermination of the hated white man, and such-like lofty and ambitious schemes? Nothing of the sort. One fellow is narrating how he got a thorn in his right heel, and how badly his brother extracted it for him, while three of the others are all trying to say at once what a fool the brother was, and that they could have done it much better.”

Lilian broke into a peal of laughter. “How absurd you are! You have quite taken the poetry out of them, and now they look like a very commonplace lot of beings. But is that really what they were saying?”

“It is, upon my word. To see a lot of Kafirs talking you would think they were letting off a stream of oratory, what with all their gesticulation and modulation of voice. In nine cases out of ten they are discussing the veriest trivialities.”

“I’m not sure that I’m glad I know that. It spoils the romance of the thing. I shan’t look at them with the same interest.”

“You are given to idealisation, I see,” he said. “It is a delightful pastime, and I must not do anything to shock it. But, look! That, at all events, is entirely free from the commonplace.”

They had reached the brow of an eminence, and before them lay unfolded a panorama which brought a flush of delight to Lilian’s face. Upland and valley lay sleeping in the golden sunshine, a rolling expanse of verdure, now open and grassy, now covered with thick bush, or dotted here and there with feathery mimosas. Wave upon wave of rise and swell, there seemed no end to the wide beautiful plains; and the eye wandered on, over and over it, drinking in a new delight in the far-seeing vision, then turning to refresh itself in the grand mountain chain which bounded its range in front. Stretching afar, in a hundred and fifty miles of stately crescent, rose those lofty mountains with their sunny slopes and beetling cliffs, and black forest-clad sides seen through the dim uncertainty of the summer haze; while, towering above the rest, the Great Winterberg raised his weather-beaten crest to the cloudless bine. The thatch and white walls of a farmhouse or two, visible here and there in the distance, redeemed the spectacle from the utter wildness of a newly-trodden land, but on the other hand added to the peaceful solemnity of the scene. Hard by, the air resounded with the low hum of bees busily gathering their stores from the blossoming sprays of a neighbouring clump of bush; spreuws whistled, and a dainty little sugar-bird—the humming-bird of Southern Africa—flitted across the path, his painted plumage glittering in the sun. Down in the valley two or three pairs of blue cranes roamed about picking in the grass, and every now and then their strange rasping note floated not unmelodiously through the calm.

Lilian, in her intense love of the beautiful, could not restrain a cry of delight as she gazed upon the splendid panorama before them. The exhilarating exercise and the warm balminess of the air had brought the loveliest flush into her clear olive cheeks, and as she sat there lightly reining in her horse, while the sweet eyes sparkled and dilated and a witching smile carved the usually sad mouth, her companion thought he had never seen such a picture in his life.

“A lovely background with a lovelier central figure,” he murmured. “Look at it well,” he added. “Take it all in thoroughly, now; it will never look the same again. Nothing ever strikes us as it does the first time.”

She looked half round at him. “Am I delaying you?”

“Delaying *me*? Good heavens!” is all the reply he can make just then. Often in the time to come will he remember this day, this moment. Often will he stand in imagination as he does now with one arm over the pommel of his saddle, watching the radiant face of this girl in its almost divine beauty, set in entranced contemplation of the glorious landscape all gleaming with purple and gold in the flooding sunshine. And remembering it he will feel as though he had lost Heaven. A dull, gnawing pain tugs at his heart as a forecast of the future runs darkly through him, but with a great effort he thrusts it aside; he will live in the present, and sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

“What are those, down there?” cried Lilian. “Bucks of some sort?”

“Yes. Springbok. There are a few on this side of the place.”

Some two dozen of the graceful creatures were trotting leisurely along on the slope below them. They were near enough for the dark stripe upon their shining sides to be plainly discernible, as also the rings on their black curved horns, as they kept turning their heads to gaze inquiringly at their human observers.

“How pretty they are!” said Lilian. “We are seeing ever so many queer things to-day, and this beautiful country. Do you know, I am thoroughly enjoying this ride.”

“Are you? I wish it might last for ever.”

His face wears the same look of longing desperation which it wore in the starlight, while they stood by the pool. Quickly the gladness fades from hers as a light that has gone out. She thinks how selfish she is to throw her joyousness at him thus, while his heart is aching for love of her.

“Hush!” she says, in a low compassionate tone. “Remember our compact.”

Claverton dare not trust himself to look at her. His eyes are fixed on the hazy slopes of the far-off mountains, whose green and purple sides he scarcely so much as sees. For some minutes neither speaks. Then with a quick restless sigh he throws himself into the saddle.

“You are right,” he says, huskily. “It is I who am weak; weak as water. Only this once. I will not transgress again.”

They resumed their way. The springboks, startled by the sudden move forward, bounded off. On the brow of the rise, several of them began leaping high into the air, with all four feet off the ground together, and their bodies in the form of a semicircle. Being in relief against the sky, the effect was not a little bizarre.

“What ridiculous creatures!” said Lilian, watching them. “I never saw such contortions.”

“Yes, they are vindicating their name,” said her companion, tranquilly. He had recovered his composure, and was thankful for this diversion.

Cresting the next ridge they came suddenly upon a couple of advancing horsemen, heavy-faced, lumbering-looking fellows, their complexions tanned to the colour of brickdust, and it needed but a glance at their general untidiness, and seedy get-up, to pronounce upon their nationality.

They stopped and shook hands with Claverton, doffing their greasy hats to his companion, at sight of whom even their wooden countenances showed signs of animation. A few commonplace questions and answers were exchanged, then one of the Boers, glancing at Lilian, asked with the freedom of speech customary among that delightfully primitive people: “Is that your wife?”

He answered without moving a muscle, and enlightened them. They were only ignorant brutes, he reasoned, half savages almost; yet just then, the question had come upon him with a kind of shock. He was thankful that Lilian had not understood the conversation.

“I really must learn Dutch,” she said. “It isn’t nearly such an inviting tongue as the full melodious flow of the Kafir language; but far more useful, I should think. Everybody seems to speak it.”

“Yes, it’s the regular go-between jargon here. Very few even of the frontier people speak Kafir, and not one Kafir in five hundred can talk English, hence the necessity of a go-between. Look! There’s our destination.”

They had reached the brow of one of those long rolling undulations which formed a leading feature in the landscape, and on the rise opposite stood a large single-storeyed house, with an iron roof and deep verandah. A block of out-buildings adjoined, and several spacious enclosures sloped down into the hollow; but save for a few tall blue gums overshadowing the house, the surroundings were destitute of trees.

“Ah, you’ve found your way over to us at last,” said Emily Naylor, who with Laura Brathwaite had come out on the stoep to meet Lilian. “So glad to see you. Was it very hot, riding? You must be tired.”

“Oh, no,” answered Lilian, “the air was delightful, and the view—I never saw anything so perfect;” and she turned to look again at the wide, sweeping landscape stretching away in front.

“Yes; it’s very pretty,” said her hostess. “It is not so pretty here as at Seringa Vale, because we have no trees, but the look-out is much wider. But come inside and sit down, or shall we sit out here? You must be tired after your ride.”

“I’m not though, really. And you must not make me out an invalid,” answered Lilian, with a smile. “I’m far from that.”

“Then come and see the young ostriches.”

Lilian readily assented, and the whole party moved thither accordingly.

“Well, Miss Laura, you’re looking all the better for your change of air; in fact, blooming,” remarked Claverton, who was walking beside her. “By the way, where’s the twin?”

“Ethel? Oh, she’s down at the ostrich enclosure, where we are going. Mr Allen is there, too, and Will Jeffreys.”

“*Alias* Scowling Will. So he’s here, is he?”

“Yes. But I can’t return you the compliment you just paid me. You look as if you had been up all night for a week,” answered Laura, with a spice of demure malice.

“Oh, don’t make personal remarks; it’s rude,” murmured Claverton, languidly.

“Ha—ha,” struck in Naylor. “Claverton’s been getting on the spree, I expect, now that you two are not there to keep him in order. And now here we are,” he went on, as they arrived at an improvised yard some twenty feet square, wherein a number of little oval-shaped woolly things were running about. “They are strong little beggars, not a seedy one among the lot.”

They had not been long hatched, and as they scuttled about, stopping occasionally to peck at the chopped lucerne strewn on the ground, they were just the size and shape of the parent egg, plus legs and a neck. Naylor picked one of them up.

“You’d never think that this little chap in less than a year’s time would be able to kick a fellow into the middle of next week, would you?” he said, showing it to Lilian.

“No, indeed,” replied she, stroking the little creature’s glossy brown neck, and passing her fingers through the thick coating of hair-like feathers like the soft quills of the porcupine, which covered its back. “What dear little things they are. They ought always to keep small.”

“Oho!” laughed Naylor. “Bad look out for those who farm them, if they did. You wouldn’t get much for a plucking off this little beggar, for instance.”

“Of course I didn’t mean that,” she explained. “I meant that it was a pity such pretty little things should grow up big, and ugly, and vicious.”

“It’s a good thing sometimes that they are vicious,” said Naylor. “It keeps the niggers from going into the enclosures and stealing the eggs, and even plucking the birds. They are taking to that already.”

“Are they not too much afraid of them?”

“Not always. Look at those two black chaps in yonder camp. They are four-year-old birds, and the nigger isn’t born who’d go in and pluck them. Look, you can see them both now,” added Naylor, pointing out a couple of black moving balls, many hundred yards off, in the middle of their enclosures.

“It is all very interesting,” exclaimed Lilian, half to herself, gazing around. Far away on the sunlit plains a herd of cattle was lazily moving; down by the dam in the hollow, whose glassy waters shone like burnished silver in the midday heat, stood a few horses, recently turned out of the kraal, swishing the flies with their tails, or scratching each other’s backs with their teeth, while in the ostrich “camps,” whose long, low walls ran up the slope, the great bipeds stalked majestically about, pecking at the herbage on the ground, or, with head erect and neck distended, looked and listened suspiciously, equally ready for a feed of corn or for an intruder. All seemed to tell of peace, and sunshine, and prosperity.

“How you must enjoy your life in this beautiful country!” she went on.

Naylor was hugely gratified. Subsequently he took occasion to remark to his wife that Lilian Strange was the nicest and the most sensible girl he had ever seen. “Why doesn’t Claverton cut in for her?” added the blunt, jovial fellow, in his free-and-easy way. “Then they could get hold of one of these places round here. He’s a fool if he doesn’t.” To which his wife answered, with a provoking smile of superior knowledge, that she supposed most people knew their own business best.

Now, however, he looked pleased. “Well, yes; we’ve been brought up in it, you see, and shouldn’t be happy in any other. But I should have thought that you, coming out from England, would have found it rather slow. Perhaps you haven’t had time to, though, as yet.”

“You mean that the novelty hasn’t worn off yet? No more it has; but even when it did, that would make but little difference. There is a charm about this beautiful country, with its solitudes, its grand mountains, and rolling plains, and wild associations, which, so far from becoming tame, would grow upon one. And the climate, too, is perfect.”

Naylor laughed diffidently. “Yes; but there’s another side to that picture. How about bad seasons, and drought, and war, and locusts, and stock-lifting, and so on? It isn’t all fun here on the frontier.”

“Now, I won’t be disenchanted,” she retorted, with a bright smile. “You must not try and spoil the picture I have drawn.”

“Then I won’t. Hallo, Ethel! We’ve been looking for you,” he added, turning as he, for the first time, discovered she had joined them. “Here’s Miss Strange prepared to swear by the frontier—in fact, she has done so already.”

“Yes?” said Ethel, coming forward to greet Lilian; and Claverton could not help contrasting the two as they stood together: the one with her soft, dark, winning beauty, the lovely eyes never losing for a moment their serene composure; the other, bright, laughing, and golden, the full red lips ever ready to curl in mischief-loving jest or mocking retort, and hair like a rippling sunbeam. Yet nine men out of ten would probably have awarded the palm to Ethel. “Yes?” she said, and, in her heart of hearts, added, “and with her own reasons.” She did not feel very cordially towards Lilian just then.

“She says it’s perfect, all round,” went on Naylor—“a young Paradise.”

“I don’t know,” said Ethel. “I shouldn’t like to stay on the frontier all the year round. One would miss the balls and theatre in Cape Town.”

“Aha!” laughed Emily, “Ethel is still intent on slaughter. She made such havoc last session; ever so many poor fellows threw themselves off the cliffs on Table Mountain on her account; how many was it, Ethel—twenty-five?—that she had to be spirited away in the night for fear of the vengeance of their bereaved mammas.”

“Call it fifty while you’re about it,” she answered. “How awfully hot it has become!”

This served as a pretext for a move indoors, which was made accordingly.

“So you’re all determined to go back this evening,” said Naylor, as they sat in the verandah after dinner.

“I think we must,” answered Ethel; “aunt will think we are never coming back.”

Hicks, who at the other end of the verandah was “assisting” Laura to play with the children—these having finished their morning’s lessons, had invaded the party—pricked up his ears and looked rueful in advance. If they were persuaded to stay, he would have to go anyhow; but Ethel was firm, and he breathed freely again.

“But, Claverton, you and Miss Strange might stop—to-night, at any rate,” persisted Naylor.

It was Ethel’s turn to feel apprehensive. She had schooled herself into accepting the situation, and accepting it patiently. The strife had been a hard one, and she had suffered in it—suffered acutely, but she had conquered. Yet the struggle had not been won in a moment, and it had left its traces; but she seemed not to show them; she was a trifle graver, and more subdued in manner, that was all. A few days ago she had longed, with an intense longing, to get away—away from the sound of his voice, from the glance of his eyes; yet now that it is a question as to whether they shall return without him, her heart beats quick, and she seems to hang upon the verdict which they are all discussing so calmly.

“I don’t think we can to-day, Naylor,” answered Claverton, a glance at Lilian having satisfied him that she did not favour the scheme.

“But look here,” Naylor was beginning, when his wife cut him short.

“Why shouldn’t we inspan and go back with them, Ned? We can leave Seringa Vale again before breakfast if you like, and there’s something I want to see mother about.”

“All right, we’ll do that. Don’t you think Seringa Vale is rather a good name for a place, Miss Strange?”

“Yes—so pretty,” answered Lilian; “it’s a poem in itself.”

“How do you like Thirlestane?”

“I like it, too. Did you name it?”

“Yes,” replied Naylor, “it’s called after a small place my grandfather had in England. Its original name is a Dutch one—*Uitkyk*, a look-out; but Thirlestane’s better than *Uitkyk*, isn’t it?”

“Jack Armitage calls it ‘Oatcake’ even to this day,” put in Claverton.

Suddenly, a loud booming noise came from one of the enclosures. All looked in that direction. The great ostrich was plainly visible, his neck inflated to six times its size as he emitted his deep call, volleying it out in heavy booms, three at a time.

“Fancy an ostrich making such a row as that! You wouldn’t have thought it possible, would you, Miss Strange?” said Gough, the tutor. He had joined the party at dinner-time, when school was over.

“I don’t think I should,” answered Lilian. “The first time I heard it, I was so frightened. It was at Seringa Vale. I was lying awake at night, and this great booming sounded so awful in the dead of night. I hadn’t a notion what it was; the first thing I thought of was some wild beast.”

“A lion, I suppose,” said Naylor.

“I think the whole of the Zoological Gardens ran through my vivid imagination. How Mr Brathwaite laughed when I told him about it next morning! Yet I was terribly frightened.”

“No wonder,” said Claverton. “It’s a precious uncanny sort of row to strike up in the middle of the night, especially when you don’t know where it comes from, or what it’s all about.”

It was now voted time to be getting the horses in. This served as a signal for a general break-up, the masculine element of the party making towards the stable, or the enclosure, where some manoeuvring was needed, as we have seen, to obtain possession of the requisite steeds without exciting the wrath of the autocratic biped who reigned there.

Claverton having, as before, submitted Lilian’s steed and its gear to a rigid examination, now whisking a speck of dust off the saddle, or letting down a link of the curb-chain and readjusting it, assisted her to mount.

“Wish that fool would go on,” he muttered savagely, referring to Allen, whose ancient screw was mooning along with a kind of crop-the-grass gait. The rest of the party were on ahead. “He needn’t wait for us,” and flinging himself on his spirited chestnut he bade the groom let go the reins. The fine animal tossed his head and sidled and champed his bit as he felt himself free; free yet not free, for his rider was a consummate horseman and had him perfectly in hand.

Lilian laughed. “Poor fellow,” she said. “Do you know, I sometimes feel so sorry for him. You all chaff him dreadfully and—Oh!”

The last exclamation is one of alarm, for at that moment a troop of ostriches—young ten-month-old birds—having deserted its herd in one of those stampedes to which these idiotic bipeds are so liable, whirls past them, with wings outstretched and snowy plumes sparkling in the sun, and Lilian’s steed, which has not yet become quite accustomed to the gigantic fowls, shows signs of restiveness.

“Don’t be frightened—darling. You’re quite safe,” says her escort, noting the scared look in her face, as the old horse tugs at his bridle and snorts and plunges a little. “He’ll be perfectly quiet in half a minute.”

He is so close beside her all the time, and speaks in such a reassuring tone that her alarm subsides, and the old steed drops into his normal steadiness as though half ashamed of himself.

“Are you not utterly disgusted with such a coward?” says she, with a faint apologetic laugh. “I ought to have enjoyed the affair as a good opportunity for showing off, oughtn’t I?”

“One must show on before showing off. I wouldn’t have you anything but timid on board a horse for the world, except for your own sake. It suits you to perfection.”

He is in earnest. These oft-recurring little alarms of hers are so captivating in their pure unaffectedness, so womanly; and, withal, the sense of protection imparted to himself is delicious. And if she is at times somewhat shrinking, as at present, even that lends an additional attraction to her delicate refinement.

“Every one is not an Amazon, thank heaven,” he continued, “and you will soon be as much at home on horseback as in a chair. We will have a lot of practice. Besides, you know, lately you have not been very well, and that is calculated to unnerve you. We will do our best to set you up thoroughly—while—you are here.” He tried to speak firmly, but it was of no use, that tell-tale tremor shook his voice over the last four words, for they conjured up a picture of when she should be no longer “here,” and he dared not think of it. At present he would thrust the thought far from him.

They had now overtaken Allen, and were obliged to shape the conversation accordingly. “Shall we canter on a little?” suggested Claverton. “The rest are a good way ahead.”

Lilian acquiesced, and their steeds bounded along the grassy slopes at an easy elastic canter, but Allen’s sorry screw finding a difficulty in keeping pace with the long stride of the well-bred horses, that disconsolate youth soon dropped behind.

“Here is our panorama again,” said Claverton, reining in on the top of the hill, whence they had enjoyed the view that morning.

“It looks different already. This golden light sheds a rare peacefulness—an evening repose—upon it, which is perfectly enchanting. It is hard to determine, but of the two I think I preferred it this morning. There was an exhilaration in the very air that made one feel the pleasure of merely living.”

“I liked it best this morning, too,” he answered gravely. Then all the day was before him—so many hours with *her*. Now they had come—never to return.

Volume One—Chapter Twenty One.

Hicks Waxes Intrepid.

“Phew-w!” whistled Hicks, staring in consternation at the scene before him. Then he added in a determined voice: “But I’m going straight over that bridge or down the river, one of the two.”

“Umph! More fool you,” growled his companion. “I’m damned if I am.”

“But look here, Thorman. If we don’t get across now while we’ve a chance, Heaven only knows when we shall. The river’s ‘down’ as it has never been before, and all along the road we have heard nothing but how it’s coming down harder. Every blessed one of the bridges will go, and we shall be stuck on this side, it may be for weeks.”

Thorman made no reply, but sat on his horse scowling ferociously at the flood in front of them.

The spot was a drift on the Great Fish River crossed by an important main road which was one of the principal lines of transport up-country. Some years previously a fine bridge had been thrown across the bed of the river, which at that point was about fifty feet deep and twice the distance in width, thus rendering traffic independent of the rise or fall of the water or the state of the drift—at no time a first-rate one. But although the actual bed of the river was wide and deep, the stream itself was an insignificant trickle, dabbling along over stones, with here and there along sandy reach, after the manner of a North Country trout stream, but without its dash and sparkle. Except in rainy seasons; and then its red turbid waters, swelled by the contributions of numerous confluents and the drainings of the high watershed on either side, tore foaming between their high banks, carrying down drift-wood and trunks of trees in their swift pent-up course. But the bridge, a fine iron one, standing sixty feet from the bottom of the river to its parapet, rendered the transport-riders (carriers) absolutely independent of these floods, as has been said. Whether the stream was almost dry in its bed, or rolling down rocks and tree-stumps, mattered nothing to them now. Instead of the tedious delay of several days on the bank, and then the trouble and risk of crossing a bad, washed-out drift, their waggons rolled as gaily across the bridge as along the road, and they kept on their way as if there was no river there at all. Once or twice since the bridge had been built, the water had risen within a few feet of its roadway; but though an occasional prediction would be made that the river was capable of rising a great deal higher still, yet it had not done so. The bridge was of enormous strength, said they who were most concerned, and would stand against anything.

But now it seemed as if the predictions of disaster were going to be verified. For several days and nights it had rained incessantly; not a series of heavy deluging showers, but a steady, telling downpour. No break had occurred, not even a pause of ten minutes—rain, rain, rain, till people became as accustomed to the continuous fall upon their roofs of zinc or thatch as to the ticking of a clock—and the parched earth, now thoroughly soft and moistened, ran off the superfluous water in streams from every runnel and gully, which emptying themselves into the larger rivers, these in their turn came down in such force as to flood their banks, doing much and serious damage.

And the prospect before the two who sat there on their horses swathed from head to foot in long mackintoshes was, it must be allowed, sufficient justification for Thorman’s retort. An expanse of tossing, swirling water lay in front, and in the middle of this stood the bridge, or rather all that could be seen of it, for its roadway lay at least a foot beneath the surface. The banks of the river were overflowed to some distance, and here it was comparatively smooth; but in the middle the mighty stream rushed on its way with a dulling and ever deafening roar, rolling its huge red waves; curling, hissing, splashing; now heaving up a great tree-stump which, tossing for a moment, and leaping half out like a live thing, disappeared again in the boiling depths; now floating down the carcase of an ox or half-a-dozen drowned sheep. Against the bridge lay jammed an accumulation of drift-wood and logs, which groaned and grated with half-human shriek as the fierce current hurled itself continually upon the obstructing mass, which as yet it was unable to break through.

For sky, a pall of dark rain-cloud—heavy, opaque, and without a break anywhere—resting, in a regular line, low down upon the sides of the high hills on either side of the valley. Not a breath of wind to toss about the showers—nor, indeed, could the term shower apply. A downpour—straight, penetrating, and incessant. On the opposite bank of the river many waggons lay outspanned, their number augmenting as more kept on arriving in twos and fours from up-country, and the cracking of long whips, and the peculiar “carrying” yells of their drivers, were borne through the roar of the flood in front. Though early in the afternoon it was dark and gloomy, and the great rolling river, its red, turbid, hissing surface covered with evidences of damage and destruction, the lowering sky, the oppressive and woe-begone aspect of the surroundings, made up a picture of indescribable weirdness and threatening grandeur. The elements were supreme; man was nowhere.

“Oh, hang it, Thorman,” went on Hicks, impatiently. “You’re not afraid of a little water? I must get home to-night, and it’s now or never.”

The two had left some days earlier to attend a sale a good distance from home; for Hicks, as we have said, was an energetic fellow, and always alive to the main chance. The rain had just begun at the time they started; but they hadn’t bargained for this.

“Well, one damned fool makes two damned fools. Come along then,” growled Thorman. It would never do for it to be said he was afraid—and by a “Britisher,” too.

“That’s the sort, old *Baas*. I knew you were humbugging,” rejoined Hicks, heartily. He would have gone through more than the present undertaking, though that was no child’s play, when he thought of the alternative—several days’ weary waiting at the wretched little inn just left behind. Why, one evening of it would be too awful. But things gain or suffer by comparison, and now the comparison lay between this contingency and Seringa Vale, a cheerful room, a snug home circle, and—Laura. So quite airily he prepared to risk his life, having persuaded his companion to follow his wise example.

A group of men stood at the water’s edge exchanging speculations on the probable turn of affairs, for a few waggons, bound up-country, lay outspanned on this side, though the large majority, coming down country, were on the opposite bank. They eyed the two travellers inquiringly.

“I say, Mister,” said a tall fellow, with a beard the size of a peacock’s tail, falling over his chest. “You’re never going to try and get through, are you?”

“We are going to do just that,” growled Thorman.

“We are not going to try, but we are going to get through,” asserted Hicks confidently.

“Well, I hope you may,” said the other, “but take my advice and don’t attempt it.”

“I’m going to attempt it, at any rate,” answered Hicks. “Thanks all the same.”

“Much better not,” said another sturdy purveyor. “Joe’s right. There’s nearly a yard of water on the bridge, and the thing’s been cracking and groaning under all that drift-wood. It’ll go any minute, I tell you. I wouldn’t go across for fifty pound. Besides, you’ve got to get to it first, and there’s a lot of water on either side. Better give it up.”

“Oh, I know the road all right, every inch of it,” was the reply. “Come along, Thorman.”

Fortunately for them they did know the road, for on either side of it lay deep fissures and gullies, now, of course, all under water. To flounder into one of these would be just better than getting into the river itself. Still it would be extremely dangerous.

“Well, good-bye,” called out the men on the bank as the two went plashing into the surging water. “So long! We shall meet in the next world.”

A jest which contained more than half the truth for all the likelihood of their ever meeting again in this, and so its utterers knew, perhaps better than the two on whose ears it fell; yet the rough, venturesome life led by these men rendered them reckless and indifferent in the face of danger. They could jest with Death, with his grim hand put out before them.

“Well, now we’re in for it you’d better let me go first,” said Thorman. “I know these rivers better than you do.”

Hicks acquiesced, and they plunged on. As they neared the bridge the current increased in strength, but not yet did they feel anything like its full force.

“Quick! Turn to your right,” shouted Thorman, wheeling his horse. His experienced eye detected one of those deep fissures above mentioned, into which his steed even then nearly slipped. A plunge and a splash, and he was on firm ground again, Hicks following.

And now, as they neared the bridge, the horses began to show signs of terror: snorting and tossing their heads, their eyes rolling wildly as they began to feel the effect of the swift, powerful current flowing round the great piers at the entrance to the bridge, and had the riders lost nerve their doom was sealed. And in truth the situation was somewhat awful, and well calculated to try the strongest nerves. Before them lay the submerged bridge, the water tearing over its roadway so as to hide it completely—to what depth they could hardly guess. Even Hicks began to repent of his headstrong rashness as he looked giddily at the red, heaving flood rearing up its great waves as it thundered against the bridge; but it was too late now, there was no turning back.

“So-ho, boy!—careful!—so-ho!” he cried, patting the neck of his frightened steed, which, terrified at the roar and rush of water through the ironwork, showed signs of backing; but the current upon the bridge shallowing after rather a deep plunge just before reaching it, in a measure reassured the animals.

“Don’t look at the river, Hicks; keep your eyes on your horse, and look only at where you’re going,” said Thorman, in a set, deep voice, speaking over his shoulder; but the warning was nearly lost in the deafening roar of the flood. Overhead, on either side, rose the parapet of the bridge, and, as they splashed along the submerged roadway, every now and then an uprooted tree or a huge stump would be hurled with an appalling crash upon the accumulation of drift-wood which lay against the quivering mass of ironwork. In one place the head of a drowned ox protruded through an aperture as though the animal were looking into a road; having been dashed there by the current, and its body being unable to follow. A bizarre and ghastly sight was this great head, with its fixed, glassy eyes, and yet living aspect, glaring from out of the ruin. But such things as these our adventurers saw as in a dream. All their attention was turned to their horses and their own safety. They could feel the huge structure quiver and shake as they passed along it, and ever in their ears was the stunning, deafening roar of the mighty flood as it boomed beneath and around them.

And now the worst was over. They had gained the other end of the bridge, but before them lay an expanse of submerged land, where the current, if not so strong and deep as on the side they had started from, was at any rate wide enough still to constitute a source of peril in the exhausted state of their steeds. But the bottom was a smooth gentle slope, free from any of the occasional cracks and fissures which had troubled them at first.

“Don’t stop, Hicks! Keep his head *up* the stream. We’ll be through in a minute!” cried Thorman; and cramming his hat down, he settled himself firmer in the saddle, and struck into the open flood again.

But the horses knew that the worst was over, and kept up bravely, snorting and puffing like traction-engines as they struggled to maintain their footing in the swirling tide. As in a dream, the riders could see a crowd of men at the water’s edge; could hear their cheers of encouragement; then the resistance of the current slackened and ceased, and the exhausted animals walked despondently out, and stood, their dripping flanks panting and heaving, as Hicks and Thorman slid to the ground, little less done up than their steeds.

“I say—did you do that for a bet?” asked one of the crowd which had been standing ready to afford them what assistance they could, as well as to watch an event of some excitement, a perfect godsend to these men delayed there for many tedious days.

“No. Bet be damned,” growled Thorman. “I did it because that fool persuaded me to; and I wouldn’t do it again for a thousand pounds.”

“Oh, hang it, old man, don’t be shirty,” cried Hicks. “We are through now, you know, and the proof of the pudding’s in the eating. Besides, we’ve shown what our horses can do.”

“By the way, Mister, d’you care to part with that same animal?” said a tall, lank transport-rider, critically eyeing Hicks’ steed. “Because I want a horse that ain’t afraid o’ water. I have a lot of drift work to do at times, and that critter o’ yours ’ud just suit me. What’s the figure?”

“Well, no, I don’t,” answered Hicks. “It would be rather rough to get rid of him, just as he’s brought me through that, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, all right,” rejoined the other, good-humouredly, “I’d kind of taken a fancy to him, that’s all. When you do, just drop a line to John Kemp, Salem, Lower Albany.”

The two turned and waved their hats in response to a cheer which arose from the other side.

“Well, we shan’t meet in the next world yet, my friends,” remarked Hicks, with a laugh, referring to the last God-speed hurled after them as they began their perilous crossing. Then, leading their horses, they turned towards the roadside inn, which lay a couple of hundred yards from the river bank, and whose landlord, by reason of the presence of a number of men in a state of enforced idleness, was driving a roaring trade. The inn, or “hotel” as it was usually called, was, this afternoon, in a state of exceeding liveliness, for it was full of transport-riders, making merry—one or two of them, indeed, decidedly “cut,” and in that condition affording huge entertainment to the rest. Ordinarily a sober class of men, they were now indulging through sheer *ennui*, being driven, as one of them expressed it, “to get on the spree in self-defence,” and to keep their spirits up. So the place rang with the boisterous mirth of many jovial souls, and the air was heavy with the fumes of grog and Boer tobacco which not all the open windows and the door sufficed to carry off. Hicks started, as a dog and an empty whisky-bottle shot past his legs at the same time in the doorway.

“Beg pardon, mate,” cried a giant in corduroy, from across the room, not moving from his place on a dingy sofa, where he sat wedged in among other boon companions. “Sims here bet me I couldn’t hit that Kafir cur on the side of the ear, the loser to stand drinks all round.”

“And, by jingo, you’ve lost,” rejoined Hicks, good-humouredly, “so we claim to cut in to the penalty.”

“Right you are,” cried the other, with a jolly laugh. “What’s it to be—‘French’—Whisky? All right. Here, Sims, whisky and soda for these gentlemen here; Hennessy for me,” and then followed much discussion and questioning among the rest as to what they would take, one rather surly fellow coming near to having his head punched for curtly declining to benefit by the general “treat.”

The hotel-keeper, a thin, wiry-looking man, with grey whiskers and a sharp face, now came forward.

“Where might you be from?” he began. “Want to off-saddle? You see I’m pretty busy just now,” he went on, as if apologising for the delay.

“We *might* be from the bottom of the river, thanks to this fellow, and we don’t *want* to off-saddle, because we have,” growled Thorman. He was determined, characteristically, to make the worst of the situation, and resented having been made a fool of, as he phrased it, by Hicks.

“Why, it can’t be that you’ve come across the river?” cried the landlord in amazement.

“The devil it can’t! We have, though, unless we’ve gone down it and got into hell,” fiercely replied the other, with a contemptuous glance around; but the sulky rejoinder was received with a loud laugh by the boisterous but good-natured crew as a capital joke.

“Come through the river?” exclaimed a rough-looking fellow sitting close by. “Here, Mister, you and your friend must have a drink with me. What’s it to be?”

“No fear,” called out the thrower of the bottle. “The gentlemen are going to have one with me, Robins; they can have one with you after. Here, Sims, look alive, trundle up those drinks.”

“Keep your temper, Hallett,” replied the imperturbable landlord. “A man can’t wait on a dozen fellows at once, you see; and there are a precious deal more than a dozen of you here.”

“And devilish glad you are of that same, you old humbug,” retorted the other, cheerily.

“Tell you what it is,” an oracle of “the road” was saying in a loud voice, for the benefit of the assemblage. “That bridge’ll go, I say, before night; but, anyhow, it’s bound to go before morning.”

“Don’t know about that, Bill,” said another. “It’s a good strong bit of iron, and my opinion is that it’ll hold out.”

“It won’t, though. It’ll never stand the crush of drift-wood that’s against it now. And, mind you, the river’s coming down harder nor ever it was—I know. It’s raining like blazes up the country, far more’n it is here, and what with the Tarka and the Little Fish and half-a-dozen other streams besides, emptying into this, the bridge is bound to go. Mark my words.”

“Well, p’raps you’re right, Bill. We haven’t had such a flood as this in my time, and I’ve known this road, man and boy, for over fifty years. Still I should have thought the bridge’d stand. It’s a good bit of iron. But what do you say, Mister?” he added, appealing to Thorman. “You’ve just come over it, I hear.”

“What do I say? Why, that the damned thing won’t hold out till night,” was the gruff reply. “It jumped about like a twenty-foot swing while we were on it. And the fool that made it ought to be strapped upon it now, say I.”

“I’ve known one flood bigger than this, but that was before your time,” observed a wiry-looking little man, with white hair and a weasel-like face, self-complacent in the consciousness of having the pull over the two last speakers, and, indeed, over most of those present. “That was the time poor Owens was drowned. The river rose to within a foot of where we are sitting now before it went down again.”

“Who was Owens, and how was he drowned?” inquired Hicks, spotting an episode.

“Who was Owens?” repeated the old man, placidly filling his pipe. “A fool; because he thought he was smarter than any of us, and thought he could cross the river when we couldn’t. He went in on horseback. The river was running just as it was to-day, only not quite so deep. He went down, as a matter of course, before he was half-way through.”

“Couldn’t any of you help him?” asked Hicks.

The old fellow glanced up with a look of silent contempt for any one capable of putting such a question. Then he calmly struck a match and lighted his pipe, and having done so he continued:

“The river was full of drift-wood, and we saw one big tree bearing down upon Owens full swing. We hollered out to warn him, but the water was kicking up such a row that he couldn’t hear, nor would it have helped him much if he had. Well, the tree came bang against him, entangling him and the horse in the branches. They rolled over and over; and tree, and horse, and Owens disappeared. We never saw him again, but the next I heard of him was that his body had been found a week afterwards, when the water had run off, sticking in the bed of the river, among the drift-wood down Peddie way.”

“Poor devil,” exclaimed several of his auditors.

“No one but a fool would have gone into the river at all,” concluded the old man, sententiously, as he tossed off the remainder of his grog.

“I say, Thorman, we must be going,” said Hicks.

“All right,” replied that worthy, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and rising to his feet.

“Oh, but you needn’t be off yet,” objected he addressed as Hallett. “Stay here with us and make a night of it; you can go on in the morning.”

But Hicks was firm. It was not for this he had risked his life.

“Awfully sorry, old man, but I must get back to-night.”

“Hang it! Well, then, have another drink—just an ‘off-setter,’” persisted the other. “No? Well, then, good-bye. If you’re round my way any time, mind you give us a look up. We’ll get up a buck hunt, and some fun of some sort. Ta, ta! Take care of yourself. But you’re well able to do that now, I should think.”

They settled for their horses’ forage, and going round to the stable, saddled-up, and were soon on their way; the steeds, after a good feed and a rub down, looking none the worse for their gallant efforts in crossing the perilous flood. And a carious sight was that which the neighbourhood of the drift presented as they rode forth. In every direction waggons were outspanned, standing in rows of six or seven, or in twos and threes, according to the number owned by or in charge of any one man, but everywhere waggons. A few were empty, but most of them were loaded high up with wool-bales, sent from up-country stores to the seaboard—or with hides, and horns, or other produce—for it was before the days of railroads, and the carrying trade was abundant and thriving. Their owners stood about in knots, watching the gathering flood; others passed to and from the inn. Some again sat stolidly by their fires smoking their pipes as they waited for the pot to boil, while a cloud of native servants—drivers and leaders—hung about the canteen or lolled by the fires, the deep bass of the manly Kafir mingling with the shrill chatter of Hottentots and Bastards (Note 1). A kind of twilight had come on prematurely, by reason of the lowering sky, and the red watch-fires glowed forth, and the crowd of waggons, considerably over a hundred, standing about, gave the place the appearance of a mining-camp, or a commissariat train halted while on the march. And every now and then, more waggons would come lumbering over the rise, the cracking of whips and the harsh yells of their drivers echoing through the heavy air.

“Hi! Here! Where the hell are you coming to? Can’t you keep the right side of the road, instead of the side of the bullocks, damn you?”

The voice proceeded from an unkempt and perspiring individual, in flannel shirt and corduroy trousers, who, wielding his long whip, walked beside a full span of sixteen oxen, the motive power of a mighty load of wool-bales. So insolent and aggressive was it in its tone, that even good-natured Hicks, to whom the query was addressed, and than whom a less quarrelsome fellow never lived, was moved to anger, and answered the incensed transport-rider pretty much in the same strain.

“Oh, so you think I ought to get out of *your* way, do you?” roared the other.

“I think you might be civil, confound it all!” fumed Hicks.

“Suppose I ought to say ‘sir,’ eh?” went on the other, in wrathful, sneering tones.

“Oh, go to the devil,” cried Hicks, fairly boiling over; “I’ve no time to stay jawing here all night with you,” he added, contemptuously, making as if he would ride on.

“Haven’t you? Just get down; I’ll soon show you who’s the best hand at jawing, and at hitting, too. Come down here and try, if you’re not a blanked coward!” yelled the fellow. He thought that the other was afraid of him; but he reckoned without his host.

“Oh, that’s your game, is it?” cried Hicks, springing to the ground, and throwing off his mackintosh. “Come on, I’m your Moses.” And he advanced towards the irate transport-rider, looking him fall in the eyes.

The fellow, who now saw that he had a tough customer to deal with, began to repent of his hastiness, and would fain have backed out of the scrape into which his insolent, overbearing temper had led him, but it was too late to decline the contest, for several of his contemporaries, attracted by the prospect of a row, had gathered round. So he rushed at his opponent, hitting out blindly, right and left. But Hicks, who knew something of “the art of self-defence,” and was of sturdy, powerful build besides, found no difficulty in parrying this unscientific attack. Then with a well-planted “one—two,” straight from the shoulder, he landed his adversary in a heap on the slippery, trodden-down grass by the roadside.

“He’s down—give him law,” cried one of the bystanders. “Who is it? What’s it all about?”

“Dick Martin,” answered another voice. “He cheeked t’other fellow, or t’other fellow cheeked him, it don’t matter which; so they’re having it out. Get up, Dick, and go in at him again.”

But Dick manifested no such inclination. He raised himself half up and sat glowering stupidly around, as if dazed. His nose was bleeding, and a huge lump over his eye betokened pretty plainly that he would wake on the morrow with that useful organ somewhat obscured.

“Never mind. Get up and have another try, man,” called out the last speaker.

“He can’t; he’s had enough. T’other’s been one too many for him,” said some one else. And he had.

Hicks, who was far too good-hearted a fellow to exult over a fallen foe, however great the provocation received, said nothing. He lingered a moment to see if his adversary would show any sign of renewing battle, and then began to mount his horse. Just then a loud shout went up from the water’s edge about four hundred yards below them. All turned.

“The bridge! It’s going!” cried some one.

The spot where they stood, being on an eminence, overlooked the river, and they could see the strong ironwork of the parapet bend to the ponderous mass of accumulated drift-wood heaped against it. It yielded—then snapped; and with a thunder-crash sounding loud above the continuous roar of the flood, the vast obstruction of *débris* bore it down. A huge wave reared its head many feet in the air, and fell with a mighty hiss, covering the rushing surface with seething foam. Then, the obstruction removed, the mighty river hurled itself forward, its horrible, many-tongued voices bellowing as if in savage joy at having overthrown and defeated the works of human ingenuity. All that could now be seen of the once fine bridge was a few strands of twisted ironwork clinging about what remained of the piers at each of its ends.

“Let’s give the old bridge three cheers,” cried one of the spectators. “She’s been a good friend to us, and now we shall be put about as we were before for the want of her.”

They did so; and a great shout went up from the outspan, echoing far along the sides of the darkening hills, where the lowering rain-clouds rested in an unbroken pall. The bridge had been a good friend to them, and now it was gone they would sorely feel the want of it for some time to come, until another should replace it, which might not be for years. So they cheered right heartily; but with a feeling of genuine regret.

Meanwhile, at Seringa Vale, everything was at a standstill. The stock was kept at home, and in the soaked kraals the sheep stood huddled together, stolidly chewing the cad, and looking very forlorn in the dripping rain. But their owner's watchful eye was everywhere, as, wrapped in a waterproof coat, he moved about, noting where it became necessary to cut a channel for the drainage of a fast accumulating body of water which threatened damage, and all hands would be turned out with spade and pick for this and such like duty. Even he was more than satisfied with the rainfall this time, and now and then cast an anxious look at the weather quarter.

"I don't think I ever saw the kloof so full as this before, and it's still rising," he said.

"No?" answered Claverton, who was meditatively jerking a pebble or two across the broad, surging rush of water in front of them. "All the rivers in the country must be tolerably well down. Why, the bridges will never stand."

"No, they won't. If it goes on like this till morning there won't be a bridge left in the country, that's my opinion. There'll be a heap of damage done besides. Well, we can't do anything more now, and it's getting dark," and they turned towards the house.

Very cosy and cheerful looked the interior of that domicile, as a few minutes later, Claverton found his way thither, and got into dry clothes. No one was about—wait—yes—there was some one in the inner room. It was Lilian. She had been reading, and was seated by the window with her book open in her hand, just as the twilight and then the darkness had surprised her.

"Trying to read in the dark? Worst thing possible for the eyes," he said. "What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

She turned to him.

"Very much what you see me doing now—reading and—dreaming."

"The best possible occupation for a day like this. I've been doing the latter—dreaming," he said.

"You? Why, you have been hard at work all day," said she. "I've been watching you walking about in the rain with a spade, and pitying you for being so uncomfortable, while we were all sitting indoors, dry and warm."

"Pitying me?"

"To any extent," she answered, looking up at him with a bright smile.

He bent over her. "Yes, I was dreaming—of such a moment as this."

She did not answer. Her eyes were fixed on the gloom without and the soft falling rain. Oh, the continuous drip, drip of that ceaseless rain throughout this livelong day, turning the daylight into dusk, and beating time in her heart to the echoes of the past! And throughout it all was a vague, indefinable longing for this man's presence. The enforced imprisonment in the house had been doubly irksome without him, and at last she had been constrained to own it to herself. Once she had seen him coming towards the door, and all unconsciously had made ready such a bright smile of welcome; but he had turned back, and the smile had faded, and a chill, sickly feeling around her heart had taken its place. What right had she to feel thus, she thought? In a few weeks they would part as friends, acquaintances, nothing more, and then—well, at any rate he knew the worst. But now as he found her in the darkening twilight, her heart gave a bound, and her voice assumed a dangerous tenderness as she replied to him.

"The rain has been very cruel," he went on. "I couldn't catch so much as one stray glimpse throughout the whole afternoon. If you are blockaded indoors, you might look out of the window now and then."

"Why, I've done nothing else. And you, did you get very wet?" And there is a little inflection as of anxiety in her voice as she raises her eyes to his.

"Don't let's talk about me, but about a far more interesting subject—yourself. Haven't you been frightfully bored to-day?"

"Well, I have rather—at least, I mean, I oughtn't to say that, but one gets rather low sometimes, you know, even without much cause, and I've been so to-day," she answered, her tone relapsing into one of dejection, and he, standing there beside her, began to feel deliriously happy, though well knowing that it was for the moment. But the gloaming was about them, and they were alone together. What more could he—could they—want?

A light flashed from the other room; then a sound of voices. It was not exactly a blessing that Claverton gulped down, as some one was heard calling:

"Lilian. Are you there? It's supper-time. Why, what has become of her?" added the voice, parenthetically.

Lilian started as if from a reverie. "Here I am," and she rose hastily. Claverton was not the only one who watched her as she came out into the light, but the serene, beautiful face was as calm and unmoved as if she had been in their midst all the time.

Very cheerful and homelike looked the lighted room, and the table with its hissing tea-urn, and knives and forks and dish-covers sparkling on the snowy cloth. Very bright and exhilarating in contrast to the wet, chill gloom without, and to those two, who had been at work in the rain all day, especially so.

“The flood will do no end of damage,” Mr Brathwaite was saying, as he began to make play with the carving-knife. “There’ll be lots of stock swept away, I fear, and the homesteads along the river banks stand a good chance of following.”

“That’s cheerful, for their owners,” remarked Claverton. “I should think old Garthorpe’s place would be one of the first to go.”

“Serve him right, I was nearly saying. He doesn’t deserve to own a good farm like that—always preaching to the Kafirs instead of looking after it.”

“Is he a missionary?” asked Lilian.

“No. He ought to be, though. He’s quite humbug enough.”

“Tsh!” laughed Mrs Brathwaite. “Lilian will think you a regular heathen.”

“Can’t help it,” retorted the old man. “I know what I’m talking about, which is more than everybody does who professes to give an opinion on the subject. Any grocer’s boy, who in England would never get further than a shop-counter, makes a fine good trade of it by coming out here to ‘preach the Gospel’ to the heathen. It’s less trouble and pays infinitely better. What is the consequence? Kafirland is chock-full of bumptious, uneducated, hypocritical scamps, who live on the fat of the land, and are never happy unless meddling with what doesn’t concern them. All the disturbances which crop up from time to time, are hatched and fomented by these rascals. Call themselves teachers, indeed! What do they teach their lambs? To keep their hands off their neighbours’ property? Not a bit of it. And what missionary ever stuck to his post when war did break out, I should like to know? Not one. They clear out in time to save their own skins, never fear, and sneak off to befool the British public, while we are defending our lives and property. A set of meddlesome, mischief-brewing, slander-mongering frauds. They are the curse of the colony.”

On this congenial theme the old man continued to descant for some time. Then the tread of horses was heard outside, and the arrival of Hicks and Thorman created a diversion.

“So the bridge has gone,” said Mr Brathwaite, dropping the missionary question. “I thought it would. It should have been built ten feet higher from the first. This flood, though, is a flood, and no mistake. I only remember one like it.”

“Ha, ha?” laughed Thorman, who was quite in a genial mood. “You should have seen Hicks pitching into a transport-rider. He doubled him up by the roadside like a ninepin.”

“And how would he double up a ninepin, Mr Thorman?” queried Ethel, mischievously.

Meanwhile, Hicks looked sheepish. “I couldn’t help it,” he said. “The fellow challenged me.”

As predicted, the flood did an immense amount of damage. Every bridge was torn away by the force of the waters, as if it had been a bit of stick. Homesteads by the river-side flooded or swept away; gardens and corn lands swamped and utterly laid waste; every runnel or golly washed out as clean as a tube, the piles of drift-wood and rubbish, deposited here and there on their banks, alone showing the height to which the waters had risen. And when in a few days the rain ceased, and it was practicable to ascertain the fall extent of devastation—though even then in parts of the *veldt* it was impossible to ride with any safety or comfort, for a horse would sink knee-deep in the spongy soil—the land was noisome with the carcases of drowned animals, sheep and goats lying by tens and by twenties rotting in the sun in roadway and golly.

Note 1. Hottentots with an admixture of white blood are thus known in Colonial parlance.

Volume One—Chapter Twenty Two.

The Bushman’s Cave.

Christmas has come and gone, bringing with it, contrary to expectation, peace instead of a sword. The dreaded outbreak, by some inexplicable turn of events, has been averted, and instead of deluging the land in blood, and scattering rain and desolation broadcast, the tribes are, in their own expressive idiom, “sitting still,” and the frontier is at peace.

No one can tell exactly how this welcome turn in the tide of affairs came about. Whether it was that the different sections of the Amaxosa race distrusted each other, suspicion being a leading trait in the savage character, and were unable to coalesce; or that they deemed the time not yet come when they could venture to strike a blow with any hope of success; or whether the counsels of the peace-loving party in the nation—the older men, who had everything to lose and nothing to gain by war, and who, moreover, had learnt by sad experience of former struggles, the futility of embarking in such undertakings—prevailed, no one can say for certain. Some contended that with the prospect of such a thriving good season before them, the Kafirs could not afford to throw it away, for the recent rains had made the land to blossom like a rose. Anyhow, the natives were tilling their mealie gardens, and the more well-to-do of them were laying out cash in the purchase of ploughs and other agricultural implements, which certainly did not point in the direction of hostilities. Christmas was past, and once well over Christmas without an outbreak, there was no fear of war this year, at any rate. So said the old frontiersmen, and they ought to know. Anyhow, at that moment, the tribes within and beyond the colonial border were more quiet and settled than they had been for some years past. Stock-stealing had decreased with a rapidity bordering on the miraculous, and daring outrages, which a month ago had been waxing alarmingly common, were now absolutely unknown.

So peace reigned, and with it its twin blessing, plenty. In the gardens the trees groaned beneath their weighted branches; yellow apricots, with a warm red flush through their golden skin as they turned lovingly towards the sun; velvety peaches, rosy-cheeked and fragrant, dragged down the branches, or lay scattered upon the earth in lavish profusion. Up among the purple figs, the spreuws were having a rare good time, but nobody grudged even those mischievous birds their share, for was there not abundance for all? And the long green pears hanging on the drooping boughs, which swept as in a natural harbour round the wooden seat at the foot of the tree, what a luscious refection they promised in two or three weeks' time, when they should have felt a little more sun, to those who would avail themselves of that cool, shady retreat!

In the fold, as in the lands, plenty reigned. The flocks and herds were fat and well-liking, for the grass was abundant and good; and, strengthened by the sweet and nutritious pasturage, the animals remained free alike from the ravages of disease or tick, and the better able to stand against the attacks of those insidious foes, that they were in excellent condition and likely so to remain; for, as if in compensation for the widespread havoc it had wrought, the great flood, besides washing away many impurities, both in noxious herb and insect, had thoroughly permeated the long parched-up soil, softening it to a depth of many feet. It had done more than this, for it had broken up the long continuation of settled drought; and periodical showers, soft and penetrating, had fallen from time to time since, so that the land had lost its brown, sun-baked aspect, and lay everywhere green and well watered, luxuriously reposing in the rich, generous glow of the Southern summer.

And now we shall transport the reader to a deep wooded valley, similar to many of those already described, though it would be hard to find one to equal it. It is a romantic and beautiful spot. At the upper end is a deep pool, some thirty yards across, and pear-shaped. Into this, when there is a rush of water in the stream, falls a really magnificent cascade; when there is not, well—there is the rock, perpendicular, black and shining, a film of water silvering down it to plunge into the pool beneath with a pleasant, cool tinkle. As you stand facing the cascade or its lofty wall of shining rock, on the left hand, starting sheer out of the depths of the pool, is a mighty cliff, rising up in rugged tiers or ledges—which afford root-hold to a profusion of mosses and trailing plants, with here and there an aloe—to a height of two hundred feet. Just below the exit of the pool these natural terraces all culminate in a jutting angle of the cliff, which protrudes, sharp and awful in its unbroken perpendicularity. On the right hand is also a cliff, but it stands back, leaving a slope of forest trees and bush between it and the water's edge. The exit from the basin discloses a lovely view—with the jutting cliff, above mentioned, as a foreground—of the valley, whose wooded slopes, undulating in spurs, either culminate in a precipice, or cleave the blue sky with a line of feathery tree-tops.

But to-day there is not a rush of water in the stream above, though there is enough to fall into the pool with a resounding plunge, and to carry off a clear, sparkling stream at the pointed end of the pear-shape. The cascade is not in force; if it were, the merry party gathered around its base would be constrained to put up with some less inviting resting-place, for it would fill all the hollow with a cloud of showery spray—thick, penetrating as rain. The place is in an outlying corner of Jim Brathwaite's farm, and, sure enough, there sits jovial Jim himself, in a shady corner beneath the rock, his legs dangling over the water, a pipe in his mouth, and in his hand a fishing-rod. Other pipes and other fishing-rods surround the water-hole, "the fool at the other end" of each staring stolidly and apathetically at the water or watching his float with a despairing eagerness begotten of hope deferred, according to temperament. But the fish are either replete and satisfied, or cursed with the wiliness characteristic of their species, for not a float shows any sign of agitation. One rod, indeed, is submerged even to the second joint, while its manipulator, George Garrett—a stolid-looking youth of twenty-one—is occupied lying on his back upon a ledge of rock blowing rings of tobacco smoke skyward, and no one seems very keen on the sport. A line of blue smoke, curling beneath the cliff on the more open side of the pool, betokens "camp."

It may as well be stated that the gathering is nominally a fishing picnic. I say, nominally, for no one is idiotic enough to suppose for a moment that the *fishing* part of it will turn out aught but the veriest farce, for the day is hot and cloudless, and the still depths of the water are glassy and translucent.

"I say, but this is deuced exciting work," cried Jim, who had not had a bite the whole morning, a misfortune wherein he was not alone. "Let's knock off."

"That's right, Jim, always fall back on my advice," said Ethel, who was seated near him, likewise trying to fish. "I suggested that an hour ago."

"You? I like that. Why, it was you who said we didn't deserve our dinner unless we caught it."

"Did I? Well, I very soon recanted," laughed she, throwing down her rod with a yawn. "We are getting sleepy over this, and that's the preliminary stage to getting quarrelsome, you know. So let's go and see what the others are about."

"W-wait a bit," stuttered Allen, eagerly. "I've got a bite."

He had. Suddenly, after one or two violent bobs, his float disappeared—down, down—far into the depths.

"Hallo, Allen, you've got a whale on there, at least," cried Jim. "Hold on to him and be ready to cut the line before he lugs you in."

Allen's hands trembled with excitement, and he could hardly work his tackle for fear of losing the prize, as he felt the series of jerks and tugs as if something powerful was kicking at the end. At last he succeeded in bringing it to the surface. It was a huge eel.

But the next thing was to land his capture. For Allen, with infinite difficulty, had succeeded in making his way round the rock-bound sides of the pool to a narrow ledge, whereon he now stood. There was just standing-room, but only just, and the eel, as it leaped and squirmed on the narrow ledge, soon made it evident that there was not room for itself and its captor too. Once it fell back into the water and Allen, losing his balance, nearly followed; but the tackle was good and he succeeded in landing it again. Finally he managed to get his heel upon it and end its writhings by a process of semi-decapitation, but, oh, Heavens! His jack-boots on which he had that morning bestowed an extra amount of care and blacking, were profusely defiled by contact with the slimy reptile as it twisted over them in its death-throes, leaving trails and trails of slime upon their polished surface.

“I say, Allen, you’ll be wanting to catch another eel after that, I should think,” cried Jim, while Ethel, whom Allen’s silent expression of hopeless woe had convulsed, was nearly choking in her efforts to stifle her laughter.

It became necessary to rive a line through the eel and haul it across the water, as all its captor’s efforts were needed to ensure himself a safe return along the slippery face of the cliff. But he was downcast and subdued, and the good-natured chaff that fell to his lot as the only successful angler, was bitter to him.

“Well, Jim,” said his father, as the fishing contingent returned to the halting-place. “Caught anything?”

“No. At least Allen has. Caught enough for the lot of us put together. A regular young python. Look here,” and he produced the eel.

“My! that is a big ’un,” cried old Garrett, who was sitting in the shade with Mr Brathwaite, and talking over old times. “I say, you’re a lucky feller, Allen. We ought to ’ave a drop o’ grog over this.”

Mr Brathwaite’s eye twinkled as he heard this characteristic remark, and he turned to say something to Jim as a pretext for not hearing it. He shrewdly suspected that his old friend and companion-in-arms would have quite as much grog on board as he could carry before the day was out, and he didn’t want him to get “cumbersome” too early. He had had more than one “tot” already.

A dozen yards off, on the other side of the glade, talking to Mrs Brathwaite, sat Lilian Strange; and the rich, sweet tones were well in keeping with the languorous beauty of the spot as she now and then raised her head from some crewel-work she had brought with her, to tell some little joke to the old lady. She was in cool white and looking lovelier than ever, for the fresh, healthy air had acted with tonic result, and she hardly knew herself, so thoroughly bracing had been its effect upon her. And she had been happy here, too—yes, happy; putting both past and future resolutely away from her—and happiness and contentment is a better restorative than all the tonics or bracing climes in the world.

Claverton was away with the rest of the party, roaming about the kloof. She had asked him, as a special favour, to go with them, not feeling equal to a walk herself in the morning, as it was rather hot. And she must not monopolise him, she said, with a witching little smile. He must do his duty, and then, perhaps—no one knew what might happen in the afternoon. He had complied, as he took occasion to tell her, as he would have complied with any wish of hers however difficult, and irrespective of that veiled half-promise; to which latter, however, he intended holding her, and lived in anticipation on the thought. But it must be admitted that his presence among the exploring party did not, on the whole, constitute an adjunct of cheerfulness, though now and again, by an effort, he would make them laugh. And he persisted in piloting them to places involving a toilsome climb, ostensibly to descant on the view; but in his heart of hearts, hoping that the point of vantage would command the camp—where haply his eye might catch the gleam of a white dress against the foliage. Whereby it is manifest that, other points in his favour notwithstanding, Claverton was, after all, a consummate ass.

“Well, Miss Strange,” cried Jim, “how do you like this sort of thing? Has mother been taking care of you, or have you been taking care of her? Why, you look as cool as if we were not in a sort of natural oven.”

“I don’t know about the oven,” replied Lilian. “I know that this is a delightful place, and falling water always makes a current of air. But I do feel somewhat guilty, sitting lazily here while every one else is on the move.”

“*We’ve* been taking it rather easy, too. Fishing, you know, is proverbially a lazy amusement.”

“Is it? Anyhow, I have been pitying all of you poor creatures broiling in the sun, looking at the water.”

“Ho, ho! Broiling in the sun?” laughed Jim. “Why, you should just have seen that fellow George, for instance, lying on his back in the shadiest corner of the place, blowing clouds, and his rod nearly at the bottom of the water?”

The youth named grinned shyly and looked sheepish.

“How about going to look after the others?” suggested Jim, ever energetic and anxious to be moving. “Do you feel inclined to venture, Miss Strange, or would you rather stay here?”

Now the fact was, Lilian had become a little tired of sitting still, and the proposal was rather a welcome one. She would fain have strolled away under the cool shade of the trees, but she had resisted her lover’s longing entreaty to make one of the former party, on the ground of wishing to rest, and now he would come back and find her away with Jim and the others, and perhaps be hurt. No; he should not. If she could not give him all he asked—namely, herself—at any rate she would show an unselfish regard for his feelings in everything else. It was a poor consolation, but this she could do, no matter what it cost herself; and this was only one out of a hundred little instances of the kind, all of which Claverton had seen, and, seeing, could have worshipped her. And yet, would it not make their parting a hundredfold more bitter when it came?

So unhesitatingly she answered: “I think I’ll stop here just at present.”

“That’s right, Lilian,” said Mrs Brathwaite. “I’m sure you oughtn’t to go scrambling about all day. It’ll be much better for you to wait till this afternoon, dear, when it’s a little cooler.”

“Well, I shall go,” cried Jim. “Come along, you fellows. Ethel, you’ll come?”

“No, I won’t.”

“What? Well, I didn’t think you’d be so lazy!”

“Thank you, Mr Brathwaite,” said Lilian, with a quiet little laugh. “That’s one at me.”

“Oh, no; really not. It’s different with you, you see, and—and—Hang it! I’d better clear out of this; it’s getting too warm for me,” cried Jim, in mock helplessness.

“Well, I think you had,” laughed his mother. And he and young Garrett wandered off.

Soon the ramblers began to drop in, hot and tired, but in high spirits. Luncheon was ready laid out.

“Oh, Ethel, you ought to have come with us! It’s lovely down there!” cried Gertie Wray, who, with Armitage, was the first to arrive.

“Yes? What *have* you been doing to yourself?”

Following the direction of her glance, Gertie put both hands to her hat. Her mischief-loving cavalier had amused himself by sticking the ends of several pieces of long grass into it, and these were standing out a yard above her head, nodding like plumes. There was a laugh at her expense.

“Oh, you horrid tease!” she cried, crushing them up and throwing them at him.

“What? Why, ’pon my word it wasn’t me! I didn’t do it; it was Claverton.”

“Was it?” repeated she, indignantly. “It was you. Mr Claverton never plays practical jokes, and you—”

“Oh!—h’m!—ah! I say—awfully sorry! Didn’t know, really—have put my foot in it—must be more careful,” cried the mischievous dog, in tones of mock consternation.

“You’re a perfect horror!” cried Gertie, laughing, and blushing furiously. “I declare I’ll never speak to you again?”

“And was that Claverton, too?” tranquilly asked the owner of the patronymic in question. For Jessie Garrett, who had also been with Armitage and Gertie, now arrived on the scene—having lingered behind a little—similarly adorned.

“What a mischievous fellow he is!” cried Jim’s wife, who had just come up. “We ought to make him go without his dinner.”

“Or duck him—he deserves ducking,” put in Jessie Garrett. “Mr Claverton; can’t some of you duck him?”

“Too hot for any such violent exertion,” replied Claverton, nonchalantly, as he turned away, and sat down on the ground by the side of Lilian Strange, while old Garrett was heard to remark that “young fellers would ’ave their fun.”

“Do you know, I’m a shocking bad waiter,” he observed. “I invariably upset everything—cut over a wing of chicken into somebody’s lap, or pour a tumbler full of liquid down their back, or shoot some one opposite bang in the eye with a soda-water cork.”

“But to-day you won’t do any of these things,” laughed Lilian. “And you seem to have taken care of me pretty well.”

“Have I? As a rule, on these occasions, I skulk in the background, and pretend not to know that people have begun to feed. Then, when they are well under weigh, some motherly soul spots me, and makes a descent upon me, singing out: ‘Why, I declare, you haven’t got anything. Do come and have some of this and of that, and so on;’ and I find myself looked after as if I was the prodigal calf—prodigal son. I mean—same thing. Thus the public back is saved from a baptism of soda-water, and I from making an ass of myself, and every one’s happy.”

“Don’t be so utterly absurd,” said Lilian, laughing as if she could never stop.

“Here, I say, what’s the joke over there, Claverton?” cried Armitage. “Roll it down this end.”

“I was only telling Miss Strange about you tumbling into the puddle yonder, Jack,” answered he.

“Did he? When? How? Do tell us, Mr Claverton,” cried Gertie Wray.

“Oh, hang it, that’s not fair,” growled he most concerned.

“Well, he and Hicks went fishing here one Sunday. They were told that only naughty little boys went fishing on Sunday; but anyhow they went, and so were bound to come to grief, and come to grief they did—at least one of them did. The other was spared that he might take warning by it. Friend Jack, finding it slow, I suppose, lay down on that first flat rock and went to sleep, and—*presto*!—he found himself floundering in deep water.”

“You weren’t there,” retorted Jack.

“*No*; else you would not have been here to-day, for I should have deserved well of the State by leaving you in the deep. But the story goes that Hicks was so immensely tickled by the circumstance as to be unable for some time to render any help to poor Jack, who in consequence was nearly drowned, for the rock is perpendicular, and high out of the water, as you see. My impression is, that Hicks, likewise, wae in the land of Nod; but if so, no historian was present to record the fact.”

There was a laugh all round at Armitage’s expense, and amid the clatter of knives and forks, and the popping of corks, conversation and chaff waxed high.

“By the way, did any one go up to the cave?” asked Mr Brathwaite, suddenly.

“No, I think not,” replied Hicks. While others inquired: “What cave?”

“Why, the cave up yonder. It’s a regular Bushman’s cave. A lot of them used to live there; but the Dutchmen, who owned the place just below, polished off the last of them. That was during the ’46 war. Some of their bones are there still, I believe; but it’s a long time since I’ve been into it.”

“That sounds interesting, but rather ghastly,” said Lilian. “But why were they killed? Did they join the Kafirs in the war?”

“No. The Kafirs hated them almost more than the Boers did. But they’re mischievous little devils, you see. One scratch of their poisoned arrows, and it was all up with you.”

“Where is the place?” asked Claverton.

“Just a little way down the bend, there,” pointing to the jutting wall of cliff. “There’s a path leading up to it—a sort of cattle track—you ought to go and look at it. And there are a lot of regular Bushman drawings in the rock, which are rather curious things if you haven’t seen them before. Take Miss Strange up to see them, she might like to make sketches of them.”

For Lilian was an adept in the art of water-colour drawing, and had already portrayed much of the wild bush scenery in the neighbourhood, which had never before been reduced to paper.

“That would be so nice,” she said. “I’ve brought my drawing things with me, too.”

“Claverton, old feller,” cried old Garrett. “We ’aven’t ’ad a glass together all day; let’s have one now.”

“All right.”

“That’s it. Better late than never. ’Ere’s my respects,” cried the old chap, nodding; his rubicund countenance aglow with geniality—and grog. “I suppose, Miss Strange,” he went on, turning to Lilian, “you’d never ’ave thought we could get up such a pleasant little picnic in these out-of-the-way parts, would you?”

“Well, yes, I think I should, Mr Garrett,” she replied.

“Aha, yes. I dare say ’e’s bin putting you up to the ropes,” went on the old fellow, leering and winking at Claverton, and speaking in a tone which he thought was the perfection of genial banter; but which made its object wildly long to shy a bottle at his head. Ordinarily he looked upon old Garrett with a kind of amused contempt; but to be made the butt of his muzzy jests, that was quite another thing. So, completely ignoring him, he drew Lilian’s attention to an effect of light and shade high above them on the cliff opposite.

“Now we’ll make for the cave,” he said, as, feeding operations over, pipes began to appear.

“Yes. I’ll get my drawing things,” answered Lilian, rising.

“Are you going up to the cave?” said Miss Smithson, a pretty, fair-haired girl, who lived in the neighbourhood and whom they saw a good deal of. “That’ll be delightful—I should so like to see it. Mr Gough, will you come, too; there are some beautiful ferns up there?”

Gough assented, while Claverton inwardly anathematised poor Lucy Smithson, little thinking how unjustly, for she was really going out of her way to render him a service.

The four started. No one else seemed inclined to embark in the undertaking, having had enough knocking about at present, they said; old Garrett adding: “We old fogies don’t feel up to climbing, so we’ll just sit and ’ave a nice comfortable chat and a smoke.”

“And a big drink,” added Claverton, cynically, to his companion. “What an infliction that old fool can become!”

“He is rather overpowering,” assented Lilian. “Who can the old fellow have been?”

“A bricklayer, most likely, or a clodhopper of some sort. These fellows save a little coin, or make a lucky venture at the Diamond Fields, and buy a farm, and then, there they are. There’s precious little class distinction here.”

“I suppose so. But as the country gets more thickly settled, that’ll all come.”

“Yes. You see, in the old times when all these older men had to rough it together, and were dependent on each other for mutual help and defence, it was the smartest fellow who was made most of, irrespective of social grade. And these bricklayer chaps and journeymen were always in request, and could not only command high wages at any time, but didn’t care what they did, so they made their pile quickly enough. In a few generations most of the class distinctions of the old country will prevail here, as education and the importation of educated people grows. As it is, the rising generation, if you notice, is better educated than its parents, and in many instances undisguisedly looks down on its grandparents.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that,” said Lilian. “And my predilection generally lies with the old people, who, if somewhat uncultured, are kindness itself.”

“And their very roughness makes them the fittest people to open up a new colony,” went on Claverton. “Now look at that scowling fellow Jeffreys—how weary I am of his eternal scowl, by the way. Well, his grandfather would hardly have been taken on as valet to Mr Brathwaite’s father in the old country, and yet here the Jeffreys mix with us as equals, and are among the most well-to-do people anywhere about. Isn’t this shade delightful?”

For they were walking beneath a growth of massive yellow-wood trees, whose great twisted limbs overhead shut out the sunlight, though here and there it struggled through and lay in a golden network on the ground. Masses of lichen festooned from trunk and bough, and monkey ropes and trailers of every description hung here straight and cord-like, there tangled together in the most hopeless confusion. A gloom lay beneath the shadowing trees, but it was the softened gloom of a cathedral aisle; and the column-like trunks, firm and massive, stood in rows along the coarse of the stream which bubbled along—now in little clear pools, now brawling over a stony shallow.

“Yes, perfectly sweet,” answered Lilian.

“Then, like all things to which that description applies, it isn’t to last, for here we turn upward.”

A ragged track, half path, half water-course, diverged from the stream, leading up the bush-covered hillside, steep as a flight of steps.

“Wait a minute,” called out Lucy Smithson, who was overtaking them. “I don’t think I’ll go up after all. It’s turned out so hot, and here we leave the shade. Do you mind, Mr Gough?” she added to her companion. “But don’t let me keep you from going, I can easily go back alone. It isn’t far.”

This was out of the question, and she knew it. The fact being that the whole move was a little ruse on her part with the object of befriending Claverton and Lilian, in a way covering their retreat, so as not to make it quite so conspicuous. Who knew, thought the good-natured girl, but that this very afternoon might decide the future of those two? So she had laid her little plan.

Gough, who had his own reasons for wanting to rejoin the others, professed that turning back was the very course he should have thought advisable, so with a conventional word or two of regret, they separated.

“Now one can breathe again,” exclaimed Claverton, in a tone of relief.

“I don’t know,” laughed his companion; “climbing a flight of very steep steps is likely to put one out of breath. And it’s awfully steep here.”

“It is rather,” he answered, taking her arm to help her up the rough bush path, which was, in truth, like a flight of stairs. “But you’ll go wild with delight when we get to the top, I expect. It’s just one of those views you revel in. And,” he added, tenderly, “this is the first time I have had you all to myself to-day.”

“I thought I should have ridden this morning,” she said.

“Were you sorry you didn’t?”

“They said it was too far for me to ride,” she went on as if not hearing his question. Then, looking suddenly at him: “Yes, I was sorry; but—”

Claverton’s heart gave a bound. Was this anything to augur from, after all? No. Lilian was not as most girls.

“But what?” he asked, eagerly. “Nothing,” and the expression of her face was grave and troubled.

Of late she had been a prey to sad misgivings; at times she felt as if she had been playing a deceitful and unworthy part. She had let this man go on thinking she was learning to care for him—for she was sure that he did think so—knowing the while that she could never be anything to him; and now the time of her stay was drawing very near its close, and she must explain to him that the fact of having given him so much of her society, and sought his confidence, and shown her unmistakable esteem for him, was only her side to the compact which they had ratified that evening under the stars, and that they must part as they had met—strangers, or what to him would seem but little less cold—friends only. Yet she had been very happy with him, happier even than she dared own to herself. And now she must explain all this, and what would he think of her? Would he hate her? Would his powerful, all-in-all love change to bitter contempt? Ah! there lay the sting. But, no! She felt that he was different somehow to other men. He would understand perhaps, and pity her, and even not withdraw his love. She could not bear the thought of losing that—and she was so lonely. Yes; she would explain; this very day, she had made up her mind as to that. But when she tried to begin she had stopped short, and when he would have had her continue, had answered “Nothing.”

Claverton did not urge her. He respected her sudden reticence, as he respected her every word, her lightest look. He, too, had his own thoughts to occupy him. With the shadow of her approaching departure lying upon his mind, deepening day by day as the time drew on, he was fast relapsing into the state of restless despondency to which he had been a prey before he tempted his fate so futilely. The wave of reckless happiness into which he had unquestioningly plunged, with nearly two months of Lilian’s society before him, had rolled on, leaving him even worse than before. He would cast the dice again; but, instinctively, he felt that this time the throw would be fatal. Should he do it to-day? The opportunity was a rarely favourable one. But, no! He would not mar the recollection of this one golden day, one of the few last they would spend together.

So in silence they continued the ascent, every now and then pausing to rest and look back. At length the arching trees overhead gave way, and a wall of rock rose in front.

“We are nearly there now,” said Claverton, leading the way along beneath the rock. “This is our way.”

“Oh, look!”

There was a rustle among the bushes, as a buck, which had been lying in the sun at the base of the cliff, sprang up and plunged into the cover, where they could hear it bounding away down the hill.

“How pretty! I’ve never seen one so close before—at least, not alive,” she went on. “I could see its eyes quite plainly; but how it startled me!” she added, with a laugh.

“All the unwonted eights that you do see are always when you are with me,” said Claverton, with a pleased smile. “But here we are at last. One more staircase, though.”

They stood before a yawning fissure falling back so as to make a natural staircase to the brow of the cliff. Nearly a hundred feet above, queer jagged pinnacles stood one above the other all up the sides of the gully, at whose entrance rose a great perpendicular tower of rock, with a huge boulder resting fantastically upon its summit. A tiny thread of water trickled down a well-worn channel, and from every cornice and cranny trailed a profusion of the most delicate maiden-hair ferns.

Lilian was enchanted. While pausing for a moment to rest, she dipped her hands into some clear water gathered in its little stony basin. In the act of withdrawing them, a ring slipped from one of her fingers and fell to the bottom of the water. It was a curious ring, consisting of two ropes of solid gold twisted together. Her companion fished it out, and, as he returned it to her, he noticed that she was deathly pale. But he made no remark, only glanced in the opposite direction for a moment, in order to give her time to recover her self-possession. Yet he connected the circumstance with her former lapses of hesitation and restraint. In silence they resumed their way, and at length gained a wide ledge at the other end of which was the cave. It seemed of some depth, being wider and loftier at the month, narrowing thence into darkness.

“Wait, let me go in first and explore,” he went on, as a matter of precaution holding ready in his pocket the small revolver which had been his constant companion since Mopela’s attempt on his life. Then striking a match he was about to advance.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Lilian. But he had seen it as soon as she had, and placed himself in front of her. It was a human skull, standing on a ledge of rock about breast-high, and the eyeless sockets and white teeth looked ghastly enough, grinning at them dimly through the darkness. In an instant he had laid hold of it and jerked it away out of the cave down into the bush beneath.

“What was it?” she repeated.

“Only a stone. A rolling one, like yours truly. I don’t suppose it has stopped yet.”

He was glad she had not seen the hideous thing, and lighting another match he peered cautiously around, lest there should be a second skull. There was, but it was lying on the ground with the face turned away from them, and Lilian took it for a stone. There would have been to her something horribly ghastly in these grisly death’s-heads, lying there in that gloomy cavern, just faintly visible by the flickering light of the match he carried.

“That’s all right,” he said, as they returned to the light. “I didn’t much think we should find anything very terrific, but it’s as well to look. Sometimes a snake takes up his quarters in a place like this.”

“What’s this?” cried she, as something crackled beneath her feet.

“Oh, some of those old bones the *Baas* was telling us about. I don’t suppose there’s much left of them now, five-and-twenty years after.”

Lilian shuddered slightly.

“Let’s get into the air again,” she said. “This place is rather awesome.”

“Very well. But look, here are the Bushman drawings.”

The walls of the cavern were plentifully adorned with hieroglyphics—rude figures of men and animals—worked into the smoother parts of the rock with a kind of blue dye. Here and there the surface had been smoothed away to admit of the barbarous frescoes.

“They are very queer,” said Lilian, “but candidly I am just a little disappointed in them. I thought they were much more artistically done.”

“Yes, I always think people make more fuss about them than they are worth. They are sorry attempts after all.”

“I think I shall make a sketch of the kloof, bringing in that great jutting cliff. What a pity it just hides the waterfall!” continued she.

He undid her basket and got out her drawing materials. Then they discovered that the little portable water-tin was empty.

"I'll get you some from down there in half a minute," he said, starting to his feet.

"But—but—I don't quite like being left alone here," she said, hesitatingly, casting an apprehensive look backward at the gloomy cave.

Claverton stopped.

"Then we must go together," he said. "As far as the end of the ledge, anyhow. Then I shall have you in sight while I scramble down the rocks."

"What a helpless creature I am!" she exclaimed, with a sad little smile.

"I wouldn't have you otherwise for all the world," replied he, tenderly; and they started on their quest. Swinging himself over the ledge he filled the little vessel from the trickle of water in the gully, and was with her again in a minute.

"Now," he went on, arranging a large flat stone as a seat for her, just in the shade of the cavern's month. "Now, you must make the most of the time, and knock up an adequate representation of the scene, and I believe I shall have the cheek to ask you to copy it again for me," and he threw himself down on the rock beside her.

"Don't sit there in the sun," said she. "And I shall tire you out, keeping you tied here by the hour. It would be much more amusing to you to be away with the others."

Claverton indulged in a long, quiet laugh. "That idea strikes me as something too rich. Tire me out! When I have been longing the whole day to be with you, and with you only and alone. When I could sit here for ever and ever only to be by your side and to see you and to hear the music of your voice, darling. I never want a better heaven than this—than this one—here, at this moment," he went on, with a burst of passionate abandonment as different from his ordinary self-control of speech as the beautiful scene before them was from a Lincolnshire fen.

Lilian made no reply, but bent her head rather lower over her drawing, and her fingers trembled ever so slightly. Clouds of spreuws flitted among the crags opposite, their shrill whistle echoing melodiously from rock to rock. Bright-eyed little conies sat up peering warily around for a moment, and then scampering into their holes among the stones and ledges; and a large bird of prey circled slowly overhead uttering a loud rasping cry, then soared away over the valley. Beneath, the forest lay sleeping in the lustrous sunlight, and now and again from its cool recess would be upborne the soft note of a hoopoe.

Lilian worked on, neither of them speaking much. Claverton, for his part, was content to lounge there, as he had said, for ever, so that only he might watch that graceful white figure—bending over the sketch-block—and the delicate patrician profile, the fringed eyelid opening wide as she kept looking up from the paper to take in the scene. The sound of his own voice had a tendency to break the charm, so he kept silence. And thus the time wore on, till at last the sketch was finished, and Lilian, laying down the block to dry, rose to her feet.

"There," she said; "I think we must be going."

Her companion's countenance fell. "Not yet. Look. You haven't filled in that tuft of aloes on the krantz, and there's more shading wanted here."

She laughed. "I can fill that in at home. And the shading's quite right, really. Do you know how long we have been here?"

"I know how long we haven't been here—half long enough."

"Two hours and a quarter. We must really be going. They'll be wondering what has become of us."

"Really not. They won't trouble their heads about us. A little longer. Heaven knows when I shall get you all to myself like this again," he pleaded. "And—Why, Lilian—darling—what is it?" For she had suddenly grown very white.

"You are tired," he went on. "The heat and the climb have been too much for you. What a ruffian I was to have made you come! But it's shady and cool here, let's wait a little longer; the rest will do you good."

"No, I am not tired; but we will wait a little longer. I—I have something to say to you, and this is a good opportunity of saying it."

"Yes. What is it?"

"Do you remember our compact?" she went on, with a sort of shiver, and speaking in a dead, mechanical voice. "Have you forgotten it—that night by the water? I had no right to bind you to such a one-sided agreement. It was not fair to you. I only thought of myself, and it was selfish of me—sinfully selfish—to ask you to consent to such a thing."

"Selfish! You selfish? Well, what next?"

There was silence for a moment. Before—beneath them lay the beautiful valley, its abrupt slopes and iron-bound krantzes soft in the golden sunshine. A couple of crimson-winged louris flitted among the tree-tops beneath, and the hum of insects floated up with a faint and far-away sound. Behind—above them yawned the gloomy cave, those whited relics of primeval barbarism lying silent and ghastly on the shadowed floor, the sole witnesses of this conflict of love in all its heart-wrung hopelessness. What a mocking irony of circumstances is that which has caused such a scene in the drama of civilisation—civilisation in its highest and most refined phase, to be enacted here in this savage spot, where lie the dead bones of the most degraded of the human race.

"Yes, selfish. I valued your society, your friendship, so much, I could not bear to lose it. I was afraid you would leave me, then and there; and, oh! I have never known what real chivalrous sympathy was till I met you, and I have needed it so. Yet I might have known what would be the result of tasking you to the utmost of your strength—beyond it, rather. Well, our compact," she went on, in an altered voice, as if nerving herself for an effort. "You have not kept to it. You must not talk to me as you have been doing lately—to-day even. You must not—"

She turned half away; she felt faint and sick at heart and dared not look at him. What would he say to her? Suddenly something struck her on the shoulder, just behind the neck. The concussion was of the nature of a blow, rather quick than violent. She turned upon her companion, lost in a kind of scared wonder.

He had sprang to his feet and was shaking something from his hand. It fell on the ground, and he stamped upon it and crushed it.

"What is that?" she asked, glancing from the ground to his face, which was growing very white.

"Only entomology," he replied. "Look at it."

A huge red scorpion lay on the ground, where he had trodden upon it. It died hard, however, and though half-crashed it lay writhing and darting out its formidable sting in its rage.

"In half a second it would have been on your neck; it was going there as fast as it could crawl when I picked it off," he said.

"Has it stung you? Of course it has," she cried, her rich voice vibrating with concern. "Why, Arthur," she went on, all in a glow of admiration; "do you mean to say that you snatched that dreadful creature off me with your bare hand?"

It was the first time she had ever called him "Arthur," and for a moment he almost forgot the furious pain of the sting.

"Just that. I'd lay hold of the devil himself under far less provocation, I assure you. It was the only way of getting it off quick enough. By Jingo, it hurts, though. Look away for a moment, I'm going to slash it."

Opening his knife, which was keen and sharp as a razor, he drew its blade across the wound in a couple of deep gashes. The blood spurted freely, and he ground his teeth in the convulsive anguish caused by the venomous brute's sting, which seemed to go through his whole frame. Then he applied his lips to the wound and sucked.

"Good thing it missed that large vein," he said. For he had been just in time to seize the creature and crush it up in his fingers, during which process it had whipped up its tail and stung him twice just round the back of the hand. "Oh, I shall be all right, but we'd better get back. The Baas sometimes carries a bottle of Croft's Tincture. That'll put it right in no time," continued he, with rather a ghastly smile. For the sting of a scorpion is terribly painful; indeed, unless a remedy is at hand the sufferer will undergo the most acute agony. The sting of the Apocalyptical locusts has been well compared.

"Yes, yes. Let us be going," she said, hurriedly. "Is it dreadfully painful?"

"I hardly feel it when I look into your eyes, darling. And your very voice has a soothing effect."

She had just been taking him to task for talking to her in this strain, regardless of their compact, but how could she upbraid him now—when he was in this terrible pain—and all for her? Suddenly he reeled giddily, and his face became even more livid; and the perspiration stood in beads upon his forehead. An awful fear gripped her heart. All the grim stories she had heard of deaths from stings and snakebites crowded up. If this were to prove fatal and he were to die at her feet, having laid down his life for her! At this moment she knew her own heart if she had never done so before. Further self-disguise was useless. This incident had swept away the veil.

"Ah, why did you do it?" cried she, in tones of thrilling anguish. "I would sooner it had stung me a hundred times! You can hardly walk! Lean on me. See! I am not such a weak support, after all."

She had passed her arm through his, and, for the moment, felt as strong and determined as even he could have been. All thoughts of prudence and conventionality were scattered to the winds in her awful apprehension. He was suffering horribly—it might be, even, that his life was in danger.

"Why, how childishly weak I am!" said he, with another forced smile. "The thing can't hurt so much, after all; hang it, it can't!"

But it did. There was no getting rid of that fact, try as he might to ignore it. Thus they made their way back.

"Look, now, I mustn't make a crutch of you any more. We shall be coming upon the others directly," said Claverton, as they drew near to the halting-place.

"I don't care if we do," she replied, fearlessly.

"But I care; and I'm not going to let you do what you might regret afterwards," rejoined he, sadly, remembering the burden of their conversation at the time of the occurrence.

"Ah, why did you do it?" she repeated. And by that time they were in sight and earshot of the rest of the party.

"Hallo, Arthur! What's up?" asked Mr Brathwaite, noticing his unwonted aspect.

“Nothing much; only a sting. Got any Croft’s Tincture?”

“Is it a snake?” inquired the old man, with more alarm in his voice than he intended to betray.

“No; a scorpion.”

The while Mr Brathwaite had been uncorking a small bottle. “Lucky I didn’t change my coat at the last moment this morning. I was as nearly as possible doing so, and this would have been left behind if I had, sure as fate. Now, let’s have a look at it.”

An infusion of the healing fluid was applied, and soon the sufferer began to feel perceptibly relieved. The throbbing became less violent, and, although much swollen already, the hand grew no larger. Old Garrett stood by, watching the doctoring process, lecturing the while, his theme the deterioration from its ancestry of the rising generation.

“There,” he was saying, “I’ll be bound that none of you young fellers ’ave any of that stuff with you—and what would you ’ave done without it? We old stagers is always ready for any emergence,” (his auditors presumed he meant emergency)—“always ready. All there, sir; all there?”

“Have you got any of it yourself?” asked the patient, catting him short.

“’Ave I? Well, let’s see. No, I ’aven’t to-day, but I generally ’ave.”

“Oh!” said the patient, significantly.

“There, you’ll do now,” said Mr Brathwaite, tying up the hand with a handkerchief. “It’ll hurt a little for a time, but the swelling will soon go down. But how did it happen?”

“The scorpion was on my shoulder, and Mr Claverton snatched it off with his bare hand,” answered Lilian, quickly, in her clear tones.

“Awkwardly enough, too, as the result shows,” rejoined Claverton. “By the way, has Hicks slain anything? We heard him cannonading away down the kloof like the Siege of Paris.” He said this with the object of changing the topic, and the statement was not strictly historical in every particular.

“Ha, ha!” laughed Mr Brathwaite. “Hicks banging away, as usual. He never will move without his gun. One thing, though, if he isn’t dangerous to beast, he isn’t to man either. He’s always careful enough.”

“I’ve sent for the horses,” said Jim, who had just come up. “Hallo, Claverton! What’s the row with your hand?”

Then the story was raked up afresh, and all eyes were turned upon its hero, which he hated, and looked around seeking a means of escape, when, to his intense relief, a diversion occurred, in the shape of Hicks and Allen dragging between them a huge bushbuck ram, which the former had shot.

“Hicks to the fore. Hooray!” cried Armitage. “How much salt did you lodge on its tail, old man?”

“Go to Bath, Jack. You’re not the only fellow in the world who ever shot anything,” retorted Hicks, who was hot and testy. Then there was a general laugh, and at length the jollity was cut short by the inexorable hand of Time. The vehicles were in-spanned, for they must needs depart. Those who were to ride were busy saddling up, and at length farewells having been exchanged, all started on their respective ways, some riding, some driving. Armitage declared that the last thing he saw of old Garrett was that worthy balancing himself in his trap trying to draw a cork, while his hopeful held the reins; but no one knew whether to believe the statement or not. One thing, however, presumption was all in favour of its veracity, so they gave the old toper the benefit of the doubt—in the wrong direction.

Volume One—Chapter Twenty Three.

“Sunshine Outside—Ice at the Core.”

“After all, this is a glorious sort of life!” exclaimed Hicks, striking his hatchet into a thorn-stump and standing upright, in all the elation of his health and strength, to gaze at the sun—now rather more than an hour high—and then at the surrounding *veldt*, all dewy and sparkling.

“It is,” assented his companion, making a final chop at a thorn-bush which he had cut down. “Here, Tambusa, lay hold of that ‘tack’ and bang it up against the others. There. The devil himself would yell if chucked against that hedge now.”

For they were repairing sundry breaches in the fence of the wet-weather kraal.

Tambusa obeyed; but in the act of doing so stumbled, and, trying to save himself, sat right on the most thorny end of the branch he was manipulating.

“I never did see such a nigger for blundering,” laughed Claverton, as Tambusa, picking himself up, endeavoured to extract the sharp mimosa spikes which had stuck in his naked carcase. “Hang it, man; you had the whole district for as far round as you can see to sit down in, and yet you pick out such a seat as that.”

The Kafir grinned dolefully, not much relishing this keen jest; but he liked its propounder, and so he grinned.

“Yes. It’s a glorious life,” continued Hicks, bent on philosophising, apparently. “One never feels off one’s chump. Suits a fellow down to the ground."

"It does," acquiesced the other. "By the way, I hear the Brathwaite girls are going away next week."

"Eh!—what? No. Who told you that?" cried Hicks, turning sharply.

"Oh! didn't you know? My informant was Ethel herself. I thought you knew."

Hicks looked "off his chump" enough now, to use his own expression, and his companion's satirical soul discovered something irresistibly comic in this sudden transition from elation to crestfallenness, which would have amused him vastly, but that the laugh was not entirely on his own side. So he only repeated: "I made sure you knew."

"No, I didn't. But, I say, though, that's a blue look out. I don't know how we shall get on without them, it'll be slow as slow can be," and then, remembering that his companion might have good reasons for not agreeing with this latter statement, Hicks stopped short, and began blundering out something about "it making all the difference, you know, having a lot of people in the house—or only a few."

"Let's knock off," suggested Claverton. "We're about done here. Tambusa, lug along those 'tacks,' we'll bang them up somewhere and go."

It was a couple of days after the fishing picnic, and just each a morning. There had been plenty of work of one kind or another to occupy the whole of the time since then; but to-day they would only ride round the place, and give an eye to the stock, picking up, perchance, a stray shot or two on the way.

"Arthur," said Mr Brathwaite, meeting the two young men on the *stoep*. "Driscoll's just sent over to say he can take you down to see that place of his to-day. I advise you to ride over there and go with him. It's a good place, and going for a mere song. I'd think twice, if I were you, before letting it slip."

"You're right; I'll go over and see it. But could you come too, and give me the benefit of your experience?"

"I can't to-day, I'm afraid. It's a long way, and I don't feel up to it. Still, you have a good eye to the capabilities of a place, I should say. Anyhow, go and look at it."

On second thoughts, Claverton was rather glad. He would be more the master of his own movements if alone, and would be able to return as soon as possible, whereas, at the ordinary regulation speed, the undertaking would carry him through the whole day.

"Have you far to go?" asked Lilian, as after breakfast he sat buckling on his spurs in the passage.

"Yes; it's a good way. I may not be back till nearly dark," he answered, ruefully, taking down his riding-crop from the peg. "But to-day I'm going to imagine myself riding another fellow's horse with my own spurs. I may as well be off, there's that little chatterbox, Gertie, bearing down upon us. Good-bye."

He mounted and rode off in a very discontented frame of mind. What did he care if any one made him a present of the whole continent of Africa, if he were not to win *her*? The days were so precious and so few now, and here he was throwing away a whole one for the sake of a wretched "bargain." He wouldn't go—he would let the thing slide—he would turn back. And his face, as he rode, wore an aspect of troubled preoccupation.

Turning from the door, Lilian encountered Gertie Wray in the passage.

"Oh, there you are, Lilian," exclaimed that volatile young lady. "I was just coming to look for you. Do come and teach me that lovely song you promised to, last night. We shall have it all to ourselves. Ethel and Laura are fixed for the morning with Mrs Brathwaite, making dresses or something."

"Very well, dear," assented Lilian, always ready to oblige others. She was not feeling inclined just then to sit hammering out accompaniments for a not very apt learner to murder a song to; but self came second with her. So she did her best to instil the desired accompaniment into the other's understanding; but in about half an hour her pupil got tired of it.

"I think I shall sit indoors and read," said Gertie. "It's too hot to go out."

"Is it? I like the heat," said Lilian. "I think I shall go for one of what you call my 'somnambulisms.'"

"And a very good name for them," laughed the other. "To see you walking along, so still and stately, any one would think you were walking in your sleep, but that your eyes are open. Well, go for your 'somnambulism,' my peerless Lilian, only don't get too much in the sun or you'll get freckles," and the speaker nestled down comfortably in a chair in a cool corner to while away the morning over a novel.

"You silly child," replied Lilian, laughing as she bent down to kiss her. "You'll be asleep yourself, really and in good effect, in about half an hour at that rate. Good-bye."

She went out, and paused for a moment on the *stoep* with head gracefully poised and the beautiful figure erect as she stood gazing, with eyes opened wide, upon the glories of the sun-steeped landscape. Then she picked up a volume which lay on a chair under the verandah.

"I'll sit and read a little on that comfortable old seat under the large pear-tree when I'm tired," she thought, and, with the book in her hand, she passed on, down between the orange-trees, and out through the gate in the wooden fence, where the great scarlet-cactus blossoms twined in all their prismatic gorgeousness. Now and then she would stop and bend down to pick a wild flower or to examine some queer insect, and the warm glow of the summer morning seemed to favour her scheme of solitude and meditation. It was hot, but she loved the warmth, there was nothing of enervation in it to her; on the contrary, her thoughts and intellect never had clearer or freer play than on a day like this.

Dreamily and in meditative mood, Lilian wandered on; along the wall of the mealie-land, where the tall stalks spread their broad, drooping leaves, and many a white tufted ear, just bursting through its vernal husk, gave promise of an abundant crop; past the dam, where she lingered a moment to mark the clear shadows in its burning waters now cleft into ripples as, one by one, the mud-turtles, who had been basking on the bank, shuffled their slimy, flat shapes in with an ungainly slide; then by the ostrich camp, whose fierce occupant lazily ambled towards the wall, and then stopped half-way as if changing his mind. Dreamily still she leaned, looking over the wall, her taper fingers gathering together little fragments of stone, which, hardly knowing what she did, she threw into the enclosure, as if enticing the bird to approach. Then turning to pursue her way, behold, a high quince hedge barred it.

“How tiresome!” she said to herself. “I shall have to go such a long way round.”

But she had not. A friendly gap opened a few yards further down, and, passing through it, she found herself in a wild, seldom visited part of the garden. Here tangled grass flourished in delightful confusion; and tall fig-trees, branching overhead, cast the sunlight in a network upon the shadowy ground, while among the topmost boughs a few spreuws lazily piped to each other as they revelled in the purple fruit. Then an open bit and sunshine, and the boughs of a large peach-tree swept nearly to the earth, as though to lay its load at her feet. She plucked off one of the peaches, and pressed its blushing, velvety skin against her own soft cheek.

“It seems almost a pity to eat such lovely fruit,” she murmured. “They look so smooth and delicate.”

Still turning over the peach in her hands, she swept aside the long drooping boughs of a great espalier. A rustic seat was fixed to the trunk, forming a shady nook—though sun-pierced here and there in a qualified degree—and on this she sat down. The surrounding branches falling around, shut in the spot as if it were a tent.

“It is delicious here, after that glare. I wonder who made this seat,” mused Lilian, throwing off her hat and preparing to discuss her peach and otherwise enjoy to the full the glories of the golden noontide. Mechanically she opened the book she had caught up as she came out; but without attempting to read. The call of birds echoed through the leafy arches; bees droned in subdued murmur; now and again a tree-cricket broke the quietude with a shrill screech; the air, though not close or sultry, was rich and warm and languorous, and presently Lilian’s thoughts began to get confused; her eyes closed; then the book slid from her lap. The influences of the prevailing calm had conquered—she slept.

And what a picture she made, reclining against the rough, twisted arm of the old rustic seat, one hand supporting the graceful head, and the delicate oval face, with its refined beauty of feature! The long lashes lay in a dark fringe upon each smooth cheek, which, lovingly kissed by the warm, generous air, was tinged with a faint but inexpressibly charming flush. The sweet, red lips were closed, but without a trace of hardness in their tender curves; and the whole attitude one of ease, abandonment, and yet of infinite grace in its every contour. A figure thoroughly in harmony with the place, clime, and hour. A lovely picture indeed.

So thought its only spectator, as, with a rapturous yearning pain at his heart, he noiselessly moved aside the trailing boughs and stepped within their shade. He would not disturb the spell, but stood gazing entranced upon the slumbering form in all its wealth of refinement of beauty.

A large pear fell to the ground with a dull thud. Lilian stirred uneasily, then half rose, letting fall the hand she had been leaning upon. It was seized in a firm grasp by two other hands, and in tones wherein earnest tenderness struggled with a gleeful laugh, a voice whispered:

“One doesn’t wear gloves on the frontier, or what a chance of being set up in them for life!”

The long lashes unclosed, and she started ever so slightly. It was too much. The hot blood rushed through Claverton’s veins as though it were molten liquid, and lifting her from the seat, he pressed her to him, raining down warm, passionate kisses upon her lips, forehead, eyes, and the soft dark hair which lay against his cheek, whispering wild, delirious words of love and entreaty. Then he felt ashamed of his fierce impulsiveness—his brutality as it seemed, in taking her at a disadvantage. Was she angry or humiliated, or both? She made no resistance as he held her there. Or had he about frightened her to death? Then he held her from him.

“You—here?” she cried, in astonishment; but there was no anger in her tone, although a lovely blush suffused her face, even to the very roots of her dark hair. “I thought you were going to be away all day. You told me you would hardly get back before night.”

“I thought better of it. I couldn’t remain away from you anything like so long; wherefore I turned back. That’s the plain, unvarnished truth. Am I not improving in veracity?”

“Oh! I am hurting your hand!” she exclaimed, suddenly becoming aware that her fingers had been leaning hardly on the place where the scorpion had stung him. No fault of hers, by the way, for she could not have withdrawn them if she would.

“Say, rather, you are healing it. Your touch would have more effect in that line, with me, than that of a whole legion of Apostles,” he replied, still holding her.

“Hush! You must not talk like that,” said she, gently. Then, referring to the sting: “But I ought not to lecture you, when it was done for me. Ah, why do you take such care of me?” she cried, in conclusion, and her eyes were brimming.

“Why do—Oh, I do take care of you, then, do I?”

“Always. If I want anything, you are sure to have it ready. If ever I have a misgiving about anything, you are sure to be there to dispel it and reassure me. In fact, I can’t walk a yard but you are spreading metaphorical carpets before my feet. And yet—Oh, Arthur, why did we ever meet?”

She turned away from him, standing with hands clasped before her, and her eyes fixed on the ground.

“Why did we ever meet?” he repeated, again drawing her to him and bending down to whisper in her ear, a low, quick, passionate whisper. “Because you and I were made for each other. Because we were brought together here, both of us, from the other side of the world on purpose for each other. Darling, that was the first thought that flashed through me the very moment I saw you that first day. All of me before that, was a different self; I hardly recognise it, now. You remember that night by the water—it was the hardest blow I ever had, that that little hand dealt me. But I wouldn’t take it as final, I wouldn’t give it up, and now I’ve served my apprenticeship fairly well, haven’t I? What you’ve just said tells me that, even if nothing else did.”

There was a frightened, despairing look in her eyes; her lips moved as if she were trying to speak, but the words would not come, and she made as if she would draw away from him.

“Lilian—sweetest—life of my life! Don’t look so frightened, darling,” he cried, in a tone of thrilling tenderness. “Remember what you have just told me, and for God’s sake don’t look so frightened. Tell me now that you are going to give me the care of your whole life—your sweet, love-diffusing life. Tell me this: Haven’t I fairly established a claim to it? Look at the sunshine around. That shall be an earnest of your life, if you give it to me. My darling—my more than Heaven—only say you will.”

He paused, hanging breathlessly on the reply. Again she struggled to speak. The tension was fearful. Would she faint or die? Then he bent his ear yet lower to catch two words hoarsely whispered:

“I—cannot!”

And then again the black bolt of despair shot through Claverton’s heart. This was the last throw of the dice, the last chance, and he felt it was. Hitherto he had been almost confident in his hopefulness, now the cup was dashed to the ground. Thus they stood for a space, neither speaking. To Lilian it seemed as if the hour of her death had come, and with her own hand she must drive home the weapon—down, down to her very heart. The stray sunbeams crept along the ground beneath the old pear-tree, insects hummed, and a bird twittered in the radiant light without, and all told of calm and peace, and the very air seemed like a glow from Heaven. With that mysterious instinct which stamps upon the mind the veriest trifles at the time of some momentous crisis, she marked the efforts of two large black ants who were carrying the dead body of a cricket up the trunk of the tree; and to the end of her days she would remember the persevering attempts of the laborious insects as they dragged their burden, regardless of check or stumble, over the rough bark of the old espalier. It seemed to her that hours had passed instead of moments. Then he spoke, but his voice had lost its confident, hopeful ring. “Don’t say that. Say you can, and you will!” She tried to lift her head, to speak firmly, but the attempt was a failure.

“I cannot,” she repeated. “Forget me—hate me, if you will,” and she shuddered; but he clasped her closer to him. “I can be nothing to you. I am bound—tied—bound firmly. Nothing can release me—nothing!”

A look so stony and awful came into Claverton’s face that, had she seen it, she would inevitably have fainted away then and there.

“Oh, Lilian! It can’t be—that you are—that—you are—married?” he gasped, and his brow was livid as he hang upon her answer.

“No,” she replied, “I am not—that,” and again she shuddered.

For a moment the other did not speak, but his face would have made a study passing curious as he analysed the position. In the midst of the shock his coolness seemed to have come back to him in a sudden and dangerous degree.

“Listen, now, Lilian,” he said. “You are under a promise to some one—a rash, hasty promise. That much I might almost have seen for myself. I don’t care whether it was made in Heaven or in hell; but you are going to annul it, and to annul it in favour of me. For it was a rash promise, and if you keep it you will be doing evil that good may come of it. Your own creed would tell you that much, and would forbid it, too.”

“You don’t care for this man, whoever he is,” went on Claverton, having paused for her reply, but none came, “and he doesn’t care for you, or he would never have allowed you to throw yourself on the world’s tender mercies as he has done,” and his voice grew hard at the thought. “You don’t care for him, and you do—for—me,” he said, in a desperation which rose far above conventionalities of speech.

Again she made no reply, so he continued; but now his tones were very soft and pleading.

“Yes, you do for me, darling. I could see it. Haven’t I seen your sweet face light up at my approach? Haven’t I noticed the softening in that exquisite voice when you turned to me? You remember when I came back that time we went after the stolen oxen,” (referring to an episode which had involved a three days’ absence from Seringa Vale). “You were so glad to see me, then, sweetest. There was no mistaking the speech of those divine eyes of yours. There’s no conceit in my saying this, because love sometimes begets love, and have not I poured out the whole of mine at your feet? And I should be a fool not to see that you had been happy when with me. Oh, my darling, I cannot lose you. We cannot part. Only think of it! How can we? What will life be worth? Lilian, I won't live without you. Only give me your future, your past shall never trouble you in your future's sunshine. This wretched promise, it is nothing. It was made unthinkingly; you must retract it. You dare not wreck two lives for the sake of keeping a rash promise. You cannot, you dare not?"

He was terribly in earnest. There was something heartrending in the wild and, as it were, clinging tones of his entreaty, as he saw the prize slipping from his grasp just as he had thought to win it. He had played a bold stake, but it was his last, and the game must be boldly played if it was to be won.

To Lilian the moment was awful. She looked up at the dark, pleading face bent over her, drank in every tone of the strong, earnest voice. It was maddening, delirious. Ah! what happiness might be hers! She would yield. Then came the recollection of another face, another voice none the less pleading, a promise given, spoken low in a darkened chamber and at the side of a deathbed, but spoken in all pure faith and trust, a promise which was to hold good to the end of time, come weal, come woe. A promise—and such a promise—was sacred. She might tear out her own heart in keeping it, but it must be kept. Oh, God! this was indeed awful. Would she be able to bear up much longer, or would she die? And in her ears kept ringing *his* voice—his loving, earnest, firm voice—firm now, though at times so terribly shaken. "You dare not wreck two lives for the sake of keeping a rash promise." And the picture he had drawn for her! Oh, no; the price to be paid was to be counted in tears of blood, but a promise is sacred to the end of time.

"Only think of the future, Lilian," he whispered, entreatingly. "The future, the bright future. Always sunny like this," glancing at the surroundings. "An earnest of our lives. Yours and mine."

With a low cry she tore herself from his hold and sank down upon the rustic seat.

"Ah, don't tempt me!" she wailed, despairingly, with her face buried in her hands. "You don't know what you are saying. Why do you tempt me like this? It is not fair, it is not manly of you."

The first words of reproach he had ever heard pass her lips—and they were addressed to him!

"I want to save two lives from shipwreck," he said. "Yours and mine."

"Then listen," she said, sitting up, and for the first time speaking firmly. "You must forget all this—you must forget me—hate me, if you will, for having brought you to this. I told you from the first that I could give you no hope whatever, and yet I was selfish enough to ask you to undertake a one-sided bargain. All through, I have been deceiving you, more and more. Think me utterly heartless—but forget me. And you—you have urged me to break a sacred promise for you," she went on in a hard, dry, monotonous voice, as unlike her usual tones as it was possible to be. "Arthur Claverton, I have treated you shamefully. You will always; look back upon my memory with the scorn and contempt it deserves; but on one point you are wrong: *I do not love you*!"

"You do."

The answer came quietly and confidently, as if he had been setting her right upon some trivial point under discussion.

She looked up at him with burning, tearless eyes; for she wae about to pluck her very heart out.

"What! you refuse to believe me? I must have sunk low in your estimation. I have told you the truth, and—and—you must leave me. Will you?" she went on, speaking fast in her fear lest she should break down in the act of sacrifice. "Will you go quite away until I leave this place? It will only be for a few days now, and it will be best for both of us. Will you do this for me?"

"No."

"No? You will not? Then that is the extent of your love for me?" she said. "Ah! now I know you."

Claverton reeled giddily, as if her words had struck him, as he stood facing her. He passed his hand across his eyes as though to clear away a mist. Was it indeed Lilian Strange who sat there before him, dealing out her pitiless, scornful words in that hard, steely voice—Lilian Strange, his ideal of all that was tender, and loving, and pitiful—or had some beautiful demon assumed her form to torment him? He felt half inclined to break away, and dash off to the house, where he would find the real Lilian in all her truth and sweetness. No; he was under a spell.

Taking a couple of turns of half-a-dozen steps, he again stood before her.

"Lilian, do you indeed mean what you say?" he asked, in a quiet, hopeless tone. "Are you really going to drive me from you? I will go—your lightest wish has ever been sacred to me. After this day you will never see me again; but that will be nothing to you. I see I was quite mistaken, darling," he said, wishing to spare her the humiliation of thinking that he knew her love to be his, "quite mistaken. Forgive me—it was my fault, not yours—but it does not matter now, we shall never meet again. Am I to stay or—go?"

She did not lift her eyes to his—she did not move from her fixed, rigid position; but, hoarsely her lips framed a single small word:

"Go."

With a quick shudder, as one who feels the stab of a knife, Claverton heard it. And he knew there was no disputing the decree.

"Lilian, for the love of my whole life which I have laid down before you—for the sake of the time that is past—give me one more kiss before we part for ever.”

He bent down to her, and she did not resist. He took her to his heart, but the burning eyes, dilated and tearless, did not seek his; he pressed one long, warm, passionate kiss upon her pallid lips, such as he might have done if he had been looking upon her for the last time ere the lid of her coffin was shut down, but she made no response. Then he released her.

“There. No other woman’s lips shall meet mine, after this, till the grave closes over me—Lilian—my darling love—Heaven send you all happiness—Good-bye!”

Still she did not look up. She could not, she dared not. There was a rustle as the surrounding branches were parted, a sound as of retreating footsteps, and he was gone. Then, as the last of his footsteps died away, Lilian fell prone to the ground, and, with her face buried in her hands, sobbed as if her heart was reft in twain. She had driven him away—driven him from her with scornful words and with a lie—he, whose love was to her as something more than life. Now she had kept her promise. She had been true to that sacred bond, but at what a cost! She had torn out her own heart, and her act of self-immolation was complete. Never again in life would she see him whom she had now sent from her. Ah God! it was terrible.

So she lay with her face to the earth, watering it with her tears. Yet the sun continued to shine above; the sky was all cloudless in its azure glory; bright butterflies glanced from leaf to leaf; birds piped blithely and called to each other; all nature rejoiced in the golden forenoon; and there, prostrate on the grass, lay the beautiful form of that stricken woman pouring out her very heart in tears. For the light of her life had gone out, and her own was the hand that had quenched it.

Volume One—Chapter Twenty Four.

Forth—a Wanderer.

After that last heart-breaking farewell, Claverton tried to walk quickly away, but in vain. Several times he paused to listen. Once he turned and retraced his steps a few yards, feeling sure he had heard his name called. But no. It was only the rustle of the leaves as a bird fluttered among them, or the murmur of a tiny whirlwind which now and again whisked round a few leaves and bits of stick in the stillness of the summer morning. On, on he strode, whither he knew not nor cared, his lips drawn tight over his set teeth, a tumult of desperate thoughts raging wildly in his breast, a glare almost of mania in his eyes, dragging his steps heavily as one who staggered beneath a load. This dream which he had been cherishing, this sweet hope which had made a new man of him, was dashed from his grasp, and so cruelly, so mercilessly. Ah, good God! how he had loved her—how he did love her! He had never loved any living thing before, and now the long-pent-up torrent had burst its barrier and overwhelmed him; and he tried to look into the black, bitter future till his brain reeled and all was confusion again—wild, surging, chaotic thoughts—as he strode on through the shadeless glare of the burning *veldt*. Shade or bud, what was it to him? But human endurance has its limits. Even his iron frame, weakened by the mental strain, began to fail after hours of tramping beneath that fierce sun, and he sank to the ground nearly exhausted at the foot of a small mimosa-tree. He was desperately hard hit, if ever man was.

“Why, Arthur! What on earth brings you here? I thought you were away at Driscoll’s!” said a voice behind him.

In his preoccupation he had not heard the tramp of a horse’s hoofs. Turning quickly, he saw Mr Brathwaite.

“Oh, I didn’t go there after all—and I’ve been taking a little stroll,” he answered, with a ghastly attempt at a laugh, and in a voice so harsh and strange that the old man, looking at him, began to think he had had a sunstroke, and was a little off his head.

“Anything the matter?” he asked, kindly. “You don’t look at all the thing. Have you heard any bad news?”

Ah, that was a good idea! Claverton remembered that the post had come in that morning, bringing him two or three letters, which he had thrust unopened into his pocket. This would cover his retreat. He would be able to leave without any awkward explanations—called away suddenly. They would think he had heard of the death of some relative; and grimly he thought to himself how the death of a hecatomb of relatives would be mere gossip compared with the “news” he really had heard.

“Yes,” he replied, “that’s what it is; and I am afraid I must leave here as soon as possible.”

“H’m! But where’s your horse?”

“My horse? Oh, I walked.”

“H’m,” said the old man again. “Now look here, Arthur, my boy, I’ve got through a pretty long spell of life, during which I’ve learnt the art of putting two and two together. Whatever you may have heard to upset you, didn’t come through the post. Now I don’t want to pry into your affairs, but I can see tolerably well now how things have gone. Is it so bad as you think?”

There was a world of delicate, kindly-hearted sympathy in the other’s voice, and Claverton felt as if it did him good. Grasping the hand extended to him, he replied:

“It is. I will not try to convince you that you have got upon the wrong tack, even if it would not be useless to do so. I must go from here; you will understand, you will appreciate my reasons, and know why this place, which has been a dear home to me, the only real home I have ever known, has become unendurable now, at any rate for a time.”

His voice failed him, and he broke down. Recovering himself with an effort, he went on:

“I know it seems abominably hard-hearted, ungrateful even, suddenly to leave the best and kindest friends I have, in this way, to say nothing of the possible inconvenience to you. Yet I am going to trespass even more upon your large-heartedness. I am going to ask you to help me to leave quietly, not to make it known that I have done so until after I am gone, and even then to let it be supposed that something I heard through the post has compelled my departure. Is this too much? I do not ask it so much for my own sake, as for—for another’s.”

Mr Brathwaite mused a moment.

“You’re sure you’re right about this, Arthur?” he said. “Well, I suppose you are; you’re hardly the sort of fellow to do a thing by halves. Now listen: if things are as bad as you say, I think your plan is a good one. Go away for a change, and do some travel or up-country hunting. You’re naturally a restless man, and a little excitement and change may do you a world of good now. As to any inconvenience to me, that’s nothing. We are not very busy just now, and though we shall all miss you terribly, Hicks and I will manage to rub along somehow. And I’ll do what you want about getting off. When do you want to leave?”

“To-night, or to-morrow morning, rather. There’s a good moon now, nearly at half.”

“All right; but look here, my boy. Don’t remain away from us a minute longer than you feel inclined; and whatever happens, or wherever you may be, remember that my door is always open to you, all you have to do is to walk in and make your home with us, as long as we are above ground if you feel inclined. Now we’d better be going. You are looking very ill; get on my horse, I’ll walk a bit.”

But this the other firmly refused to do. “I feel much better now,” he said, “I’ll walk alongside.”

They were not very far from home, for Claverton’s wandering had been of a somewhat tortuous nature, so that he had got over a great deal of ground without covering much of actual distance. So they started upon their way back, and for the time he felt calmed by the other’s strong, manly sympathy; but it was the calm of exhaustion rather than that of relief.

Assuredly there were disturbing elements underlying the surface of the household at Seringa Vale, or, at any rate, of its younger members. Yet that evening, when they met, there was little or no sign of anything of the kind. Claverton looked rather worn and haggard, but not conspicuously so, and though quieter than usual, this was accounted for by one or two hints that Mr Brathwaite had let drop in accordance with the plan the two had agreed upon. Hicks, however, counterbalanced this by being uproariously lively on his own account. He had had a rare old time of it in the *veldt* that afternoon, having brought back a wild guinea-fowl, three partridges, and a red koorhaan slung to his saddle, the spoils of his bow and spear. “Not bad, you know,” as he said. “To say nothing of that other guinea-fowl and another partridge, too, that I ought to have got.”

“Why didn’t you get them, then?” asked Mr Brathwaite.

“Oh, I dropped them all right, but the grass was so long and they got away somehow,” at which reply the old man laughed meaningly, and remarked that Hicks was becoming such a crack shot that he felt himself bound to leave something for another time.

“By the way, where’s Lilian?” went on Mr Brathwaite, forgetting.

“She isn’t very well to-night,” replied his wife. “Poor child, I told her it was too hot to sit out this morning, and she stayed out too long. It’s only a headache, she says, that will be all right to-morrow. I made her go to bed early and sent her some tea in her room.”

“Well, yes, it has been rather warm to-day,” rejoined Mr Brathwaite. “She ought to be more careful.”

”—And then I heard no end of a cackling on the opposite bank,” continued Hicks, who was narrating how he had circumvented his quarry, “and I crawled along from bush to bush, and came bang into the middle of a lot of guinea-fowl. The ground was black with them—by George it was—perfectly black. Well, the beggars wouldn’t rise; they kept legging it along till I thought I should never get a shot.”

“Well, but don’t you know what you should have done then?” said Mr Brathwaite.

“What?”

“Why, shot one on the ground. They’d have got up then.”

So the evening wore on, and Claverton thought it would never end. Was it a subtle instinct that this would be their last meeting, he wondered, that made Ethel persist in talking to him the whole evening, while Laura and Gertie Wray were singing duets together, with Hicks in attendance turning over, usually at the wrong place, by the way, for which he was rewarded by a half-angry, half-amused glance from Gertie’s big blue eyes? Somehow or other, things reminded him of that earlier time there—before this turning-point in his by no means uneventful life—but he remembered it only as a far-away recollection. Then at last good-night was said all round, and he found himself alone, though not yet, for Mr Brathwaite followed him to his room just to say a more formal good-bye.

“So you haven’t changed your mind about going, Arthur? Well, I didn’t much think you would, and perhaps it’s best, for a time. You’ve got your horse I see, and we can send on anything you may want after you. The women will be sorry when they find you’ve gone. I’ll only say what I did this afternoon—come back when, and as soon as you like, the sooner the better. Good-bye, now, my boy. Don’t take things too much to heart, all comes right in time, as you’ll see when you get to my age.”

Claverton wrung his hand in silence, then the door closed on the figure of the old man. Would he ever see that kindly face and genial presence again?

He went round to the stable to see that his horse was all ready for him in the morning. Yes, there stood the fine chestnut, and it snorted and then whinnied as it recognised its master by the dim light of the stable-lantern. He cut up a bundle of forage and threw it into the manger.

“Ah, Fleck!” he said, as he stood watching the horse eat it. “You and I have had many a good time of it together, and now we’ll have many a bad time, but we’ll never part, old horse. That glossy skin of yours, which *her* hand used to stroke half timidly and *her* eyes used to look upon and admire, shall never belong to any one but me, go we north, south, east, or west.”

He patted the shining neck, and passed his hand down each of the smooth forelegs, and the horse, making one or two playful bites at his shoulder, whinnied again. Then he extinguished the lantern and went out of the stable.

“No use trying to go to sleep. I’ll take a walk.”

So saying he strolled away down into the kloof. The moon, nearly at half, was shining above, silvery and clear. Not a breath stirred the sleeping foliage, and, except that now and again something would rustle in the grass or bushes, the stillness was oppressive. He skirted the dam, whose dark glassy surface twinkled with the reflected stars, and passing through the gap in the quince hedge, stood under the old pear-tree, and the network of light beneath its moon-pierced shade was there still, but paler than that of the golden sun. A gleam of something lying on the ground caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a ring—two ropes of twisted gold welded together. Moved by the same instinct that chilled him the last time he held this trinket in his hand, he dropped it as if it had been some live thing. Then he changed his mind, and, picking it up again, slipped it into his pocket, intending to restore it to its owner, somehow. But the finding of it created a sudden revulsion of feeling—fierce resentment drove out the sad, heart-breaking thoughts with which he had come to that spot—and dark, murderous projects crowded upon his raging soul. Why could he not find out the original owner of that bauble, and remove him from his path? The end would more than justify the means. He had shot a man before to-night, merely to save his own life; and the stake to be won here was far more than his own life. He would keep the ring, it might be turned to account. Thus ruminating he passed through the wicket-gate, and on along the path towards the rocky pool. Here was where Lilian had started in alarm at the cry of the jackal that first evening; and then how happily they had conversed, wending their way down this path—but, be it remembered, with Death stalking the while unknown to them upon their footsteps.

At last he returned to the house, and re-entering his room threw himself upon his couch, sinking, from sheer exhaustion, into a troubled sleep. And the Southern Cross turned in the heavens, and the moon sank lower, and the world slumbered; but, at length, that worn-out brain was awake again.

Claverton rose, plunged his head into cold water, dressed himself for travelling, and within half an hour of awaking had saddled-up Fleck, and nothing remained but to start. Stay—something did remain. Where was his riding-crop? Then he remembered that he had left it in the dining-room. It had slipped down behind the sideboard, and something had diverted his attention at the time so that he had forgotten to pick it up. Noiselessly he turned the handle of the door and let himself into the dark passage; then into the dining-room, fearing lest the tread of his riding-boots or the creak of the floor should disturb the house; but no—all was still. He found the missing article just where he had left it; quietly he regained the passage again, in another instant he would be gone, when—What was that?

For the dining-room door, which he had just come through, was softly opened, and a figure stood at the end of the passage—a female figure—wrapped in a dressing-gown. Heavens! how his heart leaped! Had she yielded? Was this indeed her, come to cancel his departure? His thoughts were running so entirely upon her, or he would have seen that the figure before him was not tall enough for that of Lilian. But he turned towards it transfixed.

“Arthur,” whispered a voice, dispelling the illusion at once. “Arthur. You are going away—for good; I know you are.”

“Ethel! Good Heavens, child! What are you doing here?” he exclaimed in blank astonishment.

“You are going away,” she answered. “I guessed it last night. I could feel it, somehow. And you were going to leave us all without saying good-bye—to leave us without a word,” she went on in tones of suppressed excitement.

“Ethel, for goodness’ sake go back to your room at once,” said Claverton gently, yet firmly. “You don’t know what you are doing. Only think, if any one were to hear you and to come out now.”

To do him justice, he was anxious far more for her than for himself in the exceedingly awkward position in which her impulsiveness was in danger of placing them both.

“Oh, I don’t know what I am doing?” repeated the girl, bitterly, and stifling down a sob. “And you are very anxious to see the last of me; but remember this, Arthur. At any rate, I did not let you go without wishing you good-bye, however imprudent I may have been in doing so.”

“Ethel, believe me, I was thinking entirely for you. You never would think for yourself, you know,” he parenthesised, with a sad smile. “I can’t tell you how I appreciate your doing this; but I have too much regard for you to allow you to remain a moment longer. Now do go back to your room, if it is the last thing I ever ask you.”

For a moment the girl made no reply. A flood of moonlight streamed in at the open door, playing with her golden hair, which fell in waves upon her shoulders as she stood with her hands clasped before her.

“Good-bye, Arthur. And remember, I was the only one here who saw the very last of you,” she added in a tone of strange triumph, lifting her eyes suddenly to his. Was it that he had seen that look before in other eyes, and, recognising it, desired to save her from herself? Was it that in his mind was seared that last vow, uttered that morning and wrung from a breaking heart? Who may tell? He pressed both her little hands in his own, and, without again looking at her, passed through the doorway and was gone.

The red half-moon glowered in the sky, with its points turned angrily upwards, and a cloud-cap stole over the distant mountains one by one, spreading, creeping over the face of the land, and day broke. And in the cold grey dawn the wanderer rode on—on in the misty drizzle which swept through the dark spekboem sprays and made the big stones on the hillside, far and near, gleam like lumps of ice. Rain or shine, warmth or chill, it was nothing to him. Down the bush path, smooth or rugged; winding along a kloof; through a river; neither looking to the right nor to the left he held on his way, on, on—ever on.

Volume One—Chapter Twenty Five.

“I Die, and Far Away. Hast Thou Known?”

A cheerful wood fire is crackling and sparkling in the grate, throwing out tremulous shadows upon the plain, massive furniture and polished floor, ever and anon lighting up the old room with a sudden glow.

The glow quivers upon a pale, beautiful face and on a coronal of dusky hair, whose owner sits gazing into the bright caverns formed by the burning wood, the picture of retrospective meditation. A book lies open upon her lap, proclaiming that the twilight has overtaken her and compelled her to give up reading in favour of a more idle but not always more pleasant resource—reflection; which pastime, in the present instance, seems to bring her more of sorrow than of joy, for there are tears brimming in the sweet eyes, and the curves of her mouth are even a little more wistfully sad than usual.

It is four months since we saw that horseman, with despair and gloom upon his countenance, riding away in the cold grey dawn, on, whither he knew not, neither cared; and Lilian Strange is still at Seringa Vale. A few days before her projected departure, news came from the McColls to the effect that they would not be returning to the colony for another six months, and offering, if she wished it, to release her from her engagement, otherwise they would be glad to have her back with them at the time of their return. Mrs Brathwaite, however, who had secretly formed a plan in her own mind for keeping Lilian altogether, soon persuaded her to prolong her stay, at any rate until the McColls returned. “You see, dear,” she had said, “you are not nearly strong enough to go back to work again yet, even if you had anywhere to go. And just as we have got a little colour into your cheeks and set you up, here you go getting ill again. Besides, we shan’t be able to do without your bright face, dearie, so if you can put up with such a quiet house as this is now, don’t say anything more about leaving.” And Lilian, lonely and friendless as she was, and shaken and upset by the recent events, had thrown her arms round the old lady’s neck and indulged in a good cry, and declaring that she loved the dear old place almost beyond her old home, had done as she was told.

“*You will be doing evil that good may come of it*.” Was this so, indeed? Had she better have broken that promise? Ah! better not dwell on that now. And then would arise the thought of him—wandering afar and alone, uncheered, heartsick and weary in spirit; it might be in daily peril of death. It was at night—by day she could in a life of usefulness in a measure lose herself—at night, in the dead, dark, lonesome hours, that such thoughts would come upon her, and with an awful feeling of forsakenness, she would lie through the long, silent watches hardly able to sob out the bitter, voiceless anguish that overwhelmed her soul. And as yet, Time, the merciful healer, had brought little or no consolation. She would go about her daily avocations even cheerfully, always tender and thoughtful, smiling often, though as yet so sadly, for she would, as she had resolved to herself, live in the happiness of others. And the event which had kindled this resolve occurred very shortly after the death-blow to her own happiness.

One day Hicks and Laura, who had been taking a walk round the garden together, came in looking a little flurried, and the former at once and feverishly sought out his employer, whom he informed, with much stammering and bashfulness, that he had just proposed to and been accepted by Laura, and he trusted Mr Brathwaite would see no objection, etc, etc. The old man heard him out, and then mused for a moment in silence.

“H’m! You see, Hicks—you’ll have to wait a bit, but I don’t know that that’ll do you any harm,” he replied. “My brother George’ll be round here in a few days—but you did quite right to tell me at once—then you can speak to him yourself. I dare say he won’t object, and I’ll do what I can for you. Ever since you’ve been with me you’ve given me nothing but satisfaction in every respect, and I don’t forget it, my lad. You’ve learned your work well, and what’s better, you’ve done it well; go on as you’ve begun, and you’ll make your way. But, as I told you before, you’ll have to wait a bit.”

Hicks mumbled out a string of incoherent thanks, and wrung his employer’s hand.

“Ah, it’s a grand thing to be young and to have all one’s life before one,” said the old man, kindly. “Well, it’s nearly time to go and count—or perhaps I’d better do it. Your head will hardly hold such commonplace things as sheep this evening,” added he, with a good-natured laugh, as he turned away.

In great elation Hicks bolted off, and, not looking where he was going, collided against Lilian in the doorway, with such violence as nearly to upset her.

“Oh, Miss Strange. I beg your pardon! What a blundering ass I am! Have I hurt you?” he cried, in abject, remorseful consternation. “How confoundedly careless of me! Do forgive me?”

“I’m not in the least hurt, really,” answered Lilian, leaning against the chair, which she had just seized in time to save herself from falling. “But I’ll forgive you, only upon one condition,” she added, with a smile. “That you tell me what you are looking so ridiculously happy about.”

Hicks told her, there and then.

“I’m so glad,” Lilian said. “I congratulate you most truly. You will be very happy, and from what I have heard of you, you will deserve to be.”

Again Hicks mumbled something as he pressed the hand she extended to him, and passed on. Lilian gazed after him, and the tears rose to her eyes; but they were grateful, healing tears. “Thank God!” she murmured, “there is happiness left in the world for some people, and that is a sight good to look upon.” A warm glow crept round her heart—so stricken and desolate—and she felt that life might be worth living after all, to take part in the joys and sorrows of others. It was a turning-point, and the crisis was past; but, oh! the road was to be an uphill one upon whose thorny way the toiler would oft-times sink crushed and heartbroken. Then she had kissed and congratulated Laura, who, though outwardly very demure and reticent, yet felt thoroughly satisfied with her bargain.

Mr Brathwaite was as good as his word, and with such a powerful advocate Hicks’ suit was bound to prosper. George Brathwaite, an easy-going man in any matter wholly dissociated with politics, listened, and was convinced, as his brother put the case before him. Hicks was a quiet, steady, hard-working fellow, in fact, bound to make his way. He had a little stock of his own, and lately some money had been left him, not much, but enough to help him on a bit when he should set up for himself, and with a little help from them, would do well enough. He was good-tempered, and by no means a fool, and, in fact, Laura might have done worse. And Laura’s father thought the same, and the result was notified to the pair concerned. They must wait, of course, but the great thing was to have the consent of the authorities, and to know that it was a settled thing. But a thorn in the rose lay in the fact that in a couple of days or so George Brathwaite would take both his daughters away with him—that being the errand upon which he had come to Seringa Vale. However, they could write. A new experience to Hicks, by the way, who, with the exception of a stereotyped and brief letter home at rare intervals, seldom used the weapon mightier than the sword. But he would find plenty to say now, never fear.

“How I wish Claverton was back again,” Hicks had said to Laura, the day before she left. “Poor old Arthur. I suppose he’s started off on some mad expedition. The place won’t seem the same without him.”

“Won’t it? It would have been a good deal better for the place if it had always remained without him,” she retorted, rather bitterly.

He looked at her with surprise. “Why, Laura, what has he done? I thought you all liked him no end?”

“Yes, rather too much,” she rejoined, to herself—thinking of Ethel—but she only said: “Well, I don’t know why I said that. Never mind, Alfred, perhaps I’ll tell you what I mean, some day; perhaps I won’t; probably I won’t. Try and forget it now, at any rate. You will, won’t you?”

“On one condition,” replied Hicks, looking at her.

What that condition was need not be specified. Nor does it concern the thread of this narrative whether it was consented to or not.

Then the two girls had gone; and sorely did those left behind miss the bright young presences and the merry, jestful times which had prevailed, and the old farmhouse had settled down into the slumbrous quietude in which we first saw it that glowing August evening, the best part of a year back; and the events intervening had melted like a dream, for all the outward traces they had left. But a dream from which that pale, sad watcher, now gazing at the fire, would never awaken to life again.

Twice only had Claverton been heard of since he left. The first time he had written to Mrs Brathwaite explaining how nothing but the gravest reasons had induced him to leave thus suddenly—and more to the same effect; directing where his things were to be sent, and concluding with the sincerest expressions of appreciation and regard—and the old lady, who knew pretty well by that time how matters stood, had felt inclined to cry as she read it. The second letter, after an interval, was to Hicks, and bore the Durban postmark. The writer was going up-country, he said, far into the interior, to do a little shooting, and some knocking about. He wanted to be quite independent, so would go alone, with a nigger or two to carry the things and look after a spare horse. He didn’t want some cantankerous compatriot with him to worry his life out at every turn, not he. A few things had been left at Seringa Vale which Hicks might look after for him, and if he never came back could stick to—a horse, for instance, and some gimcrackery in the shape of riding-gear and one or two things. No doubt they’d clash again some of these days; if not, well, it would come all right in the end, he supposed, and life was not such a blissful thing, after all. It was not worth while answering this, concluded the writer, for he would be away on his travels almost before it had started.

And it is the crowd of memories and conjectures evoked by this letter which Lilian is pondering over this evening, alone in the firelight. A few days ago, Hicks had asked her if she would like to see it, as she was not in the room when he read out its contents. She had kept it ever since, and good-natured Hicks, noticing the light in her eyes, and the tremor of her hand as he gave it her, had “forgotten” to ask her for it again. She has read every word of it until she knows it by heart, and has conjured up many and many a picture of that lonely traveller, wandering on, mile after mile, far into that vast continent of which this locality was merely the outskirts. And it is her doing! She can “read between the lines” that time has brought no more healing to him than to herself, and, thinking over it this evening, one of those terrible paroxysms of woe is nearly upon her, and she half rises to leave the room when a step is heard in the passage, then the door opens and some one enters, whistling a lively tune which stops suddenly as the whistler becomes aware of her presence.

“That you, Miss Strange? Good evening; are you trying to read in the dark? By Jove, how cold it’s turned!” rattles on Hicks, rubbing his hands briskly, and kicking up the logs in the grate.

“Yes,” answered Lilian, for the diversion has called her back to herself. “And how the days are drawing in!”

“Rather! And cold? This morning, down there in Aasvogel Kloof, the ground was white with frost, and at eight o’clock, long after the sun was up, it was nipping cold. I had to keep changing my bridle-hand about every minute and a half, keeping one in my pocket till it got warm, you know; not that it did get warm even then, still it thawed a bit.”

“Fancy that. And yet there are people who would stare if you mentioned the word cold, in connection with Africa.”

“Yes, I know. ‘Afric’s sunny fountains,’ and all that kind of thing. The only ‘fountains’ we see here are after a jolly big rain, and then they’re not sunny, but precious muddy. Those poetic fellows do talk awful bosh.”

Lilian smiled. “Don’t try to be satirical, it doesn’t suit you at all,” she said. “And now tell me what have you been doing all day?”

“Oh, I went down and counted at Umgiswe’s. He’s a regular old humbug, and is always losing sheep. I’m certain he kills them. Don’t I wish I could catch him, that’s all. I thought I had, the other day. Anyhow, the *Baas* ought to give him the sack.”

“I shouldn’t have thought it. I thought he had such a nice old face, and he always says, ‘morning, missis,’ to me, so prettily, whenever he comes up here.”

“A bigger humbug than him couldn’t help doing that,” said Hicks, gallantly. “Well, then, I went on to Driscoll’s, to see if I couldn’t beat him down in what he asks for that place of his. He wants a great deal too much, the beggar does; far more than he offered it to Clav—” and then honest Hicks, suddenly remembering that this very place was the one Claverton had started to inspect on that day which, somehow, seemed connected with his abrupt departure and Lilian’s simultaneous depression, waxed very red in the face, and, bending over the fire, began stirring it and banging it about, as if he would pulverise the charred, smouldering faggots.

“And did you succeed?” asked Lilian, so quietly that he thought the reminiscence involved by the association of ideas had passed unnoticed by her.

“N-no,” replied Hicks. “But I think I’ll manage it in time. He’s a tight fist, is old Driscoll.”

“You will like settling in the old locality, I should think. You are not one of those who are always longing for change just for the sake of change.”

“No. In fact, as it is, I hardly like leaving the old place.”

“What—not even with Laura?” said Lilian, with a smile.

“Well, of course. But you know, when a fellow has been long on a place like this, and had such a rare good time of it, as I’ve had, he’s bound to cut up a little rough when it comes to leaving it, no matter how.”

“Naturally. But one must look forward—not back, unless it is for a pure, strengthening recollection. One might look longingly back from the rough, toilsome ascent of a steep hill into the sunlit, peaceful valley one had rested in behind; then to keep on and on till the ascent was conquered, and an easy road led smoothly down into another restful calm. That is how you must look at life, when things go the reverse of smoothly with you at first—as perhaps they will.”

Poor Lilian! Not yet could she realise this herself, and she knew it. Yet she laid it down in theory to her companion, for he had told her that he liked that sort of talk—that it did him good, in fact—and its remembrance encouraged him when he was inclined to take a gloomy view of things. They had become great friends, those two, thrown together thus by force of circumstances; and Lilian had never tired of listening to her companion’s hopes and fears, any more than he had ever tired of confiding them to her—it must be confessed, with something of wearisome reiteration, the more so that he had found so gentle and sympathetic a listener.

“But I forgot. I must not talk like that, or you will say I’m getting poetic; and ‘those poetic fellows do talk awful bosh,’” concluded Lilian, looking up at him with a bright, arch smile.

“Oh, I say! As if I should think anything of the kind!” exclaimed Hicks. “It was I who was talking nonsense. I suppose the firelight makes a fellow get sentimental. The firelight in winter is pretty much what the moonlight is in summer, I suppose.”

But the sentimental side of this firelight talk was brought to an end by the entrance of Mr Brathwaite, followed almost immediately by that of his wife.

“Sharp evening!” he said, joining the two on the hearth. “We must expect winter now, at the end of May; and this year it’ll be a cold one. I see there’s a little snow on the mountains already—just a sprinkling.”

“When shall we have a good fall?” asked Lilian. “The mountains must look perfectly beautiful, all covered, and with such a sun as this upon them. It must be very cold up there.”

“Cold? I believe you. I was nearly frozen to death up there myself once. It was some years ago now. I was coming over the Katberg road with a waggon-load of mealies—I and Ben Jackson. He had three waggons. We were caught in a snowstorm, and had to outspan. Couldn’t see ten yards in front of us. Ten yards! Not one; for the wind whirled the powdery stuff into our eyes till we were nearly blinded. It was no joke, I can tell you. There are some lively *krantzes* about there; and it’s the easiest thing in the world to drop a few hundred feet before you know where you are.”

“And how did you manage?”

“Well, we outspanned, and tied the oxen to the yokes. We couldn’t make a fire, so we turned into our blankets and piled up everything in the way of covering; but that wasn’t enough, and I was quite frozen. Nothing to eat all the time, except a bit of frozen bread to gnaw at. One of my Kafirs was nearly dead, and thirteen out of sixteen oxen died from cold and starvation. Ben was more unlucky still, and lost two whole spans. Yes, that was a time!”

Then came the lamp and supper.

“You were asking when we should have a good fall?” went on Mr Brathwaite. “The first rains we get here will leave the mountains white as a sugarloaf down to their very foot.”

Thus, with many an anecdote and reminiscence, the evening wore on. Eventually the lights were extinguished in the slumbering house, one by one, till all was dark and silent. And shining upon upland and valley, and upon homestead and fold, cleaving the frosty sky with a broad path of pale incandescence, gleamed the Milky Way, with many a brilliant constellation flashing around its track. Hour follows upon hour, but the calm influences of the peaceful night bring no relief to that broken-hearted woman lying there with her face buried in the pillows, sorrowing as one who is without hope. And every now and then a great anguished sob shook the prostrate form, for a very torrent of long-pent-up grief had come over her this evening, fresh and poignant as on that terrible day when the glories of the radiant summer world were as staring mockeries.

Lilian rose and threw open the door. The cool night air flowed in refreshing waves upon her burning brow, and, oh! how solemnly the golden stars twinkled in the far blue vault as though the eyes of their Creator Himself were visibly looking down upon her woe.

“Come back to me, darling!” she wailed, her brimming eyes fixed on the cold, star-spangled sky. “Only come back. Ah, love! I sent you away from me, drove you away with hard, cruel, bitter words, and now my heart is breaking—breaking. My life is done. I killed it when I sent you away.”

A ghostly beam streamed in through the open casement. Above hung the pointed moon, pale, glassy, and cold.

“My life, my love, come back!” she continued, sinking into a chair by the window, with her hands tightly locked, in the extremity of her anguish. “Come back, and we will never part again, never. I will abjure my word, which I have pledged by a dying bed. I will risk everything. We will never, never part again, no, not for an hour. Only come back. Oh! What am I saying? I shall never see you again. Perhaps even now you are—dead, and it is I who killed you. Ah, love, my heart is broken! If you are not in life, come and look at me in death—in pale, cold, still death—and take me with you. Only let me look upon you once more!”

The moonbeam crept further along the polished floor, and a puff of air entered. Ah! What was that? Was it a voice—a name—faint, dreamy, more felt than heard—a voice from the awesome, mysterious spirit world? Quickly Lilian raised her head.

“I thought you would come to me, darling,” she murmured, in low, firm tones, as though she had nerved herself for an effort. “I thought you would come to me, even though dead. But let me see you! I can hear your voice. I can hear you call me, once, twice. But, oh! let me see you. Ah—!”

She sat upright and rigid, gazing in front of her. For a form floated upon the shadowy moonlight, seeming to rest everywhere, yet nowhere. And the features of the recumbent figure she knew too well—pale, haggard, and drawn as they were.

“Ah, come to me, my love, my life!” she wailed, stretching out her arms in wild entreaty, but the apparition vanished. She rushed to the open window. Only the eyes of a myriad gleaming stars met hers, and a filmy dark cloud passed over the moon, veiling it for a moment.

“I have seen his spirit,” she exclaimed, passionately, her eyes fixed upon the dim horizon. “I have seen him, but he is gone. Ah, Christ! Thou hast a tender and a pitying heart. Let me see my love again—my sweet lost love!”

Look out into the still night, Lilian. Fix your eyes upon those distant mountain-tops, and then can your gaze travel many hundreds of miles beyond them, you may see—what it is better that you should not see.

Far away on the wild border of Northern Matabililand, night draws on. In one of a group of neat, circular kraals lying in a hollow between two great mountains, it is evident that something momentous has either happened or is going to happen this evening, for the chief men are standing together in a knot, talking in low tones and with an anxious look upon their grave, dignified faces. From the eastward, a mighty black cloud is rolling up along the rugged, iron-girded heights, and upon the fitful gusts is borne, ever and anon, a low, heavy boom. Down the mountain paths the cattle are wending, the shrill whoop of the children driving them, sounding loud and near, while the chatter of two or three withered crones, gossiping outside one of the domed huts, is strangely, distinct in the brooding atmosphere, hushed as it is before the gathering storm. The shades deepen, and the red fires twinkle out one by one in the gloaming; but still the men keep on their earnest discussion.

“He will die,” one of them is saying. “It will bring us ill-luck. The king, when he hears of it, will visit it upon us—he wants to stand well just now with the whites. And if this stranger dies here, he will say it is our fault. Haow!”

And, with true savage philosophy, the speaker and his auditors refresh themselves with a huge pinch of snuff.

“There is a white man living away beyond Intaba Nkulu,” says another. “He might be able to do something to save the stranger.”

“No, he is only a trader—not a medicine-man,” exclaim two or three more, simultaneously.

A flash; a peal of thunder, loud and long, and one or two large drops of rain. The Matabili start, look upward, and adjourn to carry on their discussion inside a hut; but they are soon interrupted by the entrance of a young Natal native, who, with anxiety and fear on his countenance, cries:

“Mgcekweni—Sikoto—come quick and look. My chief is dying.”

With a hurried exclamation the two addressed rise, and, following the speaker, stoop and enter an adjoining hut. Lying on some native blankets on the floor, is the form of a man—an Englishman. A rolled-up mat serves him for a pillow, and he lies tossing about in the wild throes of fever. A saddle and bridle, a waterproof cloak, a gun, and one or two small things are scattered around; a bit of candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, throwing a ghastly flickering light upon the whole, and making the cockroaches which swarm in the thatch, glisten like scales.

“Water, water,” moans the sick man, throwing his arms wildly out of bed.

“*Aow! Manzi*!” murmur the two Matabili, not understanding, but with ready wit guessing the burden of his cry, and simultaneously making a move towards the earthen bowl containing the desired fluid.

But the young native was before them, and, motioning one of them to raise him, he held the bowl to his master’s lips.

“Ah-h-h,” exclaimed the dying man, falling back with a relieved sigh, and lying with closed eyes. Then he started again. “Where is it?” he cried, his fingers clutching spasmodically at something in his breast, which he drew out and held tightly clasped in his hand. “Lilian—Lilian—It died with me. Your writing—the only thing I have left of you—Lilian—!” He paused a moment, breathless.

Then he sprang up raving. “Sam! Sam! Where are you, you damned rascal? Sam; do you hear? Go and tell her—find Lilian,” and then as if the beloved name calmed and soothed him, he sank back with a quiet smile.

“What does he say?” asked the two Matabili of each other. “Liliáne—Liliáne. Aow! That must be the name of the white man’s God.” And they repeated the name over and over to themselves, so as to remember exactly what the stranger had said, when they should report the matter to their king.

He had come there, this stranger, but a few days previously, he and his native attendant. He had come alone, travelling through their land, as he said, on his way far, far into the interior beyond, and had stayed with them, living as they lived, talking with them a little, but usually grave, taciturn, and sad. He would wander about all day in the mountains with his double gun, bringing back game at night, buck or birds, which he shared freely with them, and now he had become ill; no doubt caught the malaria while lying out all night down by the river, trying to get a shot at the lion, whose spoor had been seen by a boy who was wandering on its banks, and who had fled terrified at the sight of the great round pads in the sand. And Mgcekweni, the petty chief of the neighbourhood, was in sore perplexity about this stranger lying at the point of death within their gates; and over and above the fear that his royal master, with all the unreasoning caprice of a despot, would hold him and his responsible, he had a genuine liking for the white man—the grave, quiet traveller, whom he had at once set down as a big “*Inkoa*” among his own people.

Crash!

The thunder pealed without; a vivid blaze of lightning lit up the interior of the hut, leaving it more gloomy than before in its semi-darkness; the rain poured in torrents, lashing up the hard earth outside, and there, in the weird light, stood the tall, erect forms of the Matabili chief and his brother, conversing in subdued whispers, and with a world of concern clouding their dark, expressive faces. Kneeling beside his master, intently watching every change of his countenance, crouched the native boy, Sam. Again the thunder crashed and roared, and the scathing blaze darted through the pouring rainfall which hurled itself to the earth with a deafening rush; and amid the fierce warring of the elements let loose the wanderer lay dying. Yes, dying. Alone in a barbarous hut, racked with fever; tossing on a rude couch, almost on the bare earth; far from friendly or loving glance or touch; not even a countryman within hundreds of miles; alone in that gloomy apartment, the cockroaches chasing each other along the wattles of the thatch overhead, and tall, savage warriors watching his failing moments in wondering, half-superstitious concern. Thus he lay.

Suddenly he raised himself and sat upright.

“Lilian! Lilian!” he cried, in a voice so loud and clear that it startled his savage auditors. “Ah, I *will* see you,” he went on, his eyes dilating and fixed on the opposite wall as if to pierce through it and all space.

“I *will* see you—and I can. I see you here, now, here beside me. Are you going with me? Keep those sweet eyes upon mine, as they are now, darling—ever—ever—ever.”

His voice sank, and with a glad smile he fell back and lay perfectly still, and without the faintest movement.

“He is dead!” exclaimed the savages, holding their breath.

Precisely at that moment Lilian Strange was uttering her passionate, despairing invocation, as she gazed through her open casement far into the clear, starry night.

The day broke upon Seringa Vale, and the rain gusts howled along the wind-swept wastes—violent, biting, and chill. But by noon there was not a cloud in the heavens, and Lilian had her wish, for the mountains were thickly covered with snow to their very base. And as she gazed upon the distant peaks starting forth from the blue sky, spotless and dazzling in their whiteness, it seemed to her that they might be a meet embodiment of her own frozen despair—ever the same—icebound sight and day—through calm and through storm.

And the sun shone down upon the land in his undimmed glory, plenty and prosperity reigned everywhere; not a whisper of war or disturbance was in the air, indeed, all such had died away as completely as if it had never been. And the hearts of the dwellers on the frontier were glad within them—for the red tide, once threatening, had been stayed, and upon their borders rested, in all its fulness, the blessing of Peace.

Part II.

Once where Amatola mountains rise up purple to the snow,
Where the forests hide the fountains,
And green pastures sleep below—
Sweeter far than song of battle,
On the breezes of the morn,
Came the lowing of our cattle
And the rustling of our corn.
Where our flocks and herds were feeding
Now the white man’s homestead stands;
And while yet his sword lies bleeding,
Lo, his plough is in new lands.

Lament of Tyala—Anon.

Volume Two—Chapter One.

“Is it Peace or War? Better War.”

George Payne rode slowly away from the village of Komgha.

The air was warm and balmy, for the time of the southern winter was past, and on this September day not even the lightest of feathery clouds flecked the sky above the sunny plains of British Kaffraria. Now and again on the brow of one of the rolling eminences, which, smooth grassy, and round, alternated with mimosa-dotted vales, the rider might feel a puff of fresh air from the bine Indian Ocean thirty miles away, and which he was leaving further and further behind him with every tread of his steed. On his left front rose the round tops of the Kabousie hills, while beyond them a ridge of wooded heights slept in the golden haze of the early afternoon.

But he had little thought to spare for beauties of scenery, had this man, as he mechanically urged on his steed—a compact, well-stepping roadster—now at a long easy canter, now subsiding into a fast walk; for all his reflections were at that moment concentrated on the leading question of the day, a question which for weeks past had been in the mind of every dweller on that restless line of frontier, a question which to them was fraught with weighty apprehension—Peace or War?

And this topic, which was in everybody’s month, had it any foundation to rest upon, or was it merely a recurrence of one of those periodical scares which, with more or less reason, had of late years seriously disturbed the border districts? Ministers and legislators might, from their places in the Assembly, deny all grounds for it; merchants and snug citizens of the western capital might deride it; the pseudo-philanthropic party, likewise at safe distance, might decry it as a libel upon and a plot against the native population, to despoil them of their lands, and what not. Yet Cape Town was many hundred miles from the unprotected border, and it is so very easy at a safe distance to ridicule the apprehensions of those to whom the fulfilment of their fears would mean ruin and death. For ignore it as some would, the fact remained that a cloud, at first no bigger than a man’s hand, but already of sufficiently alarming proportions, was gathering beyond the Kei, to roll on and on till it should overwhelm all within reach—unless stopped in time, that is. And such check the country’s rulers apparently deemed it their special mission not to facilitate.

This, then, was the topic whereon George Payne’s thoughts were fixed as he rode over those grassy Kaffrarian plains in the direction of his home; and some additional rumours which he had heard that morning, had gone far towards seriously disquieting him.

He was a broad-shouldered, strongly-built man, about five feet ten in his shoes, though a slight stoop made him look shorter. He had a quiet, sensible face, and was sparing and deliberate of speech; this on first acquaintance might lead one to pronounce him “slow,” were it not for an occasional satiric burst, accompanied by a twinkle in the keen grey eyes, which alone would suffice to show that he was very far from being a fool. And, though quiet and reserved on first acquaintance, he had a sunny geniality of manner which was very taking—in fact, was as good-natured a fellow as ever lived. He was thirty-six years of age, and of colonial birth; and though he had made a couple of visits to the mother country he seldom spoke of it. When he did, his audience, who had settled in its own mind that he had never been out of the colony, would be mightily taken aback by his shrewd insight into men and things.

Around lay the broad, rolling country; here and there in the distance might be seen the white walls of a homestead or two, glistening in the sun; or a clump of Kafir huts, smoky, squalid-looking, and tumble-down, lay about, whence a tribe of yelling mongrels rushed clamouring down to the path to mouth at the equestrian and snap at his horse’s heels, while their owners stood, with kerries grasped in their dark, sinewy hands, scowling at the passer-by, and making no attempt to call off their detestable property. But the horseman cared little or nothing for this. If the four-footed pests came too near, he slashed them unmercifully with his long raw-hide whip, sending them howling back to their savage masters. At length he drew rein before a thatched, white-washed dwelling, a typical specimen of the rougher class of frontier farmhouse. A man came out—a tall man, clad in a grey flannel shirt and corduroy trousers; a slouch hat was stuck on one side of his head, a mighty red heard descended over his chest, and in his mouth was a short wooden pipe.

“Well, Marshall,” cried Payne, dismounting. “How’s the world been using you of late?”

“So so,” replied the other, shaking hands. “Where are you from?”

“Komgha.”

“Any news?”

“N-no. Nothing but ‘gas,’ in fact. One gets so sick of all the yarns that have been flying about that really one doesn’t know what to believe. I’ve got into the way of believing nothing.”

“Ah. Well, now, I think there’s something in them. And I’ll tell you what it is, Payne. If I were a married man like you I’d send my family away to King (King Williamstown. The chief town of British Kaffraria, commonly thus abbreviated) or somewhere, for depend upon it we shall have hot work here before long. They’re not safe out there at your place, I tell you.”

Payne laughed lightly. “Why, Marshall,” he said, “if you’re not becoming as great an old scare-monger as the rest! Oh, by the way, there was some news. It’s said that the new Governor’s coming up to the frontier.”

“Worse and worse—if it’s true. He wouldn’t be coming if there wasn’t good cause for it, I can tell you. What sort of a feller is he?”

“First-rate, from all accounts.”

“H’m. Did you hear anything else?”

“Two troops of police been ordered across the Kei.”

“Fat lot of good they’ll do,” growled Marshall. “A lot o’ greenhorns. Why, some of them can’t stick on their horses, and hardly know the butt from the muzzle of their carbines. The police are not what they used to be, since they’ve taken to getting out these raw chaps from England. Time was when the force was made up of good colonial men, who could ride and shoot, and follow spoor as easily as a waggon-road, and now—pooh!” And the speaker knocked the ashes out of his pipe with a contemptuous jerk.

“That’s all very well,” said Payne. “They may not be good for much at spoor, and there are a few greenhorns among them, as you say. But there are some fine fellows, too—fellows with any amount of fight in them—and, after all, that’s what we want now. You’ll see, they’ll do good service yet, if they get a fair chance.”

The other shook his head. “Dunno. But—have a drop of grog?”

“No, thanks; I must be moving on.”

“Won’t you, really? Do.”

“No, thanks. But I say, Marshall, when are you coming over our way? We haven’t seen you for about ten years. Come on Sunday.”

The other filled and lighted his pipe. “Well, the fact is, I’ve had a lot to do of late,” he replied at length, between sundry vigorous puffs. “And then, you see, I’m a rough sort of feller and haven’t got any company manners, and now you’ve got company. Perhaps, after all, I’m best here.”

“You surly old humbug,” said Payne, with a laugh, “I never heard such bosh. You come up on Sunday at latest, or we shall quarrel. Call yourself a neighbour, indeed! Now you’ll come, won’t you?”

“I’ll try.”

“All right, that’s settled. Ta-ta;” and mounting his horse Payne rode off.

Gradually the long smooth slopes became steeper, falling off into abrupt ravines, affording a glimpse of the Great Kei, which glided along, far down between its lofty banks—now winding round a smooth-headed knoll, now straightening as it washed the base of some huge wall of rock—a distant musical murmur being upborne upon the still air as it rushed over a stony shallow. From the far plains beyond, many a blue column of smoke rose into the sunshine, where dotted about lay the clustering kraals of the savage Gcalekas, whose hordes, even then, were gathering for the long-expected and somewhat dreaded inroad upon the peace of the colony. A bird sang in the thick thorn-protected brake adjoining the path, a white vulture or two soared lazily from one of the huge krantzes overhanging the river, insects hummed in the sunlight, and it seemed as if nothing but the savagery of man could avail to break the peaceful calm of that glorious scene, amid which Payne pursued his way wrapped in uneasy thought; for in spite of his sceptical tone when talking to Marshall he felt by no means the assurance that he would have had that worthy believe.

His horse suddenly pricked up its ears as the sound of deep voices immediately in front became audible, and in a moment three tall, savage-looking Kafirs, their athletic bodies smeared from head to foot with red ochre, advanced down the path at a run, swinging their kerries.

Now the said path was, just there, only wide enough for a single horseman, being shut in on either side by high thorn-bushes, and Payne naturally expected the pedestrians to make way for him. They, however, had no such intention, and his steed began to show signs of terror at the sudden appearance of the brawny, ochre-smeared barbarians, with their gleaming necklaces of jackal’s teeth rattling as they advanced.

“Out of the way, you vagabonds,” shouted Payne, angrily. “Out of the road; d’you hear?” and he raised his whip menacingly.

“Aow! Out of the way yourself, *umlüngu*!” (white man) insolently replied the foremost Kafir in his great deep tones, at the same time seizing the bridle and trying to jerk the horse’s head round. “We won’t get out of the way for you.”

Payne’s whip descended, the lash curling with an angry “swish” round the naked body of the speaker.

“Take that, you hound!” he cried. “And now let go.” And he clubbed his whip to strike with the heavy loaded end.

“Haoo-ow! Hah!” roared the savage, dropping the bridle and stepping back a pace or two, while the lurid lightnings of wild-beast wrath shot from his eyes. Then he sprang at Payne like a tiger-cat, aiming a sledge-hammer blow at him with his heavy stick.

Fortunately for Payne he managed to throw up his arm in time to save his head, or he would have fallen to the ground, brained by the terrific force of the blow. Fortunately, too, for him, his adversaries carried no assegais, or he would there and then have been stabbed through and through and his body flung over the adjacent cliff into the Kei, for he need expect no mercy from such foes. The land was almost in a state of war, and brutal outrages of this kind were only too terribly common. He made a furious blow at his opponent with the butt of his whip, but ineffectively, for at the moment of striking he felt himself seized by a powerful hand and dragged from his horse, which backed into the bushes terrified and snorting. Then nearly stunned by the fall he lay upon the ground, and the sky and earth and foliage all went round in one giddy, sickening whirl, and still he could see the gigantic figure of the savage, who, with glaring eyes and white gleaming teeth, was advancing upon him with kerrie upraised to strike, and he lay there, powerless even to avoid the blow. In a second it would fall, when—woof! something descended through the air, a large dark object darted between him and the sky, and his enemy fell heavily to the earth. He heard the clash of kerries in strike and parry, a fierce imprecation, and the ring of a pistol-shot; then he knew no more till he awoke to consciousness with some one bending over him and fanning his brow.

“Don’t move,” said the stranger. “Take it easy a little longer, and then you’ll feel better.”

Payne looked wonderingly at the dark sun-browned face bent over him, with the calm, resolute, blue-grey eyes and clear-cut features, and it seemed to him that he had seen the owner of it before.

“Oh, I feel all right now,” he said, raising himself upon one elbow and then sitting up. “A little muddled, you know, that’s all.”

“I venture to say that our friend here, feels ‘a little muddled,’” remarked the other, pushing with his foot the form of a prostrate Kafir.

Payne stood up, rather giddily, and recognised his assailant in the inert, motionless mass.

“I say, though, but the brute isn’t dead?” he said, with just a tinge of concern, bending over the fallen savage.

“He isn’t dead. A stirrup-iron properly handled is a grand weapon; but Kafir skulls are notoriously thick. The chances are a hundred to one, though, that yours would have been split at this moment, had that individual carried out his amiable little programme just then.”

“Of course—I was forgetting. You saved my life. Why, what an ungracious dog you must think me!”

“And I could have dropped the other two so nicely in their tracks,” continued the stranger, as if he had not heard Payne’s remark. “They both came at me with their kerries; but directly they saw this,”—producing a revolver—“off they went. I wanted to fell another chap, so I didn’t trot out the barker at first, till they began to think they had it all their own way, and pressed me so hard that I was obliged to. Lord, how they streaked it off!”

“But you did let drive, didn’t you? At least, I thought I heard a shot.”

“Yes, I did. Couldn’t resist the temptation; but just at the moment it flashed across me how infernally near civilisation we were, and it’s a ticklish moment just now. The authorities would think nothing of running us in and making scapegoats of us, swearing we had brought on the war, you know, or something of that sort. So I just blazed over the fellow’s head, to give him a bit of a scare, otherwise I could have dropped the pair of them—oh, so sweetly! But how did it all happen?”

Payne told him.

“H’m,” said the other, reflectively. “We could run this fellow over to the gaol if that would be any satisfaction to you, and if you cared to go through the bother. But then, unfortunately, you struck the first blow, as you couldn’t have helped doing—and the result would have been the same in any case—and the chances are some pettifogging attorney, or meddling missionary, would take up the scoundrel’s case and turn the tables on you. So that’s out of the question.”

“Shall we bring him to?” asked Payne.

“A few slashes of your whip would do it if you’re anxious on his account; if not, let him lie.”

“Poor devil, he seems to be in bad order,” said Payne, inspecting his late foe, who lay with the crown of his head cut and bleeding, exactly as he had fallen beneath the blow of the stirrup-iron, and breathing heavily. “I’ll take his kerries as a trophy, anyhow.” Moved by a sudden impulse, he glanced narrowly at the stranger, a man of apparently about his own age, or not far from it; and it still seemed to him that the dark, handsome face, and determined eyes, no less than the rather mournful ring in the quiet voice, were familiar to him.

“Well, then, we’ll be moving,” continued Payne. “My place isn’t far from here, and of course you are going with me. Don’t say no, for I insist upon it.”

There came an amused gleam into the other’s eyes, and he stroked his long, brown moustache once or twice to conceal a smile. “There’s no need to insist,” he said, “because it so happens that that was my original intention. The first thing I meant to ask you, when you came round, was the way to George Payne’s; but it would be rather superfluous to ask it of George Payne himself, wouldn’t it?”

“What! Why, good heavens! Who the deuce are you? We’ve met before somewhere, I’ll swear!” said Payne, looking at him in a puzzled manner.

The other broke into one of his long, quiet laughs, as if hugely enjoying the situation, as he steadily returned the puzzled, inquiring gaze. “Don’t you remember that refreshing row close to De Klerk—that time you were coming from the gold fields? Hang it, it wasn’t much more than two years ago!” Payne burst forth into a mighty expletive—a thing he very rarely did. “My dear fellow, this is a piece of luck! And I never recognised you! But you were bearded like the pard then, you know; and, another thing—my head must have been spinning round, for I felt an awful whack. Of course. So it is! Why, I ought to have recognised you by the neat-handed way in which you dropped that nigger, if by nothing else! That’s the second time you saved my hide,” and he seized the hand extended to him, in a mighty grip.

“Well, these niggers were tougher customers than those four swaggering Dutchmen, when all’s said and done. I haven’t been in a good honest row for a long while. It does one good.”

Mounting their horses they moved off, taking a farewell glance at the place where the fallen savage still lay at full length, though he began to show signs of returning consciousness. And the still sunshine glowed in all its former calmness, as though no fierce and deadly struggle had just occurred to mar its peace.

Volume Two—Chapter Two.

Ralph Truscott’s Quest.

On the same day that these events are occurring on the far Kaffrarian border, two men are seated together in a dingy office just out of Chancery Lane. One is a solicitor, evidently the presiding genius of the place—a man with a high, bald forehead, iron-grey hair, and a keen, intellectual face; the other is a tall, dark, military-looking man, faultlessly attired, who sits impatiently tapping his boots with his cane while he listens to the lawyer in a half-incredulous and wholly discontented frame of mind, which betrays itself only too plainly in his eyes. A striking-looking man, in age about five-and-thirty; but there is an unmistakable air of dissipation, not to say excess, about the lines of the handsome face—the air of one who had lived too hard and too fast, and would be prematurely old. And a superciliousness about the mouth which the short black moustache did not conceal, and a cold, unscrupulous look in the eyes, would effectually prevent the face from ever being a pleasing one.

Ralph Truscott, late Captain in Her Majesty’s —th Foot, was a firm believer in the adage, “All’s fair in love and war”—in the former half of it literally, as more than one rather shady episode in his gallant career might serve to show, were it known, which it was not, even within his intimate circle; in the latter half as representing the multifold ’cute devices whereby he had staved off and otherwise evaded the just or unjust demands of a swarm of importunate creditors, Jew and Gentile. In a word, the man was a born spendthrift; and having run through one large fortune, and a second smaller one, in an incredibly short space of time, found himself compelled to sell, and had been living upon his wits and high play ever since. Not that he had degenerated into a mere card-room sharper—far from it—but he was noted as a man with an extraordinary run of luck; and though some held significantly aloof from him in connection with the card-table or the billiard-room, yet, on the whole, he had not lost caste. Of course it had occurred to him that he might retrieve his fallen fortunes by picking up an heiress. It ought not to be difficult, for he was just the sort of individual who, gifted with a striking exterior and unlimited assurance, might carry things pretty much as he pleased among the society women of his—or of any—set. But this course was open to two objections. One lay in his own inner consciousness, which made him fully aware that in three years, at the outside, he would inevitably have run through the lady’s fortune, in which case he would find himself again destitute, and saddled with a wife to boot; the other, in the fact that though heiresses themselves might be soft of heart and compliant of head, their parents or guardians were not. Indeed, some of these, in the obduracy of their stony hearts, had been known to veto the transaction forthwith; while others, after a few private inquiries into the circumstances and antecedents of this enterprising individual, had briefly refused to entertain any of his proposals, and had carried off their charges out of harm’s way. So, Captain Ralph, repeatedly thwarted in his schemes of advancement, was compelled perforce to abandon them. He consoled himself, however, with the thought that after all it was better to be a free man, even if living was somewhat precarious, and gave up laying siege to the fair sex, with an eye to the main chance. But meanwhile his liabilities decreased not, and at the time the reader has the honour of making his acquaintance, he was, to use his own expression, “at his last kick” for want of the needful.

Such was the man who now sat in the inner office of Messrs Grantham and Grantham, solicitors, in close confabulation with the senior partner.

“Then you can give me no more positive information?” he was saying.

“I’m sorry to say we can’t,” replied the lawyer. “The young lady left England more than four years ago—went to the Cape, I believe, as governess or companion, or something or other in that line. Since then we have heard nothing of her.”

"Do you think she is out there still?"

"My dear sir, it is impossible for us to say. I repeat that it was more than four years ago, and that we have not heard one word of her since."

"Well, I am surprised that you, of all people, should be so blankly ignorant of her whereabouts, considering that it might be necessary to communi—" He checked himself hurriedly, seeing that he had let out too much. "I mean—that her friends might be making inquiries after her."

The faintest possible smile lurked round the corners of the lawyer's mouth. He fancied that the other had let down his guard in that incautious speech into which vexation had betrayed him. And it was even so.

"You are very interested in this lady's whereabouts," he said.

"Naturally. We are relations—distant relations, that is."

"Indeed! How, may I ask?"

"Well, you know—hang it all, I'm a deuced bad hand at pedigrees and all that sort of thing, but we are, in a way, cousins, on the mother's side," replied Truscott, testily, in a sort of tone which resented the doubt thrown upon his statement by the other's inquisitiveness.

"I see," said the lawyer, balancing a paper-cutter upon his forefinger. But though his features preserved their polite imperturbability, the fact was, he did not believe one word of this statement. "Let me see, though," he went on, musingly; "I know who might be able to give you some information."

"Who?" asked Truscott, eagerly looking up.

"Miss Dynevard, of Dynevard Chase. She, you are aware, is Miss Strange's stepsister."

The other's countenance fell. He was more disappointed than he cared to say. Eveline Dynevard was the last person he could communicate with on the subject.

"Er—yes; of course," he said, hurriedly. "I had forgotten. I will write to Miss Dynevard."

"Can I make the inquiry for you?" asked the lawyer, politely.

"No—no, thanks. I needn't trouble you further. Much obliged; good morning," and taking up his hat Truscott made his way out into the street.

The lawyer went to the window and watched him turn the dingy corner. "John," he said to his brother and junior partner, who at that moment entered. "You saw that chap who just went out from here. He's got an inkling of the contents of old Dynevard's will. I read him like a book as he sat there, clumsily trying to fish out the whereabouts of Miss Strange."

"H'm! Has he?" grunted John Grantham, who was the greatest possible contrast to his more astute brother, in that he was short, red-faced, and irritable. "He didn't succeed, I hope?"

"No. I couldn't have told him if I had wanted to, for the simple reason that I don't know. But he says he's her cousin."

"Hanky-panky," replied the other, with a contemptuous snort. "I don't believe a word of it. It's easy to see what he's after. And it would be a bad day for Lilian Strange, or indeed for any other pretty girl, when that rascal got making up to her. I know Master Ralph Truscott and his goings on, a good deal better than he thinks."

"Well, it's my opinion that the young lady's married long ago. An attractive girl like that is sure to be able to pick and choose in a country where gentlewomen are scarce, I should imagine."

"Bless my soul—yes," assented the other, changing his coat, and brushing his hat, preparatory to a start for home. "And the sooner friend Truscott goes to the devil, the better for society at large; he's going there as fast as he can, as it is."

Meanwhile, the subject of this charitable remark was seated in a hansom with his face turned westward.

"That damned lawyer was lying," he mused, "lying all the time. I could see it in his face, and it's those chaps' trade to lie. He could have told me if he had chosen. Never mind, I'll be even with him yet. I'll go to the Cape; by Jove, I will, and at once; the sooner the better, and this place is getting too hot for me just now. A few months of travel and sport, and it'll cool down again, and then, if I find the fair Lilian—Find her? I must find her, and I will." Then a suggestion, which Mr Grantham had thrown out, crossed his mind, and he turned hot and cold over the idea.

"I think it not improbable that we might have to seek for her under another name," the lawyer had said. "Miss Strange, you are aware, was a young lady of considerable attractions. She may have married."

"No, she will not," repeated Truscott to himself, "I know her better than that. Unless—I don't know. Time works queer changes. What a fool I was ever to let her out of my sight! And yet how could I tell that she would ever be worth keeping in it? It was the merest fluke that took me to Doctors' Commons this morning, and a still greater one that moved me to look at old Dynevard's will. I'll go out and look for her, the game's worth the candle, and, by George, if I win—and why shouldn't I? She will almost throw herself into my arms, if only as a contrast to the Kafirs and Boers she is living amongst. Then I'll turn over a new leaf. I could with Lilian, almost, I think. I never saw any woman to come up to her, unless it was—well, never mind. Yes, my luck is on the turn. Nearly six years ago, though. I wonder what she's like now."

He chuckled gleefully to himself as he leaned back in the cab and lighted a cigar. Then a thought struck him, and opening the trap in the roof he shouted a direction to the driver. The man turned his horse's head and in a moment was speeding away Citywards. Somehow, the reader has already seen the dusty office-door before which Truscott leaped out of his cab, as also the sharp boy who opened it.

"Is your master in?"

The boy nodded and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Quickly mounting the stairs Truscott found himself in the same dingy apartment wherein Claverton had sat, several years previously.

"Hullo, where's Morkum?" he asked, disappointedly.

"He is out for de day, sair," replied the occupant of the room, a hook-nosed son of Benjamin, rising from the table at which he was seated, and washing his hands with invisible soap, a process they greatly needed with the material article. "Can I not do anydings for you?"

"Yes, you can, Schultz," said the other, in a conciliatory tone. "The fact is, I want to renew."

The Jew looked keenly at him, and his little eyes twinkled maliciously.

"I can't do it, sair. De monish, you see, must be paid. It is over-due—over-due."

"What's the amount now?"

"Fifteen hundred and twenty-fife—six," answered Schultz, having duly consulted a ponderous tome bound in leather.

"The devil! Now look here, Schultz. We'll renew, say for three months, and you shall let me have the odd five hundred on your own terms."

"No, sair. Mishter Morkum he said he cood not renew. I was haf de monish or—" and the speaker shrugged his shoulders in a way that was highly suggestive.

"But don't you see, Schultz, I must renew, at any rate," said the other, angrily. "Don't be a damned fool now. I'm on a good thing, I tell you, and you shall be paid in full in a few months' time. Don't you see?"

But the Israelite apparently did not see. He was as obdurate towards this Gentile, as the Egyptian Gentile had erewhile been towards his own ancestors. He only shrugged his shoulders and repeated: "Mishter Morkum, he say I was haf de monish. Fifteen hundred and twenty-fife—six."

Then Truscott saw that it was useless, and, unfortunately for him, his temper got the better of him. He raved, and swore, and shook his fist under the other's nose, threatening him with swift and sudden annihilation, and abusing him and his partner in a torrent of the coarsest invective he could lay tongue to. But of his violence the little Jew was not one whit afraid, for his hand was in his coat-pocket and his fingers were grasping the butt of a revolver. His wicked little eyes sparkled like those of a rhinoceros, and the short grey bristles stood up upon his upper lip, as he turned upon Truscott in wrath.

"Hein! Vat do you shay? You shall not bully me, I can tell you dat much. You call yourself a shentelman, inteed? Yesh, you shall repent of this, ven you are in shail, dat's vere you shall be. If you come a step nearer, I shall shoot you," he went on, producing his weapon, for Truscott in another minute would have seized him by the throat and dashed him to the floor. But a bullet-wound would in no wise facilitate the success of his enterprise, if the result were no worse, and this he had the sense to see in a glimmering of reason which flashed in upon his rage. So he stopped, and, shaking his fist at the Jew, rushed from the room with a final curse—the parting epithet and scornful laugh flung after him by that worthy in no wise tending to allay his ire.

"Say, sonny," remarked the cabman to the smart boy at the door. "The Kernel's dustin' your guv'nor's jacket, ain't he?" For the row going on upstairs was in a measure audible in the street.

"Reckon he'll be the fust what's done it—and the last," replied the imp, pulling a handful of nuts from his breeches-pocket, and proceeding to crack them. Then Truscott emerged, and, flinging himself into the cab, started off westward.

"What a fool I was to get in a rage with the brute!" he thought, bitterly. "An utter fool! Now I've about done for myself, unless I can get away at once. I'm starting on a fool's errand, though. Six years—or even five; it's a long time. She may laugh in my face even if I find her; and then again—Hang it! I'll just have another look at the will to make sure. No; it's right enough, though. Still, I'm starting off on a regular fool's errand. I've a good mind to give it up—a devilish good mind. But nothing venture, nothing win."

The last ray of the sickly September sunlight was slanting garishly over the dust and whirl and roar of the great city, as he alighted at the steps of his club. Yes, a change would do him good, he thought, looking around; and when he came back, why, then—Somehow he felt certain of winning the game which he had set himself to play, and was quite elate. But the only thorn in his side—and a very sharp one it was—lay in the haunting fear lest the Jew should have him arrested before he could get away. And he could not get away for nearly a week. He would go down in the morning and see Morkum himself, and make it all right with that dirty little Schultz. Morkum was a reasonable fellow, and would be sure to renew, if not to accommodate him further, once an inkling of the case was laid before him; and as for Schultz, why, a bottle of champagne and a slap on the back would salve his wounded feelings.

With this comforting resolve, Truscott dined sumptuously, and, in high good-humour, started off to a friendly rubber, at which he reckoned to make some nice little pickings. It was a fine evening—he would walk; so, lighting a cigar, he stepped out briskly, humming a popular tune, and thinking over his prospects if this move succeeded.

Before he had gone far, some one accosted him.

“Beg pardon, Capting. Sorry to trouble a gentleman—”

“What the devil do you want?” cried Truscott, angrily, an uncomfortable idea taking hold of him.

“I must arrest you, Capting, at the soot of Silas B. Morkum and Co,” replied the other, touching him on the shoulder. “Very sorry, sir, extremely sorry; but dooty is dooty—ain’t that right, Tom?”

“Tom,” a thin, quiet-looking individual, who might be anything, from a Russian spy to a Methodist class leader, nodded, and replied:

“That’s so, Bill.”

“But look here,” cried Truscott, “I’m going down to see Morkum the first thing in the morning. Can’t we make some arrangement for to-night? The fact is, I’ve got an important engagement now.”

The sheriff’s officer smiled pityingly.

“Extremely sorry, Capting, but the thing can’t be done. We’ll jest go quietly to my little crib now, and in the morning you can send and let your friends know. Here’s the writ; better look at it for yourself, Capting, and see that all’s fair, square, and above-board. Fifteen hundred and twenty-five—six. Cab, Tom.”

“Damn the writ!” cried Truscott, savagely.

And then, as they entered the rickety, jolting vehicle, he relapsed into silence. Fifteen hundred and twenty-five pounds! It might be fifteen million for all the chance there was of his being able to pay a third of it; for even he had at last come to the end of his tether. And no one would be likely to help him either; and this scheme, upon which he had been building such hopes, must fall through, for every day was of importance now. And all its glowing chances looked fairer than ever now that he was compelled to abandon it; and his bright castles in the air seemed crumbling away in the very dust. So, with rage and despair in his heart, Ralph Truscott alighted at the door of the low sponging-house—his prison; whither he was consigned at the suit of Silas B. Morkum and Co, and whence he should not depart until he had satisfied the debt to the very last farthing; a requirement which at present he saw remarkably small prospect of fulfilling.

Volume Two—Chapter Three.

The Friend in Need.

George Payne and his newly-found friend—a veritable friend in need upon this occasion even as on a former one—kept on their way, winding along the picturesque heights overlooking the Kei, and exchanging many a reminiscence of their past acquaintance.

“To think of your turning up like this,” said the former. “Why, I thought you were still away up in the interior and never meant to come near these parts again.”

“Well, I don’t know. Fact is, after a few years of wandering, one has pretty well done this not too interesting continent, at least the southern part of it; and now I’m thinking of going somewhere else.”

“And you’ve come straight down country, now?”

“Yes; ridden all the way. It would be inconvenient in some ways were it not that one is indifferent to the exigencies of civilisation after such a spell of savagery as I’ve been having. One can’t carry much baggage, for instance.”

“Is that all you’ve got?” said Payne, glancing at the valise strapped across the other’s saddle.

“Yes; I had the rest sent to Komgha. It’s a good way from your place, but we might pick it up if it was wanted.”

“Better leave it there at present.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s an even chance that we may all have to trek into laager there or somewhere, any day; and it’s safe there, at any rate.”

“Are things as fishy as that?”

“They are,” replied Payne. “A lot of the Dutchmen down towards the coast are already in laager; but they’re a white-livered lot, when all’s said and done, so that doesn’t mean much. Still, from one or two things I heard to-day, I should say that we shall have some tall rifle practice before long. I’m no alarmist; on the contrary, I’ve more than once been advised to send the wife and kids away to the town, but I don’t think there’s any occasion for that just yet.”

“No, perhaps not. And it’s as well to keep straight as long as you can. Directly one begins to trek, another does—then another—and soon there’s a regular panic.”

“Rather. Now there was a scare on in the year of the big flood, and a lot of fellows round here began laagering, and one heard such a lot of war shop talked, that one almost wished there was some reason for it. Well, I remained through it all. I had only just come up here then, and didn’t see the fun of leaving my place to run to wrack and ruin just as I had got it a little square and shipshape, so I stuck to it, and other fellows did the same; and we had the laugh of those who ran away in a funk.”

“That was a bad scare, though.”

“It was,” said Payne. “The niggers were quite as cheeky then as they are now, and you’ve just had a specimen of what that is. By the way, don’t mention that little scrimmage to the wife; she’s very susceptible to scare, as it is, and once she heard of that, life would be a burden to her whenever I was away from home. Lately, she’s done nothing but predict that I should come to grief.”

“All right. I’ll keep dark.”

“Here we are at last,” said Payne, as they entered a narrow gorge between two high hills, and emerging upon a sort of basin-like hollow, beheld a substantial-looking farmhouse. In front, a sweep of smooth sward sloping down to the dam, in whose still surface a cluster of willows lay mirrored, as they drooped their boughs to the water’s edge; around this a few strips of enclosed and cultivated land, and a fruit-garden bordered by high quince hedges. On either side of the hollow, just far enough apart for the place not to be “shut in,” rose green lofty heights, with here and there a clump of dark bush in their rifts and chasms; and two little streams of clear water met in the valley and dashed along past the homestead, sparkling as they joined their forces in a leaping, rushing rivulet—an invaluable boon in that land of drought. But it was not until one reached the house, which was situated on a slight eminence in the hollow, that the full charm of the situation became appreciable. Then, standing on the *stoep*, which ran round two sides of the building, on the one hand the Kei hills bounded the limit of vision; while on the other, focussed, as through a glass, between the double range of green heights narrowing as they stretched further and further away, a panorama of rolling bush country, with here and there a purple ridge rising in the sunny air, found its limit on the distant horizon. The house itself was a good specimen of the old-fashioned frontier abode, with its thatched roof and canvas ceilings. It had been added to by the present owner, and was fairly roomy and comfortable. A passage intersected it, on either side of which, a door opened into a sitting-room and dining-room respectively, while another door from the latter communicated with the continuation of the *stoep*, which ran round that side of the building. Such was Payne’s home—Fountain’s Gap—so called from the two streams which met and flowed through the beautiful hollow, at either end of which one looked out upon the country beyond as through a gap.

“So this is your crib,” remarked our new acquaintance, glancing critically around, as if to take in all the capabilities of the situation. “It strikes me as an uncommonly good one. Why, that stream alone ought to be a fortune to you.”

“Yes; it’s a good all-round place,” assented Payne, perceptibly gratified. “You see, I’ve got a good deal of land under cultivation here round the dam. I’m going to break up any amount more, and go in strong for agriculture, as soon as this confounded scare, or war, whichever it’s to be (and I don’t care which), is over. It’s of no use making a lot of improvements, only to be ravaged by these black devils—is it?”

“Not in the least.”

They were now skirting the stream, which here flowed past the dam, communicating with it by a runnel cut with spades.

“Let’s dismount here,” said Payne, “unless you’re tired, and would rather go in. You’re not? Well then, look. Here’s where I was thinking I might run up a mill one of these days; with this water power one might do anything. Higher up it’s even better. Wait, we’ll get rid of our horses and stroll along a bit,” and a stentorian call brought a young Kafir running down from the out-buildings, as also three or four rough, fierce-looking dogs in open-mouthed clamour. The latter were soon pacified, and leaped around their master in boisterous glee, wagging their tails and whining joyously as he patted them, or bestowed a playful punch upon some shaggy hide, while a precautionary sniff having satisfied them as to the stranger’s respectability, they forthwith took him into their confidence in a less mirthful and more dignified manner.

“Here, Booi,” went on Payne. “Take the horses up to the stable, and off-saddle them. Is the missis in?”

“Don’t know, Baas,” answered the Kafir, grinning.

“Don’t you? When did one of you fellows ever know anything? Now hook it,” and as the boy led away their steeds, the two strolled on, Payne pointing out the capabilities of his water advantages, and enlarging on his schemes of improvement; for this farm of his was his hobby, and in his heart of hearts he hoped some day to make it a model in the way of progress, as showing what might be done even there by a fellow with a little “go” in him.

They crossed the stream by a plank bridge, and now stood looking down it, scarcely, a hundred yards from the house, Payne still expatiating.

“Yes, with a place like this,” he said, “one ought to be able to do anything. It’s splendid pasturage, well situated, any amount of water, in fact, everything. And now comes this confounded war to upset the whole coach—Hullo!”

The exclamation is one of surprise and alarm as he turns round. His companion is standing rigid and motionless. Every particle of blood has fled from his face, leaving the sun-browned cheeks sallow and livid. His eyes are fixed and dilated, and one hand nervously grips the rail of the bridge against which he is leaning.

"Man alive—what's up?" cried Payne, anxiously. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied the other, with a faint smile. "I'm all right again now; don't make a fuss, it's nothing. I think it's a remnant of that infernal up-country fever which I can't thoroughly shake off. It left me as weak as a rat, and even yet I feel the effects now and then, as you see," and again he made a ghastly attempt at a laugh.

"By Jove!" cried Payne, in alarm. "Did you get hit in that shindy just now?"

"No; don't be afraid—I'm all right. It was only a slight seizure," and his hand, as he removed it from the rail, still trembled a little, but the colour returned to his cheek.

What should have so violently moved this man, who looked as if nothing could disturb his placid equanimity for an instant? It could not be that he was in a weak state of health or of nerve, for had he not just engaged, single-handed, in an encounter with three daring ruffians, and come off victorious? And his weather-tanned features betokened health and strength as clearly as if he had not known a day's illness for years. The heat was not overpowering; he had not been riding fast, or in any way exerting himself, nor was he subject to attacks of faintness. No, there was nothing. Unless it was that through the quiet air of that sunlit valley came the sound of a woman's voice—a rich, full, sweet voice, distant but clear—singing a pathetic ballad.

"Are you sure?" went on Payne, looking at him concernedly. "Well, let's go up to the house and have some brandy and water, you'll want it, after that, and the sooner the better."

"Payne," said the other, with a sort of sternness, laying his hand on his arm. "I don't want anything just now. If you make a fraction of fuss about me or my idiotic attack, I'll ascend that horse of mine and say good-bye this very evening."

"Eccentric as ever!" replied Payne, with a laugh. "My dear fellow, you shall do nothing of the sort, and I'll promise not to bother you in any way. Come along, let's go in."

They walked towards the house, and as they approached it the song ended. Had that man been afflicted with heart disease he would assuredly have dropped down dead on the threshold, for a mist was before his eyes and his heart was beating as if it would burst.

"This way," said Payne, ushering his guest into the empty sitting-room. "I'll tell the wife you're here," and, closing the door, he left him alone.

Alone? Payne, while he stood holding the door open, could not see the piano at the far end of the room, and now as he closed it, the graceful figure of a lady, who had apparently been occupied in looking through a pile of music in the corner, rose to greet the new arrival. His back was to the light as she first saw him.

"Have you ridden far to-day?" she began, in a pleasant conversational voice. Then with a faint, gasping cry as if she had been stabbed, she reeled back and leaned against the piano, her face ashy white, and trembling in every limb.

"Arthur!"

"Lilian!"

He made three steps towards her, and stopped short. No, he dared not even touch her. She belonged to another, now. She was the wife of his host and friend, the man whose life he had just saved. Why had *he*, of all others, been sent there only just in time to rescue that life, and then have been brought on to this house to witness what the saving of that life involved? What power of evil had sent him to this fiery torment—this pang which was worse than hell—as he stood there looking upon the woman who possessed the love of his whole nature, and whose pure-souled, beautiful face had ever been before his mental gaze, night and day, during three years and a half of lonely wanderings? What had he done to deserve this torture? Like a lightning flash these reflections pierced through his brain as he stood gazing, with a terrible agonised stare, upon the delicate beauty of face and form which had taken all the sunshine and gladness out of his existence, and now stood before him owned by another, and that other the man whose life he had just saved.

Something in his look froze her where she stood. Was she thinking much the same as himself? With hands clasped tightly before her, and eyes fixed upon his with a despairing fear, she whispered hoarsely:

"I thought I should never see you again. I thought—Oh, God—I thought—that you were—dead!"

The last ray of the sinking son shot from over the western hills, entering the window and flooding with a golden and then a ruddy halo the pale, anguish-stricken face and the wealth of dusky hair. And there they stood, those two who had been parted three long weary years and twice that number of months. There they stood—suddenly thrown together, as it were, by the hand of Fate—facing each other, yet speechless. Three years and a half of parting, and now to meet again—thus.

"I knew it must be you," he said at length, slowly. "When I heard those words I knew they could be sung by no one else—like that."

For it was the same ballad which she had sung on that night at Seringa Vale, when he was betrayed into the first avowal of his love, nearly four years ago; and the first words which had thrilled upon his ear now, as he recovered from his sudden attack of faintness, was the conclusion of the sad and mournful refrain.

And then this man, whose death she had mourned long and in secret, suddenly stood before her.

When last we saw Claverton lying fever-racked in the Matabili hut, he was certainly as near to death's door as ever man was without actually passing that grim portal; and when the uncivilised bystanders, with bated breath, whispered their verdict, it was only the one which would have been returned by any onlooker. Falling back, he had lain to all appearance dead; but that very swoon had been the means of saving his life, at least, such was the unhesitating opinion of one or two to whom he afterwards told the circumstances, though of course not what had caused the swoon, and who, from their training and practice, were qualified to judge. His life must have been saved by a miracle, said they. What that miracle was he did not feel called upon to tell them. The sight—sudden and vivid in its distinctness—of a face the dying man had longed, with a terrible hopeless longing, to see; death had no terrors for him, his whole soul was concentrated on this one agonising desire, and it had been fulfilled. The sight of that loved face, momentary as it was, had calmed him into a peaceful, death-like sleep, and the crisis was past. Had it been that in some mysterious manner, triumphing over nature, spirit had gone to meet spirit on that dark winter night? Who can tell? The end effected would have sufficed to justify such a departure from the law of nature, for it is certain that the apparition, whether due to the imagination of a fever-distorted brain, or to whatever cause, was the saving of Claverton's life.

Then, almost too soon after his recovery, he had wandered on. He had come through the Transvaal, and past the gold fields of the great Dutch Republic, and now he pushed on beyond the haunts of man striving after gain, farther and farther into the interior, where the gnu and quagga roamed the vast plains in countless herds; where the giraffe browsed in the green mimosa dales, and the elephant and rhinoceros crushed through the tangled jungle—at night terrific with the resounding roar of the forest king. On—ever on—alone, save for three or four native followers to look after his waggon and aid in the chase.

And he had borne a charmed life. He it was who had shot the huge lion in mid-air as it leaped right over him to seize one of the oxen tied fast for the night in the strong brushwood enclosure, the mighty frame falling nearly upon him as it bit and ramped in the agonies of death. He it was who had confronted the hostile Matabili chief and his six hundred men, when that truculent potentate had demanded the person of one of his followers in satisfaction for some trifling larceny committed by the hapless lad upon their mealie gardens, and dared the barbarian and his armed warriors so much as to lay a finger upon him or his; and the fierce savage, in admiring awe of his sublime indifference to death or danger, had suddenly become his fast friend, though a moment before, the chances were a hundred to one against his leaving the spot alive. He it was who had swum out into the river swarming with crocodiles, and rescued this very follower, none other than the same, the Natal boy, Sam—who had watched him through his illness at the Matabili kraal—who, carried off his feet by the force of the current, was being borne away down the river, and the other natives had given him up as lost. And many and many a hair-breadth escape had he, by field and flood, until the natives began to look upon him as a sort of god, and his own body servants felt safer in his service from danger or sickness than they would have done surrounded by British regiments in the former contingency, or protected by all the "charms" of their most renowned *izanusi* (wizards) in the latter. For he was absolutely indifferent to death, and consequently death was indifferent to him.

And ever before him, whether amid all the rapturous excitement of the chase, in the glowing noonday, or in the awesome solitude of the midnight camp far in the heart of the wilderness, hundreds of miles from the nearest haunt of civilised man, with the roar of the lion and the howl of the hyaena echoing along the reedy bank of some turbid lagoon; while he watched the scintillating eyes of savage beasts glowing like live coals out of the surrounding gloom as they prowled around his encampment, haply waiting for the sinking watch-fire to fade altogether—amid all this, and ever before him, there was one beautiful face present to his mind's eye, as he had seen it, looking smilingly at him in the soft moonlight, or set and despairing as he had last gazed upon it that day in the golden noontide, beneath the old pear-tree. And as years went on they brought with them no solace, and now he had returned to civilisation, intending shortly to leave for ever the land which had made only to mar the successes of his life.

He had changed slightly—and changed for the better—for his years of wandering in the wilderness. He was in splendid condition, broader of chest and firmer-looking, though not one whit less active than in the old days; but the impatient, restless expression had departed from his eyes, leaving one of settled calm, the imperturbability of a man who feels that he has lived his life, and that his past is a far-away state—a vista, fair and lovely, perhaps, to look back upon, as the traveller looks back in memory upon some beautiful tract he has left behind—but still another and a different state of being. Such was Arthur Claverton, as brought there by a marvellous freak of the hand of Fate, he stood once more face to face with his first and only love.

Suddenly the voice of his host on the *stoep* recalled him to himself; recalled both of them, and, with a sigh, Lilian turned round as if to resume what she had been doing, in reality to collect herself, and Payne entered.

"Hallo," he said. "You here, Miss Strange? Let me introduce my friend; or have you already been making acquaintance?"

Claverton started as if he had been shot, and the room seemed to go round with him. "Miss Strange!" She was not this man's wife, then, or anybody's. He hardly heard what was said after that; though outwardly cool and collected. Then the revulsion of feeling was succeeded by a relapse almost as overwhelming as the first. For was it likely, he argued, that she would listen to him now, any more than that morning three years and a half ago—when for the second time she refused his love? And his reason answered, No. Still it was a weight lifted, the discovery that she was not married to his host, as he had at first thought. He had never seen Payne's wife, nor had that genial-hearted soul ever touched upon the subject of his spouse in such way as to enable him to form any idea of her personal appearance. Nor had Payne mentioned the fact of there being a guest in his house. And then Lilian's own words—"*I* thought that I should never see you again—I thought that you were dead," spoken as if in explanation of her own circumstances. No wonder he had jumped to that conclusion. Well, it did not matter either way, he told himself. He would importune her no more—he could follow the only course open to him—he would go. She might tolerate his presence just this one evening, and on the morrow he could depart before any of the household were astir, even as he had done once before.

It may be wondered what Payne had been about all this time, after unconsciously leaving these two together. On going to the back of the house, the first sight that met his gaze was a troop of young cattle plunging over a fence and careering madly about one of his cultivated strips destined to become a model kitchen garden. To dash off then and there, and eject the intruders before damage, widespread and sore, was done, became at once the object of his life, and forgetting for the moment the very existence of his guest—or, indeed, of anybody—away he started; but the work of reparation was also one of time, and not until all possibility of a recurrence of the damage had been practically guarded against, did he so much as begin to think of returning to the house.

Fortunately the darkness of the room, as the shades of evening deepened, kept Payne from noticing Lilian's deathly paleness, and he chatted on in high good-humour, till the sound of voices and laughter in the passage proclaimed the advent of his wife and olive-branches—the latter, Lilian's charges; for she was still plying that delightfully remunerative and much appreciated craft—teaching the young idea.

"Well, Lilian," cried Mrs Payne, a bright, cheery little woman of about her own age, or perhaps a year or two older. "You'd much better have come out with me instead of moping indoors, on this lovely afternoon, over that wretched music. Why, who's this?" Then a due introduction having been effected, she shook hands cordially with the new arrival. "Ah, Mr Claverton, I'm so glad to see you. I'm always at that dear, stupid old George for not bringing you here, after saving his life that time; but I'm so glad you've found us out at last."

"That dear, stupid old George," the while, was winking at Claverton over his spouse's shoulder, his satirical nature hugely tickled by the flutter which the news of the other's opportune aid a second time rendered would cast her into. He would tell her some day, but not just yet.

Claverton laughed. "Well, you see, Mrs Payne, he could hardly have done that, because I was bound in the opposite direction, but I've taken advantage of my opportunity as soon as I fell in with it, and here I am."

"What! Do you mean to say you've been wandering about up the country ever since?"

"Of course he has," struck in Payne. "But hadn't we better get all snug for the evening? It's about feeding-time! Here, Claverton, come this way, I dare say you'll like to put your head into cold water. And, Annie, just tell those kids to shut up that infernal clatter," he added, as the uproar of juvenile romping, mingled with many a shrill laugh, came rather too distinctly from an inner room.

And how comes it that Lilian Strange, whom we last saw at Seringa Vale, should be quietly installed in this Kaffrarian border dwelling? It will be necessary to glance back.

Not long after we saw her, hopeless and heartbroken, more than three years back, an event happened which caused her to forget for a time her own grief in the sore affliction of others, of her dearest and truest friends. One day Mr Brathwaite started for his accustomed ride round the farm, but the afternoon slipped by and then evening came, and he did not return. His horse, however, did; for just as Mrs Brathwaite, in anxiety and alarm, was about to send forth in search of him, that quadruped put in an appearance, with the rein still on its neck, and limping up to the stable-door as if it had been injured. Then they started in search, leaving Mrs Brathwaite a prey to the most terrible forebodings, which were realised only too soon. The old settler was found lying in the *veldt*, unable to move. His horse, he said, had put its foot in a hole, stumbled and rolled over with him, falling upon him; no bones were broken, but he feared he had received some internal injury as he could not move without great pain. Carefully they carried him home, and he was put to bed. Tenderly did his wife and Lilian watch beside him the night through, while Hicks was riding at a hand-gallop to fetch a doctor from the district town. An errand, alas, which was only too futile; for as the clear dawn quivered glowing and chill over the homestead at Seringa Vale the sufferer's spirit passed slowly away, and the beams of the rising sun, darting in at the window, lighted upon the face of a corpse and two watchers weeping by a bedside.

Thus died Walter Brathwaite—the staunch, persevering settler, the pioneer of industry and advancement in a new and far-away land, and, above all, the genial, noble-hearted gentleman. One who had never turned his back on friend or foe, a man who had never been guilty of a mean action or reaped advantage from the misfortune of his fellows; open of hand, kindly of heart and firm of head, he died as he had lived, regretted, loved, and respected by all who knew him. And that country is fortunate which can show many of his like.

And in the dark and rayless days that followed, it was Lilian's task to whisper words of consolation and hope to the sorrowing widow, crushed to the very earth in her sudden and comfortless grief; and in no better hands could it have devolved. But within the year Mrs Brathwaite had followed her husband, and Lilian, who, up to then, had tended her with more than all the loving care of a daughter, watched over her to the last.

"God bless you, dearie," had been the dying woman's parting words to her. "You have given yourself up to the comfort and happiness of others; some day it will return to you a hundredfold. Only be patient."

They buried her beside her husband; and in one disastrous day, sad indeed had been the change wrought in that peaceful, happy home. And then Lilian, craving for work and diversion, had gone back to her old line of life, which, involving a constant tax on her energies, would afford her both the one and the other. So here she was, after a lapse of years, installed at Fountain's Gap, ostensibly as the preceptress of Mrs Payne's children, in reality as companion to that good-hearted little woman herself, who had taken an immense fancy to her, and, moreover, hated being left alone, as must, otherwise, inevitably be frequently the case from the very nature of her husband's pursuits.

"Did you hear anything fresh in Komgha to-day, George?" asked his wife, when they were seated at the table. The curtains were drawn and the room looked snug and homelike.

"Two more troops of Police ordered over the Kei."

"Oh, dear. That looks bad. We are in a dreadful state of scare now, Mr Claverton," she explained. "I can hardly sleep at night for thinking of it—and right in the middle of those wretches, too."

"*We* are!" rejoined Payne, good-humouredly. "Say, rather, you are. The fact is, Claverton, my wife thinks of nothing but fire and sword, morning, noon, and night, till she's worked herself up to such a pitch that every time a drunken nigger howls in the *veldt* she vows they are raising the war-cry."

"Well, but you know there is reason for it," retorted she. "And if it gets any worse, Lilian and I will go away with the children to Grahamstown or somewhere. I really am frightened."

"That's a long way," said Payne, banteringly. "I also heard that the new Governor was coming up to the frontier."

"Ah, we're getting the news by degrees," exclaimed his wife. "What else did you hear?"

"That a policeman rode in from the Transkei this morning."

"What news did he bring?"

"I don't know."

"There now. You never find out anything. Some day we shall all be taken by surprise and murdered in our beds."

"Ha, ha, ha?" laughed Payne. "Well, at any rate, you're no worse than the people at Komgha. If an express rides in, they jump to the conclusion that Kreli is marching on their precious town at the head of twenty thousand men. For my part I don't believe there'll be a shindy at all. It's only another case of scare."

But he did believe it, only he thought a pious fraud justifiable to reassure the womenkind.

"When I'm big," remarked Harry Payne, aged seven, "I'll have a gun and shoot a great *schelm* Kafir."

"But, Harry, he may shoot you first," said Lilian, during the laugh that followed upon this interruption.

"No he won't," persisted the embryo warrior. "I'll shoot him."

It was the first time Lilian had spoken, and Claverton, who was sitting opposite her and almost as silent, heard with a thrill that low, sweet voice which had haunted his dreams and his waking thoughts during the long years of solitude. He had been furtively watching her, noting every turn of the beautifully poised head, striving to catch a glance from the sweet, serious eyes, which somehow were never suffered to meet his. And he likewise noted that Lilian Strange at twenty-seven was, if possible, even more lovely and winning to behold than on that day just four years ago, when he had first gazed upon the vision which had completely altered the course of his life. Not even the most spiteful of critics could say of her that she had "gone off." A trifle graver perhaps, but it was a gravity that suited well her soft, dark beauty; and the smile, when it did come, lit up the serene, exquisite face as the ripple of a sunbeam on a sleeping pool. And it was just such a smile as this which caused a tug of pain at Claverton's heart, when the urchin uttered his bellicose aspiration.

"By the time you're big enough for that, sonny, there may be occasion for it, not before," said Payne, as he wheeled back his chair. "Come and have a smoke on the *stoep*, Claverton. What! Did you say, 'No'?"

"That's what I said."

"Well! Here's a transformation! Why, you haven't given up the only sociable habit—Ah, I see. Ladies, you may score a triumph; you have tamed this savage. He is going to give up the soothing weed in favour of your more soothing society. But I am not, therefore for the present—so long," and with a laugh the light-hearted fellow went out, cramming his pipe as he went.

"Now, Mr Claverton, we shall expect you to tell us some most thrilling adventures," said his hostess. "You must have a great stock of them."

"I assure you I have none," he began.

"Oh, that won't do. But tell me the ins and outs of that affair when you first met George."

Claverton started. His wits were, in popular phraseology, wool-gathering; and at first he thought of to-day's row. Then he remembered.

"That affair at De Klerk? It wasn't much of a thing. Payne was holding his own gallantly against four big Dutchmen, and I came up in time to turn the scale. You said something about his life just now, but his life wasn't in danger; the most they'd have done would have been to have given him rather a mauling."

"What was it about?" asked Lilian.

"The right of outspan, usual bone of contention in Dutch neighbourhoods. And just then the Boers were rather sore about the Gold Fields, and made themselves very nasty to any one coming from or going to that sham El Dorado."

"Sham! Yes, it is a sham; George did no good by going," said Mrs Payne, rising. "Now, children, bed-time," and with the reluctant juveniles she left the room; and again those two were alone together.

Claverton, who had hoped for such a moment, now that it had come, felt utterly tongue-tied. He felt that he had no right to rake up the past. She herself had buried it, and now that they were unexpectedly thrown together again, he felt that it would be unfair to her, not to say obtrusive, to revert to the forbidden subject. And yet what was he to say to her? Every topic they had in common was inextricably interwoven with that terribly painful past, which was as fresh and unhealed in his heart as on the morning when she had bidden him leave her.

“Do you know, I had not the remotest idea I should find you here to-day?” he began, rather lamely.

“Hadn’t you? I suppose not,” she answered, speaking quickly, and her fingers busy at some needlework, trembled ever so slightly.

“How long have you known the Paynes?”

“Nearly three years. Just before Mrs Brathwaite’s death.”

“What! Is Mrs Brathwaite dead?” he asked, in astonishment.

“Didn’t you know?” she replied. And then she gave him the history of the sad events which had followed so soon upon his leaving Seringa Vale, and he listened in amazement, for he had only just returned straight from the interior, and thus, as it were, into the world again.

“I am very grieved to hear this,” he said, when she had finished. “They were the truest, kindest friends that ever man had. I little thought I should never see them again. And I suppose Jim reigns in the old place, now?”

“Yes,” she answered sadly, and then there was silence for a few moments. The conversation was taking a decidedly dangerous turn, and Lilian began to feel embarrassed. Perhaps it was as well that Mrs Payne returned, having disposed of her offspring in their various couches, and almost immediately her lord entered from the *stoep*, bringing in a whiff of fresh night air not guiltless of tobacco smoke.

“Grand night!” he exclaimed, flinging down his hat in high good-humour. “We’ll have a ride over the place to-morrow, eh, Claverton?”

Claverton assented mechanically, thinking the while how he might be far enough away by that time. Then a little more conversation, and a move was made to retire. How narrowly he scanned Lilian’s face, while he held her fingers in ever so lingering a clasp as he bade her good-night! He could read nothing there. And then, mechanically again, he followed his host to the room prepared for him, and once more he was alone.

Then what a rush of recollections swept over his mind, as he sat at the open window looking out upon the still night! All the years of wandering, of peril, and of hardship, were bridged over as by a single night, and once more it seemed as if he had just heard his doom only a few hours since, in the garden at Seringa Vale. And now Fate had thrown him beneath the same roof with this woman, whom he had never expected nor dared hope to see again. He had once more looked into her eyes, and drank in the sound of her voice—once more had held her hand in his, and now the old wound, never even so much as cicatrised over, was lacerated afresh, and gaped open and bleeding. Could he have been brought here for the mere sport of circumstances, or was it with a purpose—a deeper import? And with the superstition in small things which often, and in spite of himself, clings to a man who has travelled much and in solitude, he grasped the idea. Yet he dared not hope. Hope and he had parted company long since, he told himself. But he made up his mind that, at any rate, he would not leave his friend’s hospitable roof the next day; and having arrived at that conclusion he fell asleep, and slept soundly.

Volume Two—Chapter Four.

“So the Face before her Lived, Dark-Splendid...”

And what of her to whom this long, weary period had been so many years and so many months of terrible self-reproach? To her, though Time had brought no solace, it had brought a certain amount of resignation; and she had been able to school herself to face the future as best she might. Then suddenly, without so much as a moment’s warning, this man whom she had mourned as dead, whom she had wept and prayed for, night and morning, as one whom she would never again behold here on earth, stood before her. She had looked up, expecting to see a stranger—and there *he* stood! No wonder the blood forsook her ashy face and her heart stood still.

And now, in the dark, silent hours, she can scarcely realise it. It must be a dream—such a one as she had many and many a time awakened from to find her pillow wet with tears. Would she now awaken to find herself once more the dupe of one of those cruel hallucinations? No, this was real, she told herself; and looking back upon that meeting, awful in its suddenness, she wondered how she had so preserved her calmness. And he—he had shrunk from her—stopped short as soon as he recognised her. No wonder. She had sent him away with bitter words, with hard, cruel words, as a last recollection. How could he tell the agonies of remorse, of repentance, of vain, passionate yearning, which her life had since undergone? Time had gone by—perhaps he had eradicated from his heart the image of her who had made a plaything of it, as it must seem to him; perhaps some other image had taken its place. Better she could have continued to mourn him as dead than that. She forgot, in her anguish, how he had been wandering ever since they two parted—wandering afar in the wild interior, among its wilder inhabitants, alone with his own thoughts and her memory. She forgot all this as, the night through, she lay and tortured herself with these and kindred reflections.

And even if things were not so, and he had come back as he went, was there not the same barrier between them? Now that she was face to face with it once more, could she be false to her word any more now than then? Did not the old obstacle once more arise? No, it did not. From that fatal promise she had been absolved since then, absolved by the inexorable hand of Death—not always a merciless enemy—and at this moment she was free, absolutely free. But what availed her freedom now? Years ago it would have meant everything—life, love, and happiness—but now—

One by one the stars paled overhead, a faint glow suffused the eastern sky, and, with a chill tremor, the dawn swept clearer and clearer over the sleeping earth. Very soothing to Lilian's tired brow was the fresh, cool air as she leaned out of the window, restless and fevered, after a sleepless night. For a few moments thus she stood, watching the shadows lightening upon the hills around, then, dressing hurriedly, she descended, intending to enjoy the early freshness before any one should be astir.

Noiselessly unlocking the front door, she passed out; and never had the pure morning air seemed more grateful or invigorating. She walked to the gate at the end of the *stoep* and turned the key—tried to turn it, rather, for it was firm. Then she tried again with all the strength of her two hands; but no; the wretched instrument moved not a hair's breadth, and she stood contemplating a deep-blue imprint on her own delicate palm—the sole result of her attempt.

"Allow me," said a voice, and immediately the recalcitrant key yielded, with a creak and a snap, to the vigorous turn of a strong hand. "There," said the new arrival, swinging open the gate. "Are you taking an early stroll?"

Upon what a startled ear had that voice fallen! Her first impulse was to disclaim all intention of early exercise, and to go back indoors; but she answered in the affirmative.

"I wonder if my company would bore you greatly?" went on Claverton. "Singularly enough, I turned out early with the same intent, and Fate seems to have thrown us together."

Did he say this with a meaning? she wondered. Fate had indeed thrown them together.

"It would be very ungrateful of me to refuse it," she answered, with a smile, "when you have just overcome such an obstacle in the way of my going out at all."

They walked along in silence for a few moments, side by side—those two, who had been so long parted.

"Do you find this place as pretty as Seringa Vale?" he asked.

The question somewhat took her aback. Why did he wish to recur to the past? "No; I have never seen anything like that," answered she. "Still this is very beautiful in its way. Mr Payne thinks it the most perfect spot on earth."

"And—are you happy here, Lilian?"

"Yes; I have no right to be otherwise. In fact, I consider myself very fortunate."

"Oh."

They had reached the little wooden bridge whence he had first caught the notes of the old, familiar ballad the evening before. Crossing it, they turned down a path between two high pomegranate hedges. Beyond was a garden—cool, leafy, and inviting—where birds twittered and chirped in the morning air. A gleam beyond the Kei hills betokened the advent of the sun.

"It's marvellously warm for daybreak at this time of year," began Claverton after a pause. "I hope it doesn't mean a storm in the afternoon, because that isn't exactly an auspicious opening to a journey."

"A journey!" echoed Lilian, blank dismay in her face and in her tone. "*You* are not going away—to-day?" And moved by an uncontrollable impulse she looked at him, and in that look was a world of entreaty, of despair, and of love; such a look as would be with him to his dying day.

"And is it not better so?" he said, gently. "Believe me, I did not come here to make it uncomfortable for you—darling." Then, seeing the imploring look deepen in the white face, he went on in a strangely altered tone: "What? It cannot be! Oh, Lilian—tell me—am I to—?"

"Stay." The word was spoken in a low, thrilling voice. "Stay! unless you want to break my heart. It is only what I should deserve," and a great sob convulsed the beautiful frame, which was instantly locked fast in Claverton's embrace; and heart beat against heart as he covered the shrinking face and the soft hair which lay against his shoulder with wild, delirious kisses.

Then the great, golden chariot of day mounted majestically above the eastern hills, and flamed from the azure vault, darting a bright beam upon those two happy ones as if in benediction, and flooding the valley with light and gladness; and the bleat and low of the flocks and herds sounded from the fold, and the voices of humankind echoed cheerily through the morning air—and the day was begun. And in that quiet garden the birds fluttered and piped, bees droned in the sunlight as they winged their way in search of the luscious store, and now and then the leaves would tremble in a faint breeze. Birds, insects, whispering trees, all seemed but to echo one voice, one glad, joyous refrain—"We will never part again, love, never, never."

Lilian was the first to break the silence.

"Oh, Arthur, is this, too, a dream?" she murmured. "Shall I wake up in a moment and find you vanished, as I have so often done?"

"Have you, sweetest?" he replied in a tone of reverent tenderness, as if he could not speak too softly, or too gently, to her. "It is reality now—if ever anything was—sweet reality;" and at the picture which her words opened up before his mind he clasped her again to his heart as though he could never let her go.

“Let me have a look at you, darling,” she said, suddenly raising her head with a bright, lovely blush, and gazing into the firm, serious face bent over hers. “You have become so brown, and you are looking ever so much older, and—”

“And am quite a battered and hardened campaigner.”

“And are looking ever so much better—ever so much better than you used to. There, you don’t deserve that for interrupting me,” she added, with one of her most bewitching smiles.

“Let’s sit down here,” he suggested, as, with his arm still round her, he drew her towards a rustic seat which might be twin brother to the one under the pear-tree where that dread parting had taken place those years ago. “Now tell me all about yourself—about everything.”

She did so. She told him of her life since they parted, and previous to their first meeting; told him the story of that promise which had entailed such misery upon both of them. It was the old story—a former suitor—and the promise had been most solemnly given beside her mother’s deathbed. The man was worthless to the core, selfish, dissipated, and unprincipled, but he was fascinating both in manner and appearance; and Lilian, at any rate, fancied him genuine. Over her mother he had cast the spell of an extraordinary infatuation, and Mrs Dynevard had not a little to do with the bringing about of her daughter’s engagement. Certain it was that nothing else prevented that daughter from breaking it, for when—her stepfather dying shortly afterwards—Lilian could no longer make her home at Dynevard Chase, this fair-weather suitor kept aloof. He was obliged to leave England, he explained, in order to better his fortunes, which were in a very bad way. By this time, however, Lilian had gained some insight into his real character, and then the weight of that rash promise began to make itself felt. Once she appealed to him to release her from it, but met with a decided refusal, and, as though to rivet the bond still tighter, the man reminded her that her promise was not only given to him but also to her dead mother. So poor Lilian clung fast to her only hope, which was that he might not think it worth his while to claim its fulfilment. Meanwhile she sacrificed herself to sentiment—as men and women have so sacrificed themselves at the faggot pile, or helpless and defenceless before ravening beasts in the arena. Then, like a lightning flash, had come the consciousness of real love, but still she immolated herself to the sacredness of a rash promise.

Let us leave them there, those two, in the sunny garden, amid the unclouded glory of the new-born day. Their cup is full—full and brimming with such happiness as this world rarely affords. Let them revel in it while they may, for a dark cloud is rolling up, gathering as it rolls—a cloud whose edges are red with blood, and whose gruesome shadow is fraught with desolation, with ruin, and with Death.

“Payne,” quietly remarked Claverton, two hours later, as he and his host were standing at the gate of one of the sheep-kraals, the latter counting: “I wonder if I shall succeed in astonishing you directly—by what I’m going to tell you.”

“Twenty-three—five—seven—thirty-two—six,” counted Payne. “Don’t speak to a man on his stroke—or count. Nine—forty-one—forty-four—seven hundred and forty-four. Right, Booi. Now, off you go, and keep away from old Smith’s boundary. He’s a cantankerous beggar, and I don’t want to have a tiff with him. What were you saying, Claverton?” he continued, making a playful cut at a native urchin with his whip, which the boy dodged, and gambolled away swinging his sheepskin kaross and grinning from ear to ear.

“I was saying—would it surprise you greatly to learn that I am about to perpetrate matrimony?”

Payne whistled. “N-no—I don’t know—most fellows fall victims sooner or later. And after all the knocking about you’ve had it’ll do you good to settle down for a bit. By the way—if it’s not an impertinent question—who’s the lady?”

“Lilian Strange.”

“Eh?”

“Lilian Strange.”

“The devil!”

“No—nothing of the kind. That’s deuced uncomplimentary of you when I tell you a piece of news before I’ve imparted it to any one else. In fact, I call it downright shabby,” replied Claverton in a tone of mock remonstrance, while his eyes sparkled with suppressed merriment. For Payne was staring blankly at him as if he distrusted his sense of hearing.

“But—but—Hang it all, how do you know she’ll have you? Why, you never set eyes on her till yesterday.”

Claverton laughed. “I know it because I have it from the very best authority—her own lips. And I knew her—well, long before I had the advantage of first beholding the light of your supremely honest and genial old countenance,” he said, quietly. “Come, don’t stare at a fellow as if you thought him a candidate for a glass-case, but say something decent. Make us a speech, you know.”

“Why, of course, I congratulate you, old chap, and all that sort of thing; but you’ve taken one a little aback. Hang it, it’s as good as a play. Aha! that’s what we get up so dismally early for, hey?”

And, indeed, honest Payne was so taken aback by the announcement that he walked beside the other speechless, with his hands in his pockets, and whistling.

Never before had the duties of the schoolroom seemed so irksome to Lilian as this morning. The warm, sunny air streamed in at the open windows, and just audible was the hum of male voices in conversation, and her heart thrilled as every now and then her ear caught a low, gleeful laugh, which she had learned to know so well. Once, indeed, she went to the window, in the hope of catching a glimpse of the talkers, or rather of one of them; but the result was lamentable, for she found herself dogmatically asserting to her pupils that Pekin, not Paris, was the capital of France—they staring the while as if they did not quite know what to make of her.

“Miss Strange,” exclaimed the eldest girl, “do let’s have the map of this country instead. France and Germany, and all those, are so stupid. We can see where all the Kafirs live, who are coming to fight us.”

“They’re not going to fight us,” struck in Harry, somewhat indignantly. “Pa says they’re not. They’re funky.”

Lilian smiled at this retort, and nipped in the bud an argument, which promised to wax warm, by producing a large map of the Eastern Province.

“Now look here, Harry,” she said; “here’s the River Kei, and here are we. Here are all the Kafirs and—”

“But where’s Fountain’s Gap?” inquired Rose, aged nine.

“It isn’t marked. Look. We’ll put a pencil spot for it. Here’s King Williamstown.”

“What, all that way off?” said Harry.

“Yes. It is a long way off.”

“But we should have to run there if the Kafirs came,” protested that doughty youth.

“Aha! Who’s funky now? Who wants to run away now—eh?” jeered his sister.

“Hush!” said Lilian, in that sweet, soothing way of hers, that stood her in far better stead than any amount of sternness. “You mustn’t quarrel now, you know.” Suddenly the urchin fixed his gaze upon her, and, with mischief gleaming from his blue eyes, exclaimed:

“I saw you this morning—you and that man.”

Lilian felt herself flushing all over. She tried to direct his attention to the lesson, but the imp, with that mixture of mulishness and malice which seems the invariable attribute of the infant prodigy oft-times petted, continued:

“I did. I saw you ki—”

“Harry!” cried Rose, making as if she would rush upon the delinquent. “I’ll go and tell mamma about you, at once. Send him out of the room, Miss Strange—do!”

Poor Lilian! Her delicate, sensitive nature was indeed undergoing acute laceration at the tongue of this urchin, on whom she had lavished nothing but tenderness and care. Whether from perversity, or with a savage enjoyment of the pain he was inflicting, the cub went on:

“I don’t care, Rose! I did see them. They were—”

What they were or were not doing remained unsolved, for the door opened, and Mrs Payne entered.

“I want you to give them a holiday to-day, Lilian,” she said. “Now then, children, run away out into the garden. You can put your books away after. Out you go—quick.”

They obeyed with double alacrity. For their mother, in spite of her warm-heartedness, had a very decided will of her own at times. And Rose, taking into consideration all the circumstances, deemed it advisable to say nothing about Master Harry’s ill-conditionedness.

“Lilian, dear!” exclaimed the good-hearted little woman, as soon as the children had gone out, “I’m so glad about this. Directly I heard of it I came straight here. I couldn’t let you remain drudging in here another moment, to-day. You must go out, and at once, or a certain person will be getting so impatient that he’ll be wanting to quarrel with George, which would be a pity, as they have always been such good friends.”

And then Lilian, somewhat unnerved by the recent juvenile disclosure, cried a little, and there was a good deal of kissing.

“By the way,” exclaimed Mrs Payne, ruefully, “of course, I shall lose you very soon, now; and I don’t know how I shall get on without you at all, dear.”

Volume Two—Chapter Five.

Sandili.

Never was war or outbreak more entirely without reason or provocation than the Kafir rising of 1877-8.

It is a well-known rule that savage races go under before the encroachments of white civilisation. The case of the native tribes in Southern Africa is a notable exception. Far from diminishing, every year sees their population actually increased. And the reason need not be sought for long. It lies in the security to life and property afforded these people by British rule, the quelling of intertribal wars, the breaking of the power of the chiefs, the abolition of sanguinary laws relating to witchcraft, the opening up of a vast field for native labour, and the resources of civilisation brought more and more within the reach of the tribes, who, for their part, are not slow to avail themselves of the same. True that, as well as ploughs, and waggons, and smithies, and schools, British rule has also conferred upon them grog. That would have come anyhow; but even as things are, in this respect the natives are no worse than our own countrymen.

This outbreak was devoid of a shadow of excuse. The different locations occupied by these tribes were fair and fertile tracts of country. They had no encroachments to complain of on the part of the colonists, for their territory was jealously secured to them—good pasturage, fertile lands, and well watered withal. For their surplus population there wae abundance of work to be obtained in the colony, and whatever property they might accumulate it was beyond the power of any hostile tribe or tyrannical potentate to wrest from them. Yet they were not content. And the reason thereof does not require much seeking.

They were thorough savages. They had great martial traditions. For more than twenty years their warrior energies had found no outlet. Such a state of things could not be suffered to continue.

Not all, however, were of this mind. Broadly speaking, public opinion was divided into two factors. The first consisted of old and elderly men, who owned property and had something to lose, and, moreover, having actually fought, knew that war was not all beer and skittles. The second consisted of young men, who, owning nothing, had the same to lose; who had only *heard* of fighting, and consequently imagined that war *was* all beer and skittles. And the voice of the latter faction carried the day.

As was right and proper the first to take the initiative were the Gcalekas in the Transkei, the tribe ruled by Kreli, Chief Paramount of all the Amaxosa divisions. These proceeded to organise a series of raids against the Fingoes, whose emancipation from serfdom to themselves had long been a sore point. Matters became serious. The Fingoes were British subjects and must be protected accordingly.

The High Commissioner, then newly appointed, proceeded to the border. Settlers’ meetings were held to discuss the important matter of defence, and deputations waited upon the Governor to a considerable extent. His Excellency was hopeful and reassuring in his replies, and, winning golden opinions by his courtesy and decisiveness, he passed on into the Transkei with the object of conferring with the Paramount Chief in person. That astute savage, however, plumed himself on being too old a bird to be caught upon so obviously limed a twig. While at large, he was safe. At large, therefore, he would remain. So he returned all manner of evasive replies, even the timeworn native excuse of illness. It became a case of Mohammed and the mountain, with the difference that in this case, whereas Kreli would not go to the High Commissioner, it was morally impossible that His Excellency should go to Kreli. He accordingly returned to the colony, and preparations were at once made for the inevitable campaign.

Even then it was hoped that hostilities would be confined to the Transkei—hoped, but not believed. The Gcalekas were a warlike tribe, who could put many thousands of fighting men into the field. It would be a troublesome matter to subdue them, for they had long been prepared, and were well supplied with food. But if the tribes within the colonial border—the Gaikas, Hlambis, Emigrant Tembus, but especially the first named—should join them, then the war would become a formidable affair, and, in all probability, a matter of years. Whether this state of things came about or not will appear in the course of this narrative, which it closely concerns.

To-day, however, all seems peaceful enough as the sun beats down upon the rolling plains and silent kloofs of British Kaffraria, with unwonted force for a spring day. His rays also fall upon two equestrians, who are leisurely traversing the mimosa-dotted dales, as led by the capricious windings of a somewhat tortuous track. Two equestrians, who are riding very close beside each other, and whose attention seems somewhat unequally divided between the surrounding scenery and each other’s eyes, to the advantage of which mattereth not. Indeed, so engrossed are they in each other’s conversation, that the tread of hoofs behind entirely escapes them; but an expression comes over their faces, of anger on one, and of—well—not best pleased on the other; and they look over their shoulder as a rough voice exclaims: “Ahem!—er—how d’ye do?” The last time we saw those two persons, they were together in a garden, some time about the hour of sunrise; and they were absurdly happy. They look equally happy now, as side by side they ride leisurely along, this grand afternoon. To them, at this moment, all the surroundings are as the sights and sounds of Paradise; for they are together and alone. More than a week has passed since the sun rose upon that knitting together of two severed hearts, that transformation of two sorrowing lives into, as it were, one of joy; more than a week of long, happy days, so perfect in their unbroken, blissful peace, that to the wanderer it seemed as if he had “cast” his old self and taken a fresh personality—that the old loveless existence and restless longing for excitement could never have belonged to him at all, but to some other being, so all-satisfying was this new atmosphere of peace. And on Lilian the outward change wrought was marvellous. As by magic the sad expression had given place to one of sunny contentment, and there was a sweet, tender curve in her lips, and the colour of perfect health returned to her cheek, as no longer grave she moved about the house and garden, trilling out little snatches of song, with a soft love-light in her eyes which rendered her more irresistibly charming than ever she had been in the old time. And now the two were returning from one of those long rides which they had been in the habit of taking together during those halcyon days of love deferred but now requited to the full, when that horribly grating voice burst upon them:

“Ahem! Er—how d’ye do?” And red-bearded Joe Marshall, overtaking them, doffed his slouch hat to Lilian, and shook hands with her escort, as he reined in his raw-boned nag by the side of the latter.

“Hallo, Marshall! Where have you dropped from?”

“Oh, I’ve just been making a round. I’m going home now. Won’t you come round by my place, and rest a bit? ’Tisn’t far. No? Ah, well, it’s hardly worth your while, perhaps, so near home.” For honest Joe could see pretty plainly that the two would prefer his room to his company, though they had conscientiously, at least, suffered no indication of such preference to escape them. “How are the Paynes?”

"Flourishing. Any news?"

"N-no. Kreli won't meet the Governor. Says he's sick. But that's all an excuse, you know."

"Yes; we heard that. Anything fresh?"

"N-no," said Marshall again, with a dubious glance towards Lilian. "Nothing certain, at least. Some more fellows round me gone into laager, that's all."

"H'm. I'm inclined to think with Payne, that the scare's all bosh," said Claverton. "Look at the one four years ago. That all ended in smoke. Why shouldn't this?"

Lilian, too, remembered that time; nor was she ever likely to forget it. A soft light came into her eyes, and she wished mightily that Marshall was not with them.

"Well, I dunno," rejoined that worthy. "It may, and it mayn't. We shall see, and very soon. Why, who's this?"

They looked up. The track they had been following merged into a waggon-road, and about a hundred yards in front of them stood a low thatched building. It was a native trading-store. Not this, however, but the sight of a characteristic group, drew forth the remark. Seated on the ground, with his back against the wall, was a Kafir, an old man, with a full white beard, and a face which might have been at one time pleasing and intelligent. A blanket was thrown over his shoulders, and his lower limbs were encased in a pair of ancient trousers, from whose tattered extremities projected his bare, dusty feet, one of which was deformed. He was surrounded by a group of his compatriots; some in European attire, others in blankets only, and red with ochre; some sitting, some standing, some running in and out, but all jabbering.

"Why, I declare?" exclaimed Marshall, in surprise. "If it isn't Sandili! What on earth can the old blackguard be doing here?"

"Sandili?" cried Lilian. "The chief? Oh, do let's go and talk to him."

"We will," agreed Claverton. "Prepare for an interview with royalty."

The Kafirs stopped jabbering for a minute to stare in astonishment at the party as it rode into their midst, then went on harder than ever. It was as Marshall had said. This old savage, with nothing remarkable-looking about him, unless it were that his countenance wore an air of semi-drunken stupidity—for he had been imbibing freely, according to his wont—was none other than Sandili, the chief of the powerful and warlike Gaika tribe, who, of all the Amaxosa race, had, in former wars, ever been the most formidable of the colonists' foes.

"He says he's glad to see us," explained Claverton, as having conferred for a little with the old chief, he turned, in response to his companion's inquiring glance. "In a minute he'll be even more glad. Look," and he emptied half the contents of his tobacco-pouch into the chief's hands, who immediately instructed one of his followers to fill his pipe, and looked quite benevolently at the donor.

"Why, how delighted he is with it!" said Lilian, watching the interesting individual before her, with a curious glance.

"Yes, but unless I mistake, he'll want farther delighting directly," answered Claverton. "The principle of extending the proverbial inch to the ditto ell, is thoroughly well understood in Kafirland."

And sure enough the old fellow began making signs and pointing to his month, after a few words in his own language.

"What does he say?" asked Lilian.

"Just what I told you. He's thirsty, and wants sixpence to get a drink."

"Old blackguard," said Marshall. "He's got quite as much grog on board already as is good for him."

Lilian laughed. "Only think of a great chief like him, asking for sixpence like a crossing-sweeper," she said.

The Kafirs standing around had stopped their conversation, and were gazing admiringly at Lilian, with many a half-smothered exclamation of astonishment. They had seen many white women on the farms, and when they had visited King Williamstown; but never had they seen any more bewitchingly lovely than this one, who sat there looking down on their chief.

Claverton produced a sixpence and handed it to one of the attendants, who disappeared into the store, which was also a canteen, shortly returning with a measure of the ordinary bad brandy sold to the natives. This Sandili drained without a pause, and looked up again at the group, remarking that it was good.

"Oh, what can be the matter?" exclaimed Lilian, in a frightened tone, as a hubbub of angry voices arose within the store; and before she could receive an answer, a brawny red Kafir suddenly shot out of the door, reeling forward with a quick yet uneven gait suggestive of artificial propulsion, and half-a-dozen others, with excited "whouws!" also emerged and stood around the door, as if expecting something.

They had not long to expect, for the evicted savage, having staggered a dozen yards, polled himself together and stood shaking his kerries at some one inside, as with flashing eyes he hurled a torrent of abuse at the unseen antagonist. But a bottle, which came whizzing through the open door, hit him on the shoulder, cutting his eloquence suddenly short, and, deeming discretion the better part of valour, he sneaked round the angle of the wall, muttering and growling, while the others stood looking on in dead silence.

“Don’t be frightened, Lilian,” said Claverton, reassuringly, noting that she was growing rather pale. “It’s only a fellow been kicked out by the storekeeper, probably for making himself a nuisance. It’s a thing that happens every day.”

“But he looks as if he’d kill him. I never saw a man look so ferocious,” she faltered.

“Oh no, he won’t,” answered Claverton, with a laugh. “In half an hour he’ll sneak round, and ask for a drink to make it square again. That’s what they do.”

“Really?” she said, still with a misgiving.

“Really. There won’t be a vestige of a row, so don’t be in the least afraid. Look. What do you think old Sandili is saying?”

“What?”

“That he never saw a white woman who was really pretty until this moment. And faith, I agree with him.”

Lilian laughed, and flushed softly; not so much at the old savage’s compliment as at her lover’s endorsement of it.

“Eh—what?” cried Claverton, who was listening to something Sandili was saying. “Fancy spoiling that pretty speech. The old brute?”

“What does he say?”

“He says that *you* haven’t given him anything, and must give him sixpence. I told him you would do nothing of the sort.”

“But I will. I should like to, just for the fun of the thing,” she laughed. “Only, tell him he mustn’t drink it; he must buy tobacco or something else with it. He looks awfully tipsy already.”

This Claverton duly translated, and the old savage nodded assent—of course as a mere matter of form—and Lilian gave him the sixpence with her own hand. Then he looked up at Marshall and made the same request; but that worthy, who had been watching the proceedings with disapproval, growled out, with something very like an oath, that “the old blackguard would get nothing out of him.”

“He’s going away now,” said Claverton. “We’ll watch him start. I imagine there’ll be some difficulty in getting him under weigh.”

And there was. For when his horse was brought round—a sorry quadruped, with ragged caparisonings in keeping with those of its owner—behold, the old chief was so much the worse for liquor that, when helped into the saddle, he would have tumbled off on the other side but for the timely support of one of his followers, who was ready to hand. Then two others mounted, one on each side of their exalted ruler, and thus supporting him, rode off, the whole trio swaying and lurching from side to side; for the supporters were only a degree less “screwed” than the supported. About thirty followers, mounted and on foot, brought up the rear, chattering, shouting, and laughing, as they went.

“There goes the Great Chief of the Gaikas,” remarked Claverton, ironically, as they stood gazing after the receding party; “the man upon whose nod it depends as to whether the colony will be swamped in war, or whether the outbreak will be just an abortive affair in the Transkei, to be settled by the Police. And—look at him!”

“Drunken brute!” growled Marshall. A tall man, with grizzled hair and beard, now strolled up to them. It was the storekeeper. “Evenin’,” he said, laconically, doffing his hat as he caught sight of Lilian. “I heard some one talking outside; but there were too many of those chaps within, and I couldn’t get away for a minute, or they’d have looted the place. Hello, Joe! Where’re you from?”

“Been the rounds. What was up with that nigger jes’ now?”

“Oh, I kicked him out. He kept plaguing me to give him some ’bacca—said he was Sandili’s brother. I told him to clear, or, if he was Sandili himself, I’d kick him out. And I did.”

“Aw, aw!” guffawed Joe. “But I say, Thompson, you don’t seem to lay yourself out much to amuse the chief!”

“Who? Sandili? Oh, no. He often comes here. I just give him a glass of grog and a bit of ’bacca, and let him sit down and make himself happy till he goes. I never bother about him. He cadges a lot of ‘tickeys’,” (threepenny-bits) “out of his fellows. They come here to get a drink, and then the old rascal makes them ‘stand’ him instead.”

Marshall guffawed again. “I say,” he said, “those chaps are making a jolly row. Why don’t you clear them out?”

“Where?” said the trader, turning. “Oh, they’ll go when they’re tired.”

“They” being a group of Kafirs, sitting round the man lately ejected, who was declaiming violently, and waxing more excited every moment, as he flung his arms about and brandished his sticks, and his language became more and more threatening. Claverton, who foresaw a row, was divided between a wish to get Lilian away and reluctance to desert a countryman under the circumstances; but the first consideration was paramount.

“Well, we must be going. Good day to you,” he said, shaking hands with the trader. “Good day, Marshall. Are you coming?”

“N-no; I think I’ll rest a bit longer.”

Just then the whole party, numbering perhaps a dozen, walked up to Thompson, the injured individual in advance. The latter, in an insulting and aggressive tone, demanded a sovereign in satisfaction for his wrongs.

Calmly eyeing the braggart and the muttering group behind him, the storekeeper lighted his pipe and repeated his order to quit.

“No, we won’t!” roared the savage. “We’ll roast you in your own *winkel* (shop) before long. Only wait a bit.” And then the others began all talking at once, louder and louder, and in a threatening and excited way, pressing closer and closer upon the two white men.

“Got a revolver, Joe? That’s right; so have I. Always carry it in these troublous times. Now then, Umsila; off you go—you and all the rest of them.”

The Kafirs, who saw that both the white men were armed, drew back, and, still muttering and threatening, they began to depart. Then, with loud jeering laughter and many threats, they started off at a trot along the plain, sending forth a long, resounding whoop upon the evening air. It was taken up by the kraals on the hillsides, and echoed farther and farther, fainter and fainter, till it died in the distance. The two men looked at each other.

“I say, Thompson, if I were you I should pack up my traps and clear out of this,” said Marshall.

Lilian was rather silent as they rode away from the place. The sight of that fierce-looking, loud-talking group of angry savages confronting the two white men had frightened her, and then the voices rose more violent in tone.

“Don’t be afraid, dear,” said her companion, tenderly, “Those two are perfectly well able to take care of themselves, and Jack Kafir barks a great deal more than he bites. They’re all right.”

“Yes, I know,” she replied, trying to smile. “I am so easily frightened.”

“For your own sake I wish you were not, otherwise I like it, and it seems rather to suit you. But now, only think what a lot you’ll have to tell them. Why, you’ve had an interview with no end of a big chief; and—well, it’s a pity that row should have come in just in time to spoil the recollection of the ride, but it was really nothing.”

Suddenly arose that wild, weird whoop; and turning their heads, they could see the Kafirs bounding along the hillside waving their karosses and gesticulating, and calling to each other as they ran.

“There, I told you so,” he went on. “They’ve had enough ‘jaw,’ and now they’re going home.”

But a gloom seemed to have fallen upon Lilian’s spirits. To her, in those fierce, dark forms bounding along the distant ridge, and in the weird, savage cry—like the gathering cry of a host—pealing forth and echoing in sudden answer from point to point till it died away against the purple slopes of the far mountains, there was something terrible, as though it pictured forth an earnest of the coming strife—and the smile faded from her lips.

“Oh, Arthur, can they do nothing to avert this dreadful war?”

“I’m afraid not, dearest. The only thing—if only it’s done—will be to nip it in the bud. Let them break out, and then give them a crashing defeat at the start.”

“And—you will have to go?”

He was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he said at length, “I don’t see how I can sit still when the whole country turns out to a man.”

“Of course not; you must go. I shall have to spare you for a time—darling. It will be only for a time, won’t it?” she said, beseechingly.

“It will. There isn’t a shadow of danger for me. I truly believe I bear a charmed life for some reason or other, a reason I think I’ve discovered,” he added, meaningly. “But I’ve had so many narrow shaves—more than fall to the lot of most people—that I have become a bit of a fatalist.”

A sudden impulse seized her. “Arthur, I’m going to tell you something I never told you before.” And then she told him the events of that night at Seringa Vale, shortly before Mr Brathwaite’s death. “Now do you see why I said I thought you were dead? But you’ll laugh at the whole thing as a mere fancy.”

He showed no disposition to laugh; his face wore a grave, even a solemn look.

“When was this?” he asked.

She told him the exact day and hour.

“Lilian,” he said, very solemnly, “it was you and no other agency whatever that saved my life—saved it for yourself. Therefore, it is certain that it is not to be taken now, yet awhile.” And awestruck, she listened as he told her how he had lain fevered at the very point of death in the Matabili hut, and that the sight of her had sent him into that soothing sleep which was the turning-point.

And then, as they drew near home, and the soft light faded from the lofty Kei hills, between which the river flowed far down in the silent gloom between its frowning krantzes, the calming effects of the hour was upon these two. The present was very, very sweet. They had had a brief period of perfect happiness, after the years of dreary waiting, and now, if separation was to come, it would not be for long, and they would look forward hopefully to the time when, the disturbances over, peace should be restored.

That night Claverton and his host were sitting out on the *stoep* smoking their pipes, the rest of the party having long since retired. The conversation throughout the evening had turned upon the state of affairs, and now the same topic held.

“By-the-bye,” said Payne, “there was a strange nigger here this evening, a deuced fine-looking fellow, but an infernal scoundrel, I suspect. He asked if he might sleep at the huts, and I let him.”

“Why did you?”

“Well, you see, it would have done no good to turn him away. If he’s up to mischief he’d carry it out anyhow; and if he isn’t, well, there’s no harm done.”

“H’m. Marshall seems in a bit of a funk. He told me a couple of yarns to-day about fellows whose servants had warned them to clear. I should think that trick’s played out, though.”

“Dunno. You’ll still find people to believe in it. The niggers, of course, make it pay. Jack, in his capacity of old and faithful servant, warns his Baas. His Baas believes him. Henceforth Jack has a high old time of it, and, provided he is careful in the yarns he invents, may go on to the end of the chapter. For my part, I don’t believe in any nigger’s fidelity. You can’t trust one of them.”

“Except my chap, Sam,” said Claverton.

“Ah, that’s different. He’s away from his own country, you see; and then you and he have chummed it for ever so long in places where he has learnt to depend on you.”

It was a still, clear night, the sky seemed crowded with stars, and the air was warm and balmy for the time of year. Scarce a sound was audible, save that now and again the faintest possible echo of a savage song was borne from some kraal many miles across country. Otherwise there was a stillness that might be felt, and the voices of the two men, subdued as they were, sounded almost loud.

“Hallo! What the deuce is that?” said Payne, suddenly. For there arose a terrific clamour from the dogs at the back of the house. There was a preliminary “woof” as those vigilant guardians first scented intrusion; then the whole pack dashed off violently, and showing a very decided fixity of purpose, towards an angle of the high quince hedge which bounded the garden—baying savagely.

Both men rose to their feet.

“They’ve got something there, I’ll swear,” said Claverton in a low tone. “Wonder what.”

“Very likely a prowling nigger,” answered Payne. “We’ll just get out our shooting-irons and go and see.”

Volume Two—Chapter Six.

The Fire Trumpet.

With weapons cocked and ready, and keeping a sharp look-out ahead, our two friends stole quietly and warily along the shadow of the quince hedge. Meanwhile the canine clamour increased tenfold; such a yelling, and growling, and full-voiced baying as never before was heard.

“Why, they’ve treed something—look there!” whispered Claverton, as they arrived upon the scene of the disturbance. And sure enough in the branches of a small apricot-tree, which grew a little higher than the quince hedge, they could make out the dark figure of a man, clinging there as for dear life, while the dogs were leaping, and snapping, and rolling over upon one another and into the ditch in their frantic efforts to reach him. And, but for this timely refuge, he would have been torn in pieces by the great fierce brutes.

“Come down, whoever you are,” said Payne, speaking in the Kafir language, “or I’ll fire. If you attempt to run away the dogs will soon catch you. Come down.”

They could hear a muttered exclamation or two, and then the unknown replied:

“Keep in the dogs, ’Nkos. I came here to visit you, to tell you some news.”

“All right. Come down. Here, Neptune, Corker, Slow—keep still, you brutes. *Voertsek, Huis! to*!” (be off; home) cried Payne; and the excited hounds reluctantly drew off with many a savage growl.

Then something dropped from the tree, there was a rustle in the quince hedge, and a man stood before them in the darkness. Payne had just time to restrain the dogs, who would have flung themselves upon this sudden apparition there and then.

“Now, then, who are you and what do you want?” he asked.

“’Nkos, you remember me? But I can’t talk here, it’s cold and I’ve been frightened, and I am old and weak.”

“Why, it’s Mhlanga,” cried Payne, in astonishment. “But what the devil d’you want with me at this time of night?”

“Hadn’t we better take him to the house and give him a tot of grog?” said Claverton. “He looks rather shaky.”

“Of course. Come with us, Mhlanga,” and they returned to the house, where a liberal ration of undiluted spirit having sent a generous glow through the Kafir’s frame, that unexpected visitor squatted down on the *stoep* with his blanket huddled round him, and fired off an ejaculation or two.

He was an old man, with a white head and a lean, gaunt frame, and in spite of the potation shivered slightly from time to time as he sat there, for he had had a very narrow escape from the jaws of the dogs. Then he began, speaking in a low, rapid tone:

“When the grass-fire sweeps along the mountain side, who would stand in its way because he had built a hut there? When yonder river rushes down in a flood after the thunderstorms, who would stand in the drift and try to beat it back with his hands? Why are you still here?”

“Why not, Mhlanga? You must speak plainer.” The old Kafir made a gesture of impatience. “Are you waiting till this moon is dead?” he went on. “If so *you* will never see it die. Go. Go while there is time. What can two men do to stay the roaring flame through the long, dry grass? Nothing. Will they stand in the middle and be consumed? The grass is thoroughly dry and the torch is put in, the flame will spread and devour all in its way. Even now it is kindled. Are you tired of life?” concluded the old man in a more eager tone than he had hitherto employed.

“The gist of the parable is obvious,” remarked Payne to his companion, who nodded assent. “By the way, this old bird was with me several years and left suddenly some time ago, because he wanted a change. Now, you see, he’s doing the very confidence trick we were just talking about. Have some more grog, Mhlanga.”

The old man held out his tin mug with alacrity for Payne to replenish. Then he tossed off the contents, heaved a sigh or two and was about to speak, when suddenly he stopped short and appeared to be listening intently.

“Come,” he said, rising. “Come with me, *Amakosi*!”

“Oh, that’s another pair of shoes,” said Payne, suspiciously. “But, Mhlanga; why should you come here to tell me this—eh?”

“I was with you for several years, ’Nkosi, and when the snake bit me you put in the medicine stuff that healed it. I do not wish harm to befall you.”

“Oho! gratitude’s the order of the day, is it?” Then to the Kafir: “Steer ahead, Mhlanga.”

They followed the old man as he led the way to the brow of a slight eminence a few hundred yards from the homestead. Above, the stars twinkled in their silent watch, twinkled on ever the same. The midnight sky, moonless, and arching overhead like a heavy pall of blue-black velvet besprinkled with gold-dust, was oppressive in its darksome serenity, and there was something in the mystery and suddenness of the whole situation which even to the tried nerves of the two white men was intolerably awesome and thrilling. Far away in the distance, beyond the mouth of the defile or gap, a few fires glowed like sparks.

“Listen,” said the Kafir, pointing with his sticks in the direction of this. “When the *amajoni* (soldiers) are mustered *kwa Rini* (at King Williamstown), the trumpet is blown in the morning sunshine, and all the town hears it, for its voice is of brass. Ha! When the chiefs of the Amaxosa gather their fighting men the trumpet is sounded too, but it is sounded in the blackness of midnight; and all the country hears it, for its voice is of fire. Look,” he went on. “Even now the chiefs are talking to each other. The Fire Trumpet is calling the tribes to war.”

As he spoke a red tongue of flame leapt forth from the darkness against the distant horizon, where it flashed and burned for a few minutes. Then from another high point a second beacon-fire gleamed, followed by a third; and as the watchers gazed in half-incredulous wonder, not unmixed with awe, a strange, weird, resounding cry rose upon the midnight air, gathering volume as it rolled, as if kindled by those threatening beacons which glowed in the midnight firmament from the Kei to the far Amatola. Again and again pealed forth that dismal sound, and then all was still as the fiery signal shot up redly from half-a-dozen lofty elevations, and then sank as suddenly as it had blazed forth, until nearly invisible. And that unearthly and ominous cry might well strike a chill to the hearts of the listeners, for it was the war-cry of the formidable Gaika clans.

“Who was the man who asked leave to sleep in the huts, to-night?” asked the old Kafir, meaningly. “If he is here to-morrow, if your three herds are here to-morrow, if they answer when you call them, then I have been telling you lies. Listen, ’Nkosi,” he concluded, impressively. “You are a good man. You saved my life once, and I have come far to talk to you to-night. Take your wife and your children, and your sheep, and cattle, and go—go away into the town where they will be safe, and that to-morrow, *for the call of the Fire Trumpet has rung in the heavens, and the land is dead*.”

Payne was more impressed than he would care to own, and made up his mind to act upon the other’s words, if not to-morrow, yet at no distant date.

“Well, Mhlanga,” he began, “if it’s as you say, and—Why, by George, what’s become of the fellow?” he broke off, in astonishment.

For the Kafir had disappeared. He had vanished as he had come—silently, mysteriously. They called to him once or twice, but without result. His mission was accomplished and he was gone.

They turned towards the house. Suddenly, from the summit of one of the highest of the Kei hills, there blazed forth another fire, reddening the sky overhead, and they could make out distinctly the darting, leaping flames, shooting upward like demon tongues. And this startling answer from the opposite direction brought home to these two more vividly than ever a sense of their position, hemmed in between the plotting tribes now flashing their gruesome midnight messages of fire the one to the other, conveying in a moment to thousands of eager barbarians the dread signal, of which the destructive element was a terribly fitting exponent.

“I say,” suddenly exclaimed Payne; “let’s go and see if that nigger that came this afternoon is still in the huts.”

They went to the huts. A snore from inside told that these were still inhabited, and a sleepy growl or two as in obedience to their master’s summons the slumbering Kafirs aroused themselves. By the light of a match, which Payne held in his hand, several recumbent forms huddled in their blankets became visible.

“Here, Booi; where’s the chap who came here this afternoon?” asked Payne.

There was a momentary hesitation. “He’s gone, Baas.”

“Has he? Oh, all right, go to sleep again. Faugh?” he continued, as they stood once more in the open air. “The whiff in there reminds one of the ’tween-decks of a ship in a good rolling sea. The first part of old Mhlanga’s prediction holds good, but I must confess I don’t quite believe the second. Those fellows will be here in the morning.”

After this, neither felt much inclined to sleep, so they sat up chatting in a low tone far into the small hours. Then Payne’s answers began to get very confused, till at last his pipe dropped from his mouth, and came to the ground with a clatter.

“Look here, Payne, go and do the horizontal there on the sofa,” said his companion, with a laugh. “I’ll do sentry-go, and it’s no good both doing it.”

“Well, if you really aren’t sleepy—the fact is, I am, confoundedly,” and, rolling himself in a jackal-skin rug, Payne stretched himself on the couch, and in a minute was snoring peacefully.

His companion, well accustomed to long night-watches, sat at the window, motionless, but wide awake, looking out into the starlit gloom. Now and then he would doze off into that half-slumber known as “sleeping with one eye open,” wherein the wakeful faculties seem even more developed than during actual wakefulness, but nothing occurred of a disturbing nature. Once the dogs began to bark, but quieted down very soon, and the hours wore on till the clear still dawn lightened upon the hills and the sleeping valley.

Payne opened his eyes with a start, and met those of his companion. “Hullo! Haven’t you had a snooze?”

“No; that would be a queer way of mounting guard, wouldn’t it? I think I’ll have one now, though.”

“Well, I should recommend you to turn in altogether. I’ll call you presently. There’ll be no one up for the next three hours, you know,” continued Payne, with a meaning wink.

Two hours later Claverton was awake again, and found Payne just where he had left him, snoring in regular cadence. Though the sun was up there was no sign of life about the place.

“I wonder if that old Kafir was gammoning us,” remarked Payne, as the two made their way to the kraals. In that cheerful sunshine, the effects of the dour midnight warning had faded somewhat, as such effects will, and he was inclined to make light of it. “Here, Booi, Gcoku!” he shouted; “tumble out—look sharp!”

There was no answer.

Meaningly, the two looked at each other. Then they made their way to the huts, and kicked open the doors. The huts were empty. *If your three herds are here to-morrow—if they answer when you call them—then I have been telling you lies*, had been Mhlanga’s words. Therefore, no doubt now existed in his hearers’ minds that his strange, mysterious warning was true. The three Kafirs, with their families and belongings, had departed, obedient to the “word” of the stranger, the chief’s emissary; had gone to add three more warriors to the martial gathering of their tribe.

For a few moments Payne did not speak. He was rapidly revolving the situation in his mind. War would mean ruinous loss to him. He would have to send his family away to the settlements for safety, and go into *laager* himself; which latter meant months of armed tending of his stock, in common with others in like predicament; and then, even if the animals escaped capture at the hands of the savage foe, there were the chances of catching lung sickness or other diseases from the inferior and ill-bred stock of less careful or less successful farmers, with whom they would necessarily mix during all the owners’ joint occupation of the defensive camp.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed, at length, as his eyes fell upon some spoor. “The *schelms* have gone, and they’ve not gone empty-handed.”

On counting the cattle his worst suspicions were verified. Four of his finest cows were missing, and there was no difficulty whatever in making out by the tracks that they had been driven off by his treacherous and defecting retainers. Payne swore a great oath.

“We’ll go after them!” he cried. “We’ll give them pepper. Hallo! There’s Marshall. He’s getting quite neighbourly.”

The countenance of that stalwart frontiersman evinced no surprise as, alighting from his nag, he learnt what had happened. He had come over to see how they were all getting on, and had also been making a little patrol on his own hook, he said.

“You’re just in the nick of time, Joe,” cried Payne. “You can come with us.”

“And are you going to leave the ladies here all alone?” replied Marshall. “I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

“I had thought of that, too,” said Claverton, quietly. “One of us must stay.”

“Then I will,” said Marshall. “If you fellers are determined to rush off, you’d better do so at once. Mind, I don’t think you’ll catch the beggars in any case; they’ve got a good start of you. And my old nag hasn’t got go enough in her for a raid into Kreli’s country just now.”

“Very well, then, that settles it,” said Payne. “It’s awfully good of you, Joe. We’ll get breakfast sharp, and then start. By the way, we’d better not tell the women where we’re going.”

Volume Two—Chapter Seven.

A Timely Flight.

Marshall’s prediction was verified. Claverton and his host returned to Fountain’s Gap at desk; but without the lost stock. They had spoored the animals down to a drift of the Kei River, and had even crossed; but in the then state of things they deemed it imprudent to a degree to venture farther into the enemy’s country; and the thieves, having a good start of them, escaped with their booty.

Careful watch was kept that night in Payne’s household; but beyond a couple of alarms—not unjustifiable after the events of the last twenty-four hours, though happily false—nothing transpired.

Under the influence of the cheering sunshine all were disposed to think more lightly of the situation; but Payne had formed his plans. It would not do to remain there any longer. He, in common with other settlers on that part of the Kaffrarian border, was very precariously situated. What with Kreli, just across the river, in a state of declared war; and the powerful Gaika clans, within colonial territory, liable to rise at any moment and make common cause with their brethren, George fully realised that he was in a cleft stick, hemmed in as he would thus be by hostile natives on every side. So he made up his mind to abandon Fountain’s Gap, and remove his family to Komgha; then he would have his hands free to take the field if it were still necessary. The move was to be made that morning, and all the household were hastily preparing for it.

It was arranged that they should remain in the settlement for the present, till it could be seen how things would turn out. There they would be safe, as the place would be a kind of dépôt and the headquarters whence all operations for guarding the border would be carried on.

“And now, George, I suppose the Kafirs will have made a bonfire of the house before I see it again,” remarked his wife, as a turn of the road hid the homestead from view.

“Dunno. Impossible to predict. They may, and they may not,” sententiously replied George, whose chief object in life, at that moment, was the lighting of his pipe under the adverse circumstances of being at the same time obliged to control a pair of strong, fresh horses, none of the quietest at the best of times. He was driving a Cape cart, the ordinary family coach of the frontier settler, which, besides the said family, contained very little else, for he intended to return at once as soon as the womenkind were in safety, and load up a waggon with such of his lares and penates as it was most desirable to preserve; for the rest, well, he supposed it must take its chance. Lilian was riding—needless to specify with what escort—and Marshall, who was leading a young horse, and whose attention was wholly taken up with that intractable animal—or at any rate, said it was—rode a little way behind.

“I wonder when I shall get you all to myself again, Arthur,” she said, softly.

“I was thinking very much the same,” he replied. “But keep the mercury up, dear. The row may not last long.”

“Yes. I must not be such a coward,” she said. “But somehow this morning, in spite of the sunshine and the glorious weather, there is something so awfully depressing over everything. The whole country seems deserted. That farmhouse we just passed spoke volumes, standing there all shut up; and there are no natives about even. It is dreadful.”

She was rather pale, after the long, anxious night, depressed as with the shadow of coming woe. Claverton looked tenderly at the sweet face in its sad, delicate beauty, and wished to Heaven the Kafirs would leave them all in peace. A fight was very good fun, but, for his part, he had had enough in the way of excitement to last him all his life, at least so he thought; and now he would ask nothing better than to spend the remainder of his days in calm, undisturbed quiet, with this, his long-lost love.

“Look,” he said; “there are some people coming across there—and they are Kafirs.”

Lilian started. “Where? Oh, there are only a few,” said she, in a relieved tone. For now, every member of the Amaxosa race assumed, in her imagination, the form of a fierce enemy threatening destruction to her and hers.

The natives, who had been crossing a bushy hollow some four hundred yards off, suddenly stopped, and began peering over the trees at the party, as if uncertain as to the reception they would meet with. Far away stretched the rolling sunny plains, and the lines of wooded hills, where here and there a thick column of smoke ascended through the clear air. One or two distant homesteads were visible—empty, and their pastures tenantless, for a general flight had taken place and the land seemed dead indeed; and there, a little way off, were the red forms of the Kafirs watching them from the bush, while the pleasant sun shone upon the bright points of their assegais.

“It reminds me rather of our ride over to Thirlestane that day,” said Claverton. “It’s just such another day for sunshine and scenery.”

“But not for peace,” she rejoined, softly. “Ah, if all was only as peaceful now.”

“But it will be, darling. Only a little while longer,” replied he, glad to have diverted her thoughts from this unexpected source of fear. And as they rode on further and further from it, the group of armed savages could still be seen watching them from the hill, but these were too few in number to be formidable, and, moreover, the settlement was near at hand. To which another hour of journeying brought them in due course.

And how changed was the aspect of the ordinarily quiet little village now! Waggons stood about everywhere, the three or four irregular streets were filled with a bustling crowd—men mounted and men afoot—men of every class and pursuit—farmer, mechanic, storekeeper, frontier policeman, with here and there a military uniform, and, amid the crowd, dark-skinned natives moved quietly about, or stood in knots at the corners, discussing the latest *indaba*. And the softer sex, too, held its own, in the shape of the wives and daughters of the settlers—these, for their part, of as varied a class as their lords—the ponderous frame of the blowzy Dutch *vrouw*, side by side with the regular features and straight profile of some tastefully-attired daughter of an old English line.

But although at first sight the place wore an air of bustle and confusion, it must not be supposed that chaos reigned. A regular system of defence had been organised in the event of attack, and certain points of vantage entrenched and fortified, and the safety of the place was provided for ably and well. The surrounding country, undulating and grassy, was dotted with horses and cattle grazing. These could be driven in at a moment’s warning; and the approaches to the place, being quite open and devoid of cover, were abundantly commanded by the artillery barracks of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police, which stood upon a hill some eight hundred yards from the village. The church, a brick and plaster building of unparalleled ugliness, would make an efficient block-house in the last extremity—surrounded as it was with a high sod wall. For those to whom their fellows’ necessities were their own opportunities, the existing state of affairs promised a rich harvest, for the stores were doing a brisk trade, and the canteens and hotels were full morning, noon, and night. On the steps of one of the latter lounged a group of men as our friends arrived.

“Hullo, Payne! You don’t mean to say that’s yourself?” cried one. “Why, I thought you were going to stick to your place through it all.”

“Well, and who says I’m not?” retorted Payne. “Can’t a fellow drive into the village for the day without having trekked?”

“Oh, for the day!” repeated the first speaker, significantly. “Then, my good fellow, let me recommend you to remain. After that last affair we shall have old Kreli coming straight across to give as a look up, he’ll be so cock-a-hoop.”

“Wish he would,” growled another. “We’d give him particular toko.”

“What last affair?” said Payne, half anticipating the answer. “Has there been a fight?”

“I should jes’ think there had. A few of the Police and a lot of Fingoes were tackled by the Gcalekas; but you must have heard!”

“No, I haven’t; not a word.”

“Well, then,” went on the other, brightening up as a man will do when he is the first to impart to you a big bit of news; “the thing was this. A lot of Gcalekas—five thousand, they say—were going across to thrash the Fingoes, and the Police were ordered out to support the Fingoes. They met, and the gun opened fire—one of them seven-pounders they were practising here with t’other day. It appears that they made very good shootin’, and mowed down the Kafirs like smoke; and then somehow or other the gun broke down, and, by George, sir, before you could say ‘knife’ the Fingoes turned tail and ran—bolted clean. Well, of course it wasn’t to be expected a few Police—a mere handful as it were—How many were there, Jim?” broke off the narrator, turning to a companion.

“About one hundred and sixty.”

“Yes. Well, it wasn’t to be expected they could stand against five thousand of Kreli’s chaps; and they didn’t. The order was given to retire, and then it became a job to catch the horses, and, as the Kafirs charged them, they were obliged to run for it. Some who couldn’t catch their horses were killed—six—six privates and a sub-inspector; and now old Kreli’s cock of the walk—for the time being.”

“Where was the row?” asked Claverton.

“Well, it was at a place called Guadana—just on the boundary of the Idutywa Reserve.”

“When was it—yesterday?” inquired Payne.

“No—day before. I’m expecting a chap round here directly who’s straight from up there. Come in and liquor, and we’ll get him to tell us all about it.”

“The day before yesterday!” echoed Payne, opening his eyes wide—and he and Claverton looked meaningly at each other—for it was on the evening of that very day that the old Kafir had come to them with his stealthy warning, and the dread Fire Trumpet had blazed forth on the Kei hills, signalling to the expectant tribes within the colonial boundary, the news of their brethren’s victory. And it was on the following day that they two had so nearly carried the war into the enemy’s country in pursuit of the stolen cattle, all unconscious, then, of the mad rashness of the undertaking—an undertaking, which, had it been carried out, would assuredly have cost them their lives.

Volume Two—Chapter Eight.

The Attack on the "Great Place."

It is night. Night, that is to say, for all practical purposes, though strict chronological accuracy might compel us to define it as morning; for nearly three hours have elapsed since midnight. But, be that as it may, at present it is as dark as the nethermost shades, as one of that long, silent file of horsemen, wending its way through the gloom, remarks to a comrade.

A chill breeze stirs the raw atmosphere, and sweeps before it puffs of misty vapour which have been resting thickly alike upon hill-top and low-lying bottom. Overhead a few sickly stars shine forth through the flying scud, to be quickly veiled again, and replaced by another spangled patch. And, advancing at a foot-pace, comes line upon line of mounted men, moving through the darkness like the phantom horsemen of some eerie legend. Very little talking is there in the ranks. Muffled in their overcoats and with hats slouched over their faces the men ride on, stolid, and meditative, and little inclined for conversation in the damp, raw air which has a corresponding effect upon their spirits, even if orders had not been issued for quiet and caution; for it is a night march in the heart of the enemy's country.

It is difficult to distinguish face or feature of any description in the profundity of the gloom; but now and again the dull silence and the dead monotonous tramp of hoofs is relieved by the clank of arms and the jingle of a bit; or the smothered imprecation of some one whose horse has stumbled in the darkness, as he holds up the careless animal, who gives a snort of alarm. And the march continues on through the night, till at last the gloom shows signs of lightening, and we begin to make out the aspect of this bellicose-looking cavalcade advancing over the hills and dales of savage Gcalekaland. We see a number of roughly-clad, bearded men, mostly attired in serviceable corduroy and with a gaily-coloured handkerchief twined round their slouch hats, mounted on tough, wiry steeds. On their saddles are strapped blankets or mackintoshes and for arms each man carries a rifle of some sort—from the Government Snider, to the double-barrelled weapon in ordinary frontier use, rifled and smooth-barrel for varying distance or quarry. Not a few have revolvers also; and broad, heavy belts, holding at least two hundred rounds of cartridge, are buckled round them or slung over their shoulders. Many of which bullets will, I trow, find their mark in the dusky bodies of the savage enemy before the day is very far advanced. This is a corps of Irregular Horse, frontiersmen all of them. Another side of the column we see, in the gathering dawn, is composed of mounted volunteers—townsmen—whose gay uniforms, cavalry sabres, and glittering accoutrements, show out in contrast to the more sombre trappings of the corps first noticed. Yet of the two it is not difficult to predict which the enemy would rather meet in battle. Another ingredient in this martial array is the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police, two or three troops of which useful force, looking ready and soldier-like in their helmets and sober uniforms, flank the march—these are armed with short carbine and revolver. And lo, moving along, drawn by several stout horses, black and rakish-looking in the uncertain light, are the field-pieces, with their attendant gunners—a smart and efficient selection of men.

The object of the expedition may be divulged by a scrap of the conversation of one of its members.

"So we shall smoke the old fox out of his own earth at last," is saying a sturdy young fellow in the ranks of the Irregular Horse.

"Ha, ha! Shall we? You don't suppose old Kreli is sitting at home waiting for us, do you?" is his comrade's reply. "Why, he's miles off, I expect."

"Bet you he isn't," cut in a third. "Bet you one to five in half-crowns we nobble old Kreli to-day."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the first speaker. "Jack's so sure of his bet that he wants all the odds in his favour."

"Well, well, yes," rejoined the other, briskly. "We must have a bet on, you know, just as a matter of form. But you'll have to hand over, Hicks, my boy. You laid me long odds when we started that we shouldn't burn Kreli's Great Place before Christmas, and—"

"And we haven't," interrupted Hicks. "There's many a slip, you know, and we are not there yet; and the commander may take it into his head to—"

"Ssh-h! Silence there forward, please?"

The two disputants subsided. They were very near the scene of operations now, and almost immediately a halt was called. Beneath, in a hollow, lay the "Great Place," a large collection of huts—well placed for convenience and comfort, but extremely badly for purposes of defence—on a bend of the Xora River, whose clear waters flowed gurgling past. Overshadowing the village on the one side was a great krantz, and around lay pleasant slopes of rolling pasture, relieved here and there by patches of mimosa thorns. All was wrapped in the most profound silence as the day broke. The inhabitants of the village slumbered unsuspectingly; and if the old chief was there it was extremely likely that the attacking column, drawing a cordon round the place, would have him fast shut within the trap. Meanwhile the said column rested upon its oars, and grumbled.

"What the devil *are* we waiting for?" fumed Hicks. "The niggers'll all get away before we get so much as a long shot at them. And a fellow mayn't even have a pipe while he's waiting."

"Keep cool, old man," replied Armitage. "Or ask Captain Jim."

"Captain Jim," being none other than our old friend Jim Brathwaite, who, with characteristic energy, the moment war was fairly declared, had set to work to raise a select corps of his own—not a difficult proceeding, for men flocked from all parts to take service under a leader so popular and so well known for dash and daring—and in three days he had enrolled nearly a hundred picked men. This corps comprised all of our old Seringa Vale friends, and, being mainly of local origin, its members knew and trusted thoroughly each other and their leaders.

“Ah, now we shall hear something,” went on Hicks, as a Police orderly was seen to ride up and confer with their leader. “The advance, I expect.”

“Or the retreat,” suggested another, cynically. “Just as likely the one as the other, from all accounts.”

“Hallo. There’s the enemy, by Jupiter!” cried another young fellow.

All turned. A dark column was seen rapidly advancing up the hill in their rear, and more than one heart beat quicker as its owner watched the approach of this new factor in the state of affairs.

“Not it,” said Naylor, quietly. “It’s the Fingoes for whom we’ve been waiting all this time. Now we shall be able to go forward.”

An exclamation of wrath went along the line.

“Lazy brutes!”

“Waiting for *them*, indeed!” and so on.

“Now, men,” said Naylor, who was second in command, “here’s the programme. We are to attack on the right with the Kaffrarian fellows. At the sound of the bugle we advance, in skirmishing order, according to the number of Kafirs in the kraal, and the fight they show. If possible, we are to surround them. Now—mount!”

The last order had not to be given twice, and in a moment the whole troop was moving round behind the hills, to take up their allotted position—where they waited, each man, rifle in hand, burning with impatience to begin. Scarce a sound was audible in that quiet vale; now and then a small bird fluttered up from the grass with a piping twitter, once a great black ringhals rustled away, half inflating his hood in surprised wrath at the unwonted disturbance, but even of this abhorred foe the men took no notice. They were after heavier game to-day—the heaviest of all—human game. And the mist rolled back over the bills.

Suddenly a shot rings out on the morning air, then another and another. And now, on every face is an expression of the most eager expectancy, and every one grips his rifle. The hands of some of the younger men, who have never been in action before, begin to shake; but not with fear. There is something intensely exciting in this silent waiting, and they are only longing to begin. Then a volume of white-blue smoke spouts forth from a point above, a heavy boom, a hurtling rush through the air, and the shrapnel bursts with a screech and a detonation right over the nearest cluster of huts. At the same time the bugle-notes peal out from the hill-top loud and clear—the signal for the attack to begin.

And the kraal wears the appearance of a disturbed ants’ nest. From everywhere and nowhere, apparently, dark forms are starting up, and the whole place is alive with fierce warriors, and shining gun-barrels, and bristling assegais; and puffs of smoke among the thatch huts, and many an ugly “whiz” in the ears of the attacking force, show that the Kafirs have opened a tolerably smart fire in return.

Crack—crack—crack! echo the rifles of the assailants, as the jets of flame, which in an advancing line play upon the doomed village, draw nearer and nearer—the sharpshooters taking advantage of every bit of cover during their approach. And over and above the rattle of small-arms booms out the thunderous roar of cannon, losing itself in a hundred echoes on the wall of the great cliff opposite, and again and again bursts the screeching shell over that swarm of human beings, and very soon the groans of the stricken and the maimed and the dying begin to mingle with the fierce war-shouts of the Gcaleka warriors. These, indeed, are beginning to fall thick and fast, but still their bullets and bits of potleg (Note 1) whistle about the ears of the attacking party.

“Now, men!” cries Jim Brathwaite. “One more volley and then at them. Ready!”

A rattling crash as every rifle is emptied, and then with a wild cheer the men, revolver in hand, are riding at a gallop upon the kraal; but first and foremost throughout is their undaunted leader. And the Kafirs, their ranks already sadly thinned out, unable to withstand the onslaught of this mad charge, turn and fly for dear life.

“Hurrah! At them, boys!” yells Jim, discharging his revolver at the foremost of two stalwart Gcalekas, who have sprung like lightning out of the very ground, as it were. The savage, however, dives to avoid the shot, which hits one of his fellow-countrymen fair in the back, and, gathering himself like a panther, leaps at his assailant, assegai in hand, aiming a furious stab at his side—but too late. The impetus of his pace carries Jim past, and the Kafir, missing his blow and his footing, falls forward on his face, to be trampled into a lifeless pulp beneath the hoofs of the horses, as the whole troop pours through the village, pistolling the fleeing or opposing enemy, and the ground is strewn with human forms, dead and dying.

And now the fight has become a stampede and a rout. Shut in on three sides by the horsemen bearing down upon them, the fleeing Kafirs run like bucks along the river bank, to make good their escape ere yon dark cloud of advancing Fingoes, sweeping steadily down to cut them off, shall get in front of them. Can they do this, they may yet hope to count up their scattered remnant in the welcome shelter of that dark forest line a few miles off. At any rate, they will cut their way through the Fingo dogs, and many a fierce warrior, grinding his teeth as he grips his assegai, starts off with renewed vigour, to pour out the heart’s blood of at any rate one of his despised foes before he dies.

Suddenly the flight stops, and with a rallying cry a body of the Kafirs make a stand. They are beyond the reach of the shells, and by this time the rout has scattered far over the plain; and the nearest Fingoes, who have been slowly overtaking their enemies, waver and hesitate, quailing before their former masters, who throw out at them threats and fierce taunts. The fugitives have nothing but empty guns, which being mostly muzzle-loaders, they have no time to reload. Assegais are thrown, and more than one whooping and hitherto exultant Fingo wallows in the dust, transfixed by the deadly javelin. In another minute these cowardly auxiliaries will turn and fly, as the Gcalekas, with clubbed guns and gripping their large stabbing assegais, furiously charge them, uttering their war-cry—when behold, a body of horsemen comes sweeping up, Jim Brathwaite's troop leading, and the tide is turned. The Fingoes, inspired with fresh courage, stand, and sneak behind the whites, waiting for these to disperse the enemy, and then go quietly after them and assegai the wounded lying upon the ground.

"Hallo!" cried Armitage. "Hold on; Gough's down."

"Oh, it's nothing, I'm not hurt," is the plucky reply, as the young fellow leaps clear of his horse, which, stabbed to the heart by a wounded Kafir who lay on the ground, had fallen with a crash.

"Bight you are. Better fall in with the dismounted men," and away rides the speaker.

Suddenly one of the Kafirs, watching his opportunity, springs like a cat on to the saddle of a trooper, and gripping him round the neck with one arm, stabs him to the heart with the other; then loosing his murderous embrace as he and his victim slide to the earth together, he runs like the wind, casting his glance from side to side in search of another possible victim, when he falls, pierced by a couple of revolver bullets. Another savage is suddenly descried by Hicks and Armitage, who are riding together, rushing at a man, who with his bridle over his arm stands coolly awaiting his approach. This man both of them have noticed during the pursuit. Working apparently alone, he has kept himself entirely free from flurry and excitement, reining in every now and then and taking a deliberate shot at long range, almost invariably bringing down one of the foe. And now they watch him, as a great sinewy Kafir rushes at him like a wild beast, now leaping high in the air, now dropping into the grass, then zig-zagging as if to get round the white man, who stands perfectly calm through it all, with a slightly sneering smile upon his face, but covering this dancing, leaping assailant with his gun-barrels.

Crack! The savage falls. Then, as suddenly, he picks himself up, and with a wild shout rushes at his cool antagonist.

"He's got him, by God!" cries Hicks, as in a tension of excitement he marks the artful feint of the barbarian and, as he thinks, the turning of the tables. But the other never moves, nor does the expression of his countenance alter by a single hair's breadth.

Crack! Another report, and the fierce warrior falls, this time stone-dead, leaping nearly against the barrel which at point-blank had sent a full charge of "loopers" straight through his heart.

"Whoop! Hooray!" yelled Hicks, wild with excitement. "Grand old shot, that! Thought you were a gone coon, by Jove!"

The other quickly slipped a couple of cartridges into the smoking breech of his gun, and looked up with a slight smile at this remark; and what he saw soon changed the smile into an outright laugh. For Hicks was staring at him, speechless and open-mouthed, while even Armitage looked somewhat dumbfoundered.

"The devil!" ejaculated Hicks, and relapsed into staring again.

"That's uncivil," remarked the stranger, drily.

"Why, hang it, it is—Claverton, no one else! Arthur, old boy, where on earth *have* you dropped from? I vow this is the best thing that's happened for years. We thought you must be dead and buried, hearing nothing about you," and leaping to the ground, honest Hicks wrung his former comrade's hand as if he would crush that remarkably useful member.

Something in the last phrase jarred upon Claverton. Lilian had said much the same thing when they had met.

"Well, here I am at any rate. Turned up again like the proverbial 'shise' coin," he replied. "How's yourself? Flourishing apparently. You look as if 'the holy estate' agreed with you. And Jack? I say, Jack; bet you two to one in anything you like you don't drop that chap scuttling away over there."

"Done for you!" cried Armitage, sighting his rifle and drawing a bead on one of the retreating enemy, distant some seven hundred yards.

"No. Hand over!" cried Claverton. "Missed him clean. Give you another shot, though."

But the other shot was likewise a failure; and the Gcaleka got off scot-free to rejoin, if he listed, the bosom of his family.

"Never mind, Jack. I won't dun you for the stakes, I only wanted to see if you had left off that villainous sporting habit of yours."

"But, Arthur—how the deuce did you come here?" went on Hicks. "You're not a Volunteer—those fellows are all jingling with chains and whistles."

"Yes, I am. Kaffrarian Rangers, full private. And then?"

"And then? Why, you must join us without any further *indaba*. We'll have a high old time of it. Do you mean to say you can cut all your old friends and go and fight among strangers? Bosh!"

Claverton whistled meditatively as he surveyed the field of battle and of flight. Here and there lay a dark object in a heap amid the grass, just as it had fallen—the slain body of a Gcaleka warrior—and scattered afar rode the pursuing horsemen.

“Well, I don’t know,” he said. “I should rather like to cut in with you fellows. I’ll see if it can be managed.”

“Of course you will,” said Hicks, light-heartedly. “By Jove, if that isn’t ‘the retire.’”

For the clear notes of the bugle were ringing afar, and in obedience to the summons the straggling horsemen began to collect from all parts of the field, and to retrace their steps, marvelling not a little at this sudden and unlooked-for mandate. And from the chief’s village, the “Great Place,” went up a great cloud of smoke, as, having hunted out its fleeing inhabitants, the last of the attacking force had flung a torch into the thatch tenements, setting the whole in a blaze; and above the bursting flames great rolling pillars of smoke mounted to the sky.

Slowly the pursuers straggled back, their horses and themselves wet with perspiration and grimy with dust and powder; many hatless, having lost their “roofing,” they said, in the hurry-scurry of the charge or of the pursuit; while a darker stain showed upon others, whether on their clothes or accoutrements—the stain of blood. The horses were panting after their long gallop, and the riders commenting freely on the events of the morning in a loud, excited tone. Many carried assegais, whole or broken, which they had taken as trophies, also bead-work, and other articles of native apparel or adornment. And in the rear marched the Fingo contingent, howling their war-song and looking intensely valiant now that the danger was over.

“*Manzi! Ndipé manzi*!” (“Water. Give me water.”) besought a faint voice.

Our party stopped, looking searchingly around. Several bodies of the enemy lay about, all apparently lifeless.

“Let the skunk die,” said a rough-looking fellow, who, with several others, had joined them when the rally was sounded. “Or give him his quietus in the shape of a leaden pill. A pretty dance they’ve led us all this time, and now to be calling on us to do hospital nurse for them. Damned if I do.”

“Well, a pretty dance we’ve led them to-day, at any rate. Poor devil! It won’t do any one any harm to give him a drink,” rejoined Claverton, dismounting and scrutinising the only one who showed sign of life. A tall, finely-made young Kafir lay with eyes half unclosed, and breathing heavily, apparently in great pain. Claverton bent over him as he repeated his fevered entreaty.

“Well, you may do nurse, I shan’t, so good day to you,” jeered the first speaker, riding on, while Hicks and Armitage reined in a moment, looking from their newly-found chum to the wounded man as if wondering what was coming next. But Claverton, without heeding anybody, took a large flask from his pocket, and poured a little of its contents between the Kafir’s teeth. Then filling the cup with water from the river, which ran hard by, he raised the wounded man’s head, and let him drain off the desired fluid.

“More,” whispered the Kafir; and having filled the little vessel again, Claverton watched his *protégé* drink the contents greedily. Then, with a deep sigh of relief, the sufferer lay back with closed eyes.

“That’ll do, Arthur. Come on, now, and leave the beggar alone,” cried Hicks, impatiently. “Or are you going to set up an ‘ambulance’ all over the field?”

“Don’t know,” replied the other, imperturbably. “It’s not much trouble, and we’ve been shooting such a lot of the poor devils that one may as well give one of them the consolation of a drink *in extremis*.” And he stood contemplating his *protégé*, who he had ascertained was not dangerously though badly wounded by a ball in the side. Then it occurred to him that the face of the stricken savage was not altogether unfamiliar to him; but where he had seen it he could not remember.

And now the war-song of the Fingoes drew nearer, and hearing it, the wounded man once more unclosed his eyes, with a mingled expression of despair and resignation and contempt. There was not a chance for him, he thought. The “dogs” would come up, and the white man would stand by and tell them to kill him. Well, what did it matter? They were dogs, and he was a warrior of the Amaxosa—nothing could get rid of that fact. Then, just as he thought his hour had come, the white man remarked in his own tongue: “Lie perfectly still and shut your eyes. If the Fingoes see that you’re alive, even though I may save you now, they will surely come back and kill you before you can get away.” And the other obeyed.

Claverton slowly proceeded to fill and light his pipe, as if he had dismounted with that object and that alone, and the Fingoes, their assegais red and blood-stained, marched past, looking about as though in search of any of the dreaded foe still living. They saluted the white man with servile acclamation, and passed on.

“Now,” continued he, when the savage auxiliaries were well out of the way, “wait until the coast’s clear, and then hook it. Go and tell Kreli that if he’s wise he’ll shut up fighting and come and sing small, and acknowledge that he’s made an ass of himself. You see, we don’t want to kill you fellows unless we are obliged, and then we’ll do for the lot of you. Now be off as soon as you can.”

The young Kafir, who was by no means a bad-looking fellow, smiled as he softly murmured assent, and, with a grateful look in his eyes, he laid hold of his benefactor’s foot and drew it to his lips in token of gratitude.

“All right,” said the latter; “now look to yourself,” and mounting his horse he overtook the rest, who had been making merry over their friend’s eccentricity.

“Now you’ve done the wet-nurse trick, old chap, we’ll get back to camp and have a glass of grog,” said Armitage.

"That's a good idea," assented Claverton. He did not mind their chaff, and would not have even if it were more ill-natured. A passing impulse had moved him to befriend this wounded savage, and he had obeyed it. And it may be that an even yet more humanising influence was at work, and that on that fierce battle-field, reeking with blood and carnage, the image of Lilian stood, viewing him with a sweet, approving smile as he listened to the agonised prayer of the stricken barbarian, who might be the first, if ever opportunity offered, to repay his charity with an assegai thrust. But having done this thing he was glad, and a softer feeling centred round his heart as if he actually heard Lilian's approving voice in his ear.

Much growling was indulged in as the burghers and volunteers, returning to camp, learned that the pursuit was to be discontinued. They had struck a decisive blow, and now were not to be allowed to follow it up. Public discontent found its expression freely and in forcible language.

"Infernal nonsense?" repeated one big fellow in reply to a comrade's observation. "I believe you. Why, what we've done to-day is no good at all—not one blessed ha'porth. We've shot a few of these fellers and chevied a few more; but what o' that? They're thick as bees over yonder," and the speaker jerked one hand in the direction of the flight, while with the other he viciously crammed his short, wooden pipe.

"Ay, that's so," assented a small, wiry-looking man. "If we had only gone straight on we could have cleared out the Manubi Bush right down to the coast, and driven the whole lot into the sea."

"Where they were going to drive us," chimed in another.

"And it's there we should have nobbled old Kreli," went on the former speaker. "He's in there, mark my words—in there waiting for news—he, and Sicgau, and Botmane, and the whole bilin' of 'em. Now we've burnt his old beehives here; but that's no good, they're built again in a day. No, sir; what we want is the old fox himself."

"And don't we wish we may get 'im? No; it's nurses we want to look after us," put in another.

There was a reluctant guffaw at this; but the gloom had deepened on their warlike souls.

"Well, we may as well go back, streak it straight home again, if we're going to be commanded by a set of old women," growled the first speaker. "We didn't come out here to *play* with the niggers, did we?"

"Looks like it, anyhow, mate."

Thus amid much growling, which, however, was not directed at our friend Jim, but at the power behind that gallant leader, the camps were pitched. A portion of the Police force started off back to their headquarters at Ibeka; but here, close to the scene of their late victory, the volunteers and burgher forces remained; and at nightfall the horses were driven in and "rung," that is to say, tethered in circles; while additional sentries were posted, and every precaution taken, the recent success notwithstanding, for they were in the enemy's country.

Jim Brathwaite was mightily glad, and no less surprised at the unexpected meeting, and warmly seconded Hicks' suggestion that Claverton should join his corps.

"Twice I noticed a fellow to-day, Arthur," he said, "who reminded me of your straight riding; and, by George, it must have been you yourself. Well, well; we are all bound to meet again some day, however we may scatter. But what do you think that fellow Hicks has done?"

"What?"

"Committed matrimony. And so has Jack."

"Has he? Jack, I mean. I knew about the other. Who, and when, and where?"

"Oh, that's a very old story, Jim," said Armitage, trying to look quite at his ease. "Claverton heard it ages ago. Give us some baccy."

They were sitting round the camp-fire. The afternoon had merged into night, and now the circle was discussing old times.

"Who?—Gertie Wray—you remember her—now Mrs Jack Armitage, promoted. When?—last year. Where?—in Grahamstown," replied Jim.

And then, as others joined them, the conversation turned from things personal and retrospective, to things political and present; and the state of affairs was discussed in all its bearings.

"Well, we've a big enough force in the field to thrash out the Gcaleka country," Jim was saying; "but then we shall have to be constantly playing hide-and-seek with the Kafirs until we catch old Kreli. If the Gaikas don't break out, all that the people on the border will have to do will be to guard their line so that none of these chaps can cross. If the Gaikas rise, why, then our friends there will be between two fires."

"And the Gaikas will rise," put in Garnier—Jim's second lieutenant—a quiet-looking, brown-bearded man of about five-and-forty. "You may take my word for that. It isn't for nothing that they've been going through all the war-dancing and farrago. It isn't for nothing they've been sending all their cattle away to the thickest parts of the Amatola forest. And it isn't likely they'd sit still—they, the warrior race of all others—and let Kreli do all the fighting. And to hear 'em talk, too! Why, they've been coming round my place in shoals, and they don't care what they say. Mind, they mean mischief."

“But, then, how is it they haven’t broken out already?” ventured Hicks.

Garnier looked pityingly at him. “For several reasons. There’s a strong peace party among them, for one thing. For another, they heard, or rather saw—for there were lots of them present—what a hammering the Gcalekas got the other day when they attacked Ibeka; and they’re not ready. But if any of these chaps of Kreli’s get through and join them—then look out.”

“Well, we can put a tremendous force into the field,” went on Jim. “Why, in the Eastern Province alone we could raise enough to finish the war in a couple of months, if they’re only put to it and not kept fooling about doing nothing.”

“Yes; and if they’re properly looked after in the field,” said another. “No one can fight unless he’s fed; and with the commissariat always two days behind, no body of men will remain long contented.”

“And, while they are fooling about, all their property’s going to wrack and ruin, as ours is at this damned moment,” growled Thorman, who was one of the party.

“Never mind. All the more reason why we should make a thorough good thing of it while we are about it,” said another, of more cheerful disposition. “We’ll teach Jack Kafir a lesson this time, that he’ll remember.”

Thus talking, they sat round that red camp-fire, which threw a fitful glow upon bronzed faces and attire, fantastic-looking in the semi-darkness and in its wild picturesqueness, until at length the bugle sounded, “lights out,” and gradually all subsided to silence. Now and again the yelp and snarl of a jackal came up from beneath, where lay the unburied corpses of the slain foe, and where a number of heaps of black smouldering ashes were all that remained of what in the morning had been the Kraal of the Paramount Chief of Kafirland.

Note 1. In war-time, when lead is scarce, Kafirs manufacture tolerably efficient slugs by cutting up the legs of their iron cooking-pots.

Volume Two—Chapter Nine.

A Lull in the Storm.

A dry, scorching wind is whirling the pungent red dust-clouds along the streets of King Williamstown, and early though it be, not much more than nine o’clock, life is at the moment exceeding unpleasant for dwellers in the Kaffrarian capital as the hot blast sweeps down the wide streets and over the great arid square, powdering the thirsty eucalyptus trees with a layer of sand, penetrating even the coolest and tightest of houses. A day on which an easy-chair and nankeen garments seem absolute necessities, and yet in the busy frontier town there is as much life and stir as usual. Waggons load and unload before the principal stores; their oxen standing or lying in the yokes, poor and attenuated, for the season is a bad one indeed, further up, the country is suffering from a veritable drought. Men move about singly or by twos and threes, some in the semi-military uniform affected by officers holding a command in some frontier corps, others lightly clad and in broad sombrero-like hat or pith helmet. Round the native shops and canteens bronzed Kafirs squat and jabber, or, jumping on their weedy, undersized nags, dash off at a gallop down the street. Here and there, a Police trooper, the snow-white cover of his peaked cap gleaming in the son, rides briskly away from the telegraph office, and the scarlet uniforms of a detachment of regulars, as they march up from the river, returning from their morning bathe, make a glow of shining colour in the close, dusty street. It is an ill wind, however, that blows nobody good, as the drinking-bars could testify; for the number of persons who enter those useful institutions in the course of the morning—each and all with precisely the same remark, that it being externally so dry they stand all the more in need of a wet within—is so large that I will not attempt to reveal it.

Leaving the stir and the whirl of the brisk trading centre, we will pass to a comparatively quiet quarter. In the verandah of a small house, on the outskirts of the town, some one is standing, looking intently through a pair of field-glasses, which are levelled at a distant object, evidently a horseman rapidly approaching by the road leading from the Transkei. For a moment she stands eager and motionless, gazing with all her might at that dusty road in the distance; then a red flush of disappointment tinges the beautiful face as she drops the glass from her eyes, and the graceful, erect figure suddenly assumes an unconscious droop.

“The fifth time this morning,” she murmurs to herself, dejectedly. “I declare I won’t look again, it’s unlucky.”

“So it is, dear. ‘A watched kettle never boils,’ you know,” says a cheery female voice at her elbow. “That’s why I haven’t been watching for George. He’ll come, all in good time; and so will the other one. But you really mustn’t stay out in this heat, Lilian, you’ll be ill, and then shan’t I catch it!”

“Oh no, I won’t,” answered Lilian, with a laugh and a blush. “Besides, I like the heat.”

“Do you? I wish I did, for I’ve got to go out in it. I’m not even going to ask you to come, because I know it will be impossible to get you off that verandah until—until—well, until,” concluded Annie Payne with another cheerful laugh, as she started upon her unwilling errand, whatever it was.

Left to herself, Lilian looked wearily out on the wide expanse of sun-baked *veldt*, watching ever the white straggling road where it lost itself over the rise. Once a figure appeared on the sky-line, and her heart gave a great bound, but it was only a pedestrian, her eyes were sufficiently practised now to tell her that, without the necessity of looking through the glass. The heat and the scorching wind were nothing to her. It might have been the most exhilarating weather, and she would not have felt the difference, for to-day her lover would return—return to her, after more than two months of campaigning, two months of danger and hardship and separation; and now she watched the road, impatiently pacing the verandah, and longing for his arrival. Yet he came not. She had done nothing but scan the approaches to the town through the field-glass; but what to the naked eye had more than once looked like the well-known form, had speedily changed to that of some ungainly Dutchman, or sooty native, when the powerful lens was brought to bear upon it.

Yes, the campaign is over now—at least, for the present; and the volunteers and burgher forces are returning home, leaving to the Mounted Police and Regulars the task of patrolling the Gcaleka country—that being about all there is left to do. The summer is well advanced; in fact, it wants only a fortnight to Christmas, and the frontiersmen composing the colonial forces decline to remain any longer doing mere patrol work. They have borne their part gallantly in the actual fighting, and now that this is at an end they rightly deem themselves entitled to return. So there is great rejoicing in the little domicile in King Williamstown where George Payne has installed his household during his absence at the front, and now, on this bright, though overpoweringly hot day, Lilian stands in the verandah watching for the return of her lover.

What an anxious time to her have been those two months! How she has thought of him, and in spirit been with him all through the campaign! How eagerly she has sought out every scrap of news of the forces in the field, whether in the newspaper reports or the telegrams *affiché*-d outside the post office! And at night she has lain awake picturing all manner of dreadful contingencies till her pillow was wet with tears; but she can do nothing—nothing but weep and pray. And now the time of waiting is past, and she will see him again to-day, and lay her head upon his breast and feel that life is too good to live.

But if he should not come till to-morrow or the next day! Something may have detained him. An accident perhaps, such things do happen. Her head begins to ache, and she goes into the house in search of some cooling restorative. She has the house to herself fortunately—for the children are out somewhere—and sinking into a low chair she holds her handkerchief, steeped in the grateful liquid, to her throbbing brows. At last, with a sickening sense of blankness—of hope deferred, at her heart, she falls asleep, worn out by the heat and the watching coming upon a night of wakefulness.

The molten hours creep on. The deep bass voices of a group of Kafir passers-by, momentarily break their stillness; the thrifty German housewife opens the door of the dwelling opposite—for it is a new quarter, and the houses are built almost in the *veldt*—and throws a pailful of stuff to her fowls, which run clucking up; but no tramp of hoofs disturbs the midday quiet.

Suddenly Lilian awakes. Is it an instinct, or is it the clink of a spur and a light, firm tread on the *stoep* outside, that makes her start up and hasten to the door? In the passage she collides against a man who is entering, and with a quick exclamation he catches her in his arms.

“Arthur—love—is it indeed you? I am not dreaming, am I?” she murmurs, clinging tightly to him, the rich voice vibrating with uncontrollable emotion. “It is you—at last—darling. And I have been waiting and watching so long—till I began to think all sorts of dreadful things must have happened,” and raising her head from his breast she looks at him, laughing and weeping at the same time in her ecstasy of joy.

“Yes; it’s myself all right,” he replies, kissing away the tears from her cheeks and eyes. “But I shall begin to think it’s some one else directly, because this is far and away too good for me—too good for me to believe in. Lilian, my life! Every day since we parted I have been looking forward to and waiting for this.”

“Ah God! I have got my darling back again safe—safe!” she murmurs almost inaudibly, but Claverton hears it, and he does not answer, he only tightens his clasp of the lithe, willowy figure which he holds in his embrace, and covers the soft dusky hair, lying against his cheek, with passionate kisses. A thousand years of ten times the peril and hardship he has gone through since they parted would be a small price to pay for such a moment as this, he thinks. They make a pleasant picture, those two, as they stand there. He—well-knit, grave, handsome, in the rough picturesqueness of his campaigning attire, his features bronzed by exposure to sun and climate, and with his normal air of quiet resolution deepened and enhanced by a sense of many dangers recently passed through; looking at her with a tender, protecting reverence. She—soft, graceful, and clinging—the sweet lips curving into a succession of radiant smiles even while her eyes are yet wet with the tears which an uncontrollable feeling of love and thankfulness has evoked.

“So you thought I was never going to put in an appearance, darling?” he says, at length.

“Ah, how I waited and longed! But I can forget it now—now that I have got you. Wait! You look so much better for the dreadful time you have been through, dearest, so strong and well. And you are not going off again, are you? The war is over now.”

“I hope so,” is his rather weary reply. “I’m tired of ruffians and camp life—utterly sick of them. Not but what the said ruffians are rather good fellows; but peace is better than fighting, when all’s said and done. By the way, how is it we have the house all to ourselves? This is an unusual run of luck, my Lilian.”

“Mrs Payne is out somewhere, and the children too. And—”

“And—why didn’t you go with them, instead of moping in here alone all the morning?”

“Arthur!”

“Lilian! Don’t look so shocked, my darling. Do you think I don’t know perfectly, that you wouldn’t lose a chance of getting the first glimpse of a certain broken-down and war-worn ragamuffin?”

A shadow darkened the light. Both looked up quickly as a slim, well-made native, standing in the doorway, raised his hand above his head and sang out lustily, “Inkos!”

“Hallo, Sam!” cried Claverton, not best pleased with the interruption. “How are you getting on?”

The native showed a double row of dazzling “ivories” as he grinned in genuine delight at seeing his master back again.

“Did you kill many—very many of the Amaxosa, my chief?” he asked, in the Zulu tongue.

“H’m. Many of those who got in front of my gun-barrels up there, met with bad accidents,” replied his master, drily.

Sam chuckled and grinned. His exultation could hardly contain itself.

“Ha, Missie Liliane,” he said, in his broken English, “Sam he tell you so. Inkos, he kill lots, lots of Amaxosa nigga. He shoot, shoot them—so, so,” and he began snapping his fingers vehemently, and otherwise pantomiming the sharp-shooting of a body of skirmishers. “Sam, he tell you so, Missie Liliane. Amaxosa nigga no good! They no can hurt Inkos. Sam, he tell you so. Inkos, he shoot, shoot them instead. Amaxosa nigga no good. Haow!”

“Sam, you rascal, shut up that,” cried Claverton, good-humouredly. “Cut found to the stable and look after the horse; I’ve ridden the poor brute nearly to death. Give him a good rub down, and see that he’s cool before he drinks. D’you hear?”

“Teh bo ’Nkos,” answered Sam, and he disappeared; and they could hear him as he passed beneath the open window, humming to a sort of chant of his own: “Aow! Amaxosa nigga no good—no good.”

“Has that chap behaved himself while I’ve been away, darling?” asked Claverton.

“Behaved himself? Why, he’s the best of boys. Sometimes when I felt very, very downhearted about the war, that dear, good Sam would try all in his power to cheer me up, and persuade me that you would be sure not to come to harm, love. He used to declare that the Kafirs were sure to run away whenever you appeared, and he cut such extraordinary antics, always bringing in that ridiculous phrase of his, that he kept me in fits of laughter. Yes, he has been as good as possible.”

“That’s a feather in Sam’s cap, and a deuced good thing for him. Wasn’t it queer, my falling in with all the old lot up there? They were all just the same; even Jeffreys hasn’t quite laid by his scowl, and as for Jack Armitage, he’s a greater lunatic than ever. I hope our little friend keeps a tight rein on him at his hearth and home, for in the field there was no holding the fellow. He has started a frightful thing in bugles, which he toots upon vehemently on the smallest provocation, though, by Jove, I was glad enough to hear that braying old post-horn once, when Brathwaite’s men turned the tables in our favour in an awkwardish scrimmage.”

It was a remarkable coincidence that as he uttered these words a terrific fanfare should be sounded outside.

“That’s it! Jack’s post-horn for anything!” cried he, making for the window. “Talk of the—ah’m! Wonder what the fellow’s doing here. And, look, there’s George Payne and the rest of them.”

The whole lot of them it was, and a minute later they all entered, laughing and talking at a great rate.

“Why, Jack, what the deuce are *you* doing up here?” cried Claverton, in astonishment.

“We forgot it might be necessary to obtain Mr Claverton’s permission to tread the streets of King Williamstown,” demurely said a voice at his elbow, before the other could reply.

Claverton turned.

“Oh—ah—ah’m! So *we* did. I forgot. How d’you do, Mrs Armitage?” he said, looking quizzically down at the bright, saucy face of the speaker.

Gertie Armitage—*née* Wray—laughed and blushed as she shook hands with him. She looked much the same as when last we saw her, a trifle saucier, perhaps, but that was only natural, said her friends, seeing that she had to look after madcap Jack.

That worthy, meanwhile, was endeavouring to initiate Payne’s son and heir into the mysteries of the key bugle, but the youngster could evoke no sound from the same, and was ready to cry with chagrin.

“Look here, Harry, this is the dodge,” and, putting the instrument to his lips, he emitted a series of diabolical and heartrending blasts.

“Jack—Jack!” cried Claverton, stopping his ears, “for Heaven’s sake drop that fiendish row, or you’ll have all the Germans in the quarter scuttling under their beds, thinking that the Gaikas have risen, and some fellow has come to commandeer them to go to the front.”

“Fiendish row! There’s gratitude for you,” retorted Armitage. “He didn’t call it a fiendish row that day down near the Bashi, did he, Payne?”

“No, it was all right then,” rejoined Claverton. “Music in the wrong place, you know, degenerates into a diabolical row. Keep the old post-horn for the ghosts at Spoek Krantz, Jack. They’d appreciate it keenly.”

“Oh, the ingratitude of human nature!” exclaimed the bugler. “But I’ve left Spoek Krantz.”

"Have you? Ah, I thought the ghosts would be too much for you some day. Where are you now?"

"Nowhere. Got a roving commission. When the country's quiet again I'm going to take over that place next door to Hicks. By the way, you should just see Hicks now, a model family man. Would hardly leave his missis and brace of kids even to go and have a shot at old Kreli. We almost had to lug him away by force."

"When the country is quiet again I'm going to do this," he had said, and in such wise do we mortals airily make our plans. Meanwhile all was hilarity and gladness and contentment in that circle, for was it not a reunion of those dear to each other, after the trials, and perils, and privations of a hard chapter of savage warfare?

Lilian was very happy in the days that followed; and to her lover, after the rough camp life, the toil and the battle, with all the hardening associations, the sunny quiet spent in the companionship of this refined, beautiful woman, was as the very peace of Heaven. Oft-times as he watched the sweet eyes kindle at his approach, and heard the firm, low voice shake ever so slightly, his heart would thrill and his cheek flush with a fierce elation over his absolute sense of possessing the rich, the priceless gift of her entire love; and then would succeed a momentary wave of despondency as he thought how this must be far too much happiness to fall to his lot, and with the thought something very like an unspoken prayer—wild, passionate, and unbridled in burden even as his own resolute nature—would shape itself within his heart, that rather than again experience such a blow as that which had sent him forth a desolate wanderer years ago—he might die—a hundred deaths, if need be, so that obliteration came to him at last. And had there been room for it, his tenderness towards Lilian would have redoubled with these reflections; but there was not—it was always the same.

"Be quick, darling," he said to her one day, as she was leaving the room for a moment to fetch some necessary implement missing from her work-basket. "I hate to have you out of my sight for half a minute more than is inevitable."

The two were alone together, and he pitched his book across the room impatiently as he spoke. She turned and came back to him.

"Why, I wonder you're not quite tired of me," she said, with her sunny smile, bending over him and toying with his hair.

"Tired of you! *My* Lilian. The only being on earth for me to love. The capacity has been kept so long in reserve that now there's no holding it."

She bent lower and laid her cheek against his brow. "Yes, Arthur. We are both alone in the world for each other—are we not?" she whispered; then, suddenly escaping from his would-be detaining arm, she darted to the door, turning to flash upon him a bright, loving look before she went out; and he, rising, kicked over a chair and then another, and opened and threw down three or four books without gleaning an idea of their contents, and walked to the window, then back again, and whistled, and otherwise fidgeted outrageously until her return.

Lose not a minute of your happiness, ye two; gather to the full the sweets of the present, even while ye may, for ye know not what the future may have in store. Even yet the war-cloud hangs threatening on the horizon; it has lifted, but has not vanished. Amid the rage of the elements may suddenly fall peace. It is but a lull in the tempest.

To some of his former companions-in-arms, who lived in the town or neighbourhood, Claverton was an unfailing source of wonder.

"I should never have known the fellow," one of them would say, as they discussed him among themselves. "Why, most of us in camp used to look upon Claverton as a man with no more heart than a stone. A fellow who would close the eyes of his twin brother and then sit down to a jolly good breakfast, and crack a joke about it,"—the speaker's idea of the acme of callousness. "And now he's making a perfect fool of himself about a girl—hardly leaves her for a moment, they say. I can't understand it," and the speaker knocked the ashes out of his pipe with a jerk and a shrug, implying half pity, half contempt.

"You could if you had seen her," said another, quietly. "She's awfully fetching."

"So I'm told. But still—such a hard nail as Claverton. I can't make it out."

Thus spoke his companions-in-arms. It could not be expected, however, that these plain, honest, matter-of-fact frontiersmen should give him credit for possessing a two-sided nature. They merely spoke of him as they had seen him.

One day the two were walking along the upper end of the market-square. It was in the middle of the forenoon, and though warm, a fine day, and the traffic on the footway was tolerably brisk, while around an auctioneer's table a goodly crowd was assembled, and the sale went on in spirited fashion. They were stopped by some mutual acquaintance, and Claverton, taking advantage of the incident, left Lilian talking to these, while he dived into the throng for a moment to speak to some one whom he had suddenly caught sight of. When he returned, he found Lilian standing alone, their friends having taken their leave and passed on.

"So sorry you've had to wait, darling—even a minute. Why, what is it?" For she was looking a trifle perturbed.

"Nothing. Really nothing. Let's go on."

"Is it the heat? We'll go home. It is rather overwhelming, of course; I ought to have remembered," he said, anxiously.

"No, it isn't too hot in the least," she answered. Then taking a quick, furtive look behind: "Arthur—wait—now look round—quick! There's somebody following us."

He turned rapidly and scanned the crowd. No one seemed to be making of them a special point of observation.

"I don't see any one out of the common. See if you can point him out, dear."

"No. He is gone; I could see him shrink out of sight directly I looked round the second time," she said, excitedly, twirling the handle of her sun-shade. "I wouldn't say anything at first, thinking it might be my fancy; but I could see him eyeing you as you went in among all those people just now. He was standing on the pavement—there."

"Well, he's disappeared now, at any rate," said Claverton, again looking carefully around. "What was the animal like—white or black?"

"Neither. A sort of dirty brown colour, not at all like a native of these parts. He had woolly hair, though, and a hideous, wrinkled face with two pointed, shark-like teeth; and he was looking at you so fiercely," and she shuddered. "And oh—Arthur—when I looked round again and saw those glaring eyes following on so close behind us, it quite frightened me."

Claverton was puzzled. Nine Englishmen out of ten would have gently pooh-poohed the idea as mere fancy; but his life had been too full of strange and startling experiences for that.

"Have you no secret enemy? No one who would owe you a grudge?" she continued, in a tone of deep anxiety. "That man looked murder at you."

"N-no; I can't call to mind any. Most likely a case of mistaken identity. The fellow must have taken me for some one else, and bolted directly I looked round for fear of being brought to book. That was it, dear, depend upon it; so don't think anything more about the concern," he concluded, with the air of a man who has successfully solved a mystery. But he wished he had caught a glimpse of the mysterious individual all the same.

The incident had a depressing effect upon Lilian which she was quite unable to shake off. That some terrible danger was hovering over and threatening her lover she was certain; and the idea of being tracked and watched by a secret foe was to her fraught with horror. But it was for him she feared—for this man whom every day rendered more unspeakably dear to her, and for whom, retiring, even timid as her nature was, she could be brave as a lion, even to the giving of her own life to shield him from harm. Of his past she knew but little—as yet he had not told her much, and in all the fulness of her love and trust she took a pride in abstaining from asking him; but that it had been more eventful than the lives of most men of his age she had gathered, and what relentless enemies might he not have, now surely and stealthily pursuing him? Many a glance of admiration was cast on her—in her serene, dignified beauty, which the troubled thoughtfulness now clouding her face only seemed to enhance—as they passed along the busy streets; and people began to inquire of each other who those two were who were never seen apart, and who looked such a well-matched couple.

Meanwhile, the political outlook was becoming gloomier every day, for the warlike tribes of the Gaikas and Hlambis—whose locations comprised some of the wildest and most inaccessible parts of Kaffraria—were on the verge of revolt. The stage of sullen restlessness and daring outrage was about to culminate in open warfare, and no doubt now existed that these savages intended to rise and make common cause with their brethren the Gcalekas, who, though decimated and dispersed, were as far as ever from being subdued. And, when compared with the rising now threatening, the fighting in Gcalekaland was a mere fleabite, for the latter had been localised in the Transkei, whereas this would envelope the whole Eastern frontier in the flames of war. Day by day the low rumblings of the gathering storm increased, and from far and near the families of the settlers came crowding into King Williamstown. Every hotel and lodging-house was crammed, and not a room was obtainable for love or money. Many lived in their tent-waggons, failing more substantial shelter, and the pastureland in the immediate neighbourhood seemed in danger of exhaustion from the multitudes of live stock which grazed thereon. The telegraph was actively at work, hourly flashing its messages of alarm or reassurance according as the latest turn of events warranted; while many-tongued rumour hinted at a decisive move pending on the part of the enemy beyond the border simultaneously with the rising of the tribes within the same. It was understood that the burgher forces were liable to be called out at any moment, and among the townsmen fresh volunteers were enrolled, and drill and parades went on night and day in view of the probability that the regular troops in garrison would be ordered to take the field, and that the townspeople must be ready to protect themselves.

And as if the scourge of impending war—the merciless warfare of the savage—was not enough, the land lay parched up with drought. Transport-riders from up-country had gruesome tales to tell of roads lined with rotting carcases or bleached skeletons of trek-oxen, which had succumbed unable to find nourishment in the burnt-up grass, or perishing on the margin of water-holes reduced to patches of dry, baked mud—pointing to their own attenuated spans in corroboration of their statements. The crops were failing, and, already in some districts, the appearance of locusts in sufficiently formidable swarms was reported; and the scant herbage, which the drought had spared, would be in danger of disappearing entirely before this new and redoubtable plague. Trade was at a standstill, and, amid the all-pervading apprehension and gloomy outlook, it was universally held that the sooner the rising took place the better. So Christmas approached; but it was not with joy or gladness that men's hearts looked forward to the kindly festival in that burning Southern midsummer, for the deserted farms and homesteads told their own tale, and the savage enemy sullenly sat still, biding his own time. The war-cloud hung brooding over the land darker and darker.

Volume Two—Chapter Ten.

The Fire Trumpet Again.

Payne had removed his household to Grahamstown, as being further from the seat of hostilities, and a very agreeable change to our party was the city of the old settlers, nestling in its basin-like hollow, and with its tree-shaded streets and leafy gardens, after the dust and glare and over-crowding of the Kaffrarian capital. Here, too, the talk was all of the war, but its dire evidences were less obtrusive, and, on the whole, the Paynes made themselves tolerably comfortable. To Lilian Strange, the time was fraught with a wondrous joy, and she often took herself to task for feeling so supremely happy while so much suffering and anxiety was pending over those around her. But she need not have, for the days of her rejoicing were already numbered.

She was out riding with her lover one afternoon, when a turn in the road brought them suddenly upon a man—only a native, apparently on the tramp—a half-caste Hottentot, and a dark-browed, ruffianly-looking specimen of the breed. Directly this fellow caught sight of them he stopped, and, stooping down, pretended to be tying his shoestring, at the same time keeping his face turned away from them as they passed. Lilian grew very pale.

“Arthur,” she whispered. “That’s the same man who was following us the other day in King Williamstown. I knew him at once; and he knew me. Didn’t you see how quickly he stopped and pretended not to take any notice of us?” And glancing at her lover, she saw that his face wore a slightly puzzled expression and a frown which, however, disappeared as she spoke.

“Only some loafer. One often runs against the same specimens of that class,” he said, carelessly.

“But see how quickly he has come here. Arthur—I can’t help looking upon the circumstance as an ill omen. I never saw such a murderous-looking ruffian; and I’m certain he knows you. You may laugh at my silly superstition, dear, but I can’t get rid of the feeling.”

He did laugh; but so pleasantly, so tenderly, as he tried to reassure her.

“But you must get rid of the feeling. Look now, my darling. We are not even on the road from King Williamstown, but on one leading almost in the opposite direction. If that nigger had been following me, and I don’t care a brass doit if he is, he would have come straight and not all round the country. So let the affair slide. I want you to enjoy this afternoon; we may not have many more together, for some time, you know.”

He threw in this to counteract the effect of the unexpected encounter. Shaking off her depression, she looked up at him with a bright smile.

“You dreadful prophet of ill. I won’t have you predict such things. Let’s have another of those glorious canters. I’m not nearly such a coward as I was, am I?”

“No. You’re as fearless as a circus-rider,” answered he, with a laugh; and then they started off into a long, level, swinging canter. And the golden hours of the afternoon fled as they kept on their way, over breezy grassland and shady bush road; and not till after sundown did they draw rein at their door, just as the labours of the day were at an end in the pleasant old frontier city, whose inhabitants were strolling up the wide streets, or turning into the ever open bars in quest of their evening “peg,” or standing in knots at the corners discussing the news from the front.

“Oh, there you are,” said Payne, meeting them in the doorway, and handing Claverton a couple of letters. “Heard the news?”

“No.”

“Well, here’s the deuce to pay all round. A telegram came in to-day saying that a chap named Kiva, with five or six hundred Gcalekas, has crossed into the Gaika location, that the Gaikas have risen as one man, and the whole country is up in arms. The hotel and store at Draaibosch is burnt to the ground and a lot of farmhouses besides, mine among them, I expect. The road from ‘King’ to the Transkei is blocked, and Komgha in a state of siege. A pretty kettle of fish, isn’t it?”

“H’m. Rather. What’s going to be done?”

“They’re calling out men. Our old corps is in the thick of it now, I expect. Brathwaite’s will soon be there, too, I should think.”

“I should rather like to take service in that. But, look here,” went on Claverton, who had been opening his letters the while, extending one of them to Payne. It was an official one, offering him on the recommendation of Jim Brathwaite the command of a corps of Hottentot levies which was being raised; the other was from Jim himself strongly advising him to accept it.

It was hard—very hard, to leave Lilian again so soon, and for an indefinite time—but, after all, it had been more than half expected. He supposed he must go. All would most likely be called out for service at a later stage of hostilities, perhaps almost at once, and even if it were not so, how could he hold back? Besides, now, at any rate, here was a definite command which might lead to something much better.

“Take it, Arthur. You can’t refuse it,” Lilian said, bravely, when he showed her the letter. “You must go; but you need not to-morrow. We will have one more whole day together, my darling—will we not?”

“This is Saturday. They will want me to start to-morrow, but they may want. I can’t put it off later than Monday, I’m afraid, or they’ll pitch-fork some other fellow into the concern instead. So we will make the most of to-morrow. But cheer up, dearest. It won’t be for so long as last time.”

She only answered with a smile, a little forced. She kept her tears for when she was alone, then they flowed freely enough. Such are the results of war—glorious war! Men’s blood, mingled with women’s tears, fills the cup of the destructive demon.

That evening Claverton went round to the official to whom the letter referred him, and notified his acceptance of the post.

“Ah! Yes. The levies—I remember,” and he unearthed one or two papers from a pile. “You will go round by Fort Beaufort, and Victoria East, and pick up contingents that have been recruited there, and then report yourself at King Williamstown, where you will receive further instructions. Of course you will be ready to start at once—to-morrow at the latest.”

“No.”

The official looked up quickly, with a stare of astonishment.

“Pardon me,” he said, with some acerbity. “Did I understand you to say that you could not start upon this service to-morrow?”

“Not so fast, my dear sir; I didn’t say I couldn’t, I said I wouldn’t. A vastly different thing,” said the other, with a pleasant laugh.

“But, Mr—Mr Claverton, I would really advise you not to throw up this appointment. I assure you that I could name at least a dozen men who would jump at the chance.”

“In that case it might be as well to give them the opportunity of practising their leaping powers,” was the cool, smiling reply, and he made a movement as if to rise.

The official was sorely perplexed. To let Claverton go would entail no end of correspondence and bother before he could fix upon another man altogether fit for the post; and, what with all the disturbance and worry of the past few days, he had more than enough on his hands already, as the heap of letters and telegrams lying before him all demanding “immediate” attention, and the lateness of the hour for him to be in his office, abundantly testified.

“How soon will you be ready, then?” he said at last, wearily pushing back his chair.

“On Monday morning—an hour before daylight.”

“Very well, then, that’s settled. I suppose a day won’t make any great difference after all. And you might turn the time to account by picking up three or four likely-looking fellows here. If you want any further information you’ll find me here all to-morrow. No rest for us public servants, not even on Sunday, since these confounded wars; I feel quite ashamed to look a parson in the face now—ha, ha, ha! Good-night!” and chuckling in a dispirited manner over his feeble jest, the official shook hands with Claverton and returned to grind away at his vouchers, and requisitions, and reports until midnight. And our new commandant of levies sallied forth, a flash of satirical mirth lurking in his eyes over his interlocutor’s parting suggestion. So likely that, on the last day he would spend with Lilian, he was going to bother himself recruiting a lot of dirty niggers among the grog-shops of Bog-na-fin (the popular name for a low quarter of Grahamstown).

But his fame must have spread very rapidly, for early the next morning before he was half-dressed, his faithful henchman came to tell him that a man was asking for him in the back-yard. “What does he look like, Sam?”

“An ugly Hottentot, Inkos. Big and strong, though.”

“All right, tell him to wait. And, Sam!”

“Inkos?”

“I shall take you with me to the front. So you’ll be able to try your hand at shooting Amaxosa.”

Sam jumped with delight at this. He could hardly believe his ears. The last time, he had begged and prayed to be allowed to go; but then his master had gone in the capacity of a private trooper, and couldn’t be encumbered with a servant. Now it was different, and subsequently Sam might be heard imparting his good news over the wall to the Hottentot groom belonging to the neighbouring house, winding up with his cherished formula—“Amaxosa nigga no good.”

In a few minutes Claverton went out to interview his intending recruit, as he supposed the visitor to be, and an almost imperceptible shade of annoyance came over his face as he saw before him the man whose sudden appearance yesterday had so sorely troubled Lilian during their ride. “Ghosts don’t talk!” said he to himself, sardonically and with meaning, “or this might be one.”

“Good mornin’, Baas?” said the new arrival, with his eyes keenly fixed on the other’s face.

“Morning,” replied Claverton, shortly. “What d’you want with me?”

“I want to join your levies, Baas.”

“Oh, do you? What’s your name?”

“Vargas Smith, Baas,” replied the fellow, who spoke English fluently, narrowly watching the effect of his words. But the said effect was simply nil.

“Queer name that. Where d’you come from?”

“I’ve bin up Zanzibar way—three, four, five years ago—up the river,” answered the fellow, in a tone full of significance, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the supposed direction of that locality. Then sinking his voice to a whisper: “Don’t you know me, Baas?”

“Never saw you before in my life,” replied Claverton, looking him up and down with a cold stare of astonishment.

The coolness of this rejoinder fairly staggered Smith, who, for a minute, stood dumbfoundered. Then he said, still in a would-be significant whisper:

“They used to call me ‘Sharkey,’ Baas, up yonder.”

“Did they? A devilish good name, too. But what’s ‘up yonder,’ and where do you hail from, when all’s said and done? Are you from these parts?”

“No, sah, I’m Cuban gentleman.”

“Cuban gentleman, are you?” said Claverton, with a sneer. “Then let me tell you this, Mr Vargas Smith, alias Sharkey, that I don’t want *gentlemen* in my corps; so you won’t do for me. Now we understand each other.”

“Yes, sar. I was only jokin’. Of course I un’stand. But I want to serve under you, Baas Lidwell—ah—I mean, Baas Claverton—and you’ll let me join.”

Claverton thought for a moment. If the fellow intended mischief, it would be as well to keep him under his own eye. It might only be, after all, that Smith wae really desirous of joining his corps, for he, Claverton, had something of a reputation for coolness and daring, and this fellow, too, was in no wise wanting in pluck. And he had shown the man that he was determined not to recognise him, and that any attempt to trade upon a knowledge, real or imaginary, of former days, would be worse than useless. So he replied:

“Well, Smith, you’re a likely-looking fellow enough, and, on second thoughts, I’ll take you. But it’s only fair to warn you that, as to promotion or recommendation or anything of that kind, you’ll stand just the same chances as any one else: no more and no less, d’you hear? Now, you show up at the Public Offices at one o’clock, and I’ll let you know when you will be sworn in, and the rest of it.”

“Very well, Baas,” said the other, respectfully. “I’ll be there. Good morning.”

Just then Lilian, throwing open her window, caught sight of the retreating figure of Smith. Her heart sank. What had this evil-looking ruffian to do with her lover? Had not his appearance heralded misfortune already?—for, with true feminine logic, she could not help connecting him in some way with the turn affairs had taken. And Claverton, knowing the idea she had taken upon the subject of the man, purposely forbore to mention the circumstance, and she, fearing to trouble him, would not ask him.

All along the frontier the tide of war was rising. The spark had fallen in dry grass, and now the flame flashed forth with lightning rapidity as one after another the insurgent tribes rose in open revolt. And amid the wild glens and bushy wastes of their secluded fastnesses lurked armed hordes of fierce savages, hungering for prey and plunder; and the smoke of burning homesteads hung in a pall over the land, telling of the toil and industry of years laid in ruins. On many a hill-top hovered dark clouds of the enemy, ever watchful, and ready to swoop down upon the lonely traveller, or patrol scanty in numbers; and the war-cry, grim and defiant, mingling with the crackling of musketry, told that each red wave was rolling on its course. And night after night, beneath the blackness of the heavens, the terrible Fire Trumpet rang out its lurid message of destruction, and pillage, and death.

Thus the year closed.

Volume Two—Chapter Eleven.

“Have you no Secret Enemy?”

“Good-bye!”

Who among us has not uttered the mournful word? Not merely in airy, hollow fashion, when passing out of a drawing-room door, but in dire sadness, as we look our last upon the face from which we are about to be divided by time or distance—and, it may be, upon which there is small chance of our ever looking again in life? The train rolls out of the station; the plank is hurriedly thrown back on to the thronged quay, and, as the great ship glides from her moorings handkerchiefs wave and voices no longer audible to each other still continue to articulate, it may be in accents of heartsick pain, or through a forced and broken smile, or even in tones of genuine cheerfulness, the saddest of all words—“Good-bye.”

The fatal Monday morning has come at last; and there, in the grey dawn, Lilian stands bidding farewell to her lover. A light is burning in the sitting-room, and without it is almost dark, for the morning is lowering and cloudy. Now and then a puff of warm wind, which seems to herald rain, sighs mournfully through the trees, whirling up the dust in little eddies along the empty street—and they two are alone, for none of the household are astir, which neither regrets. And thus they stand, looking into each other’s eyes and both hesitating to frame the word—“Good-bye.”

The conditions of parting are unequal, it is true. To the man, going forth on this dark, desolate morning, the time of separation will be abundantly occupied—downright hard, honest soldiering—no mere child’s play, and if during those long months there is hardship and privation, there is also the excitement of peril and the stir of strife, the rough sociality of camp, and the healthful glow and energy of life in the open. To the woman it means a period of weary and inactive waiting; of days unbrightened by the strong, tender presence she has learnt to love so dearly; of nights, wakeful and self-tormenting, when the overwrought brain will conjure up visions of deadly peril, of the flashing spears and wild war-cry of the savage foe, of the wasting form of fell disease following on wet and exposure, of the swift lightning and the raging of flooded rivers, and every contingency probable and improbable, attendant upon campaigning in a barbarous land.

“Wherever you are, and whatever you do, you *will* take care of yourself,” she is saying. “You will not run any unnecessary risks, even for other people. Your life belongs to me now, love.”

“It does,” he answers, softly and tenderly. “Keep up a good heart, my sweet. Don’t go imagining all sorts of horrors while I am away, for, remember, that after these years I was not sent back to you to be taken away again. Mine is a charmed life—never fear.”

“I believe so, indeed,” she answers, looking at him fondly—proudly, and smiling through her tears.

“Why, Arthur, I would not keep you if I could, now. It is such as you who should be to the fore at present, and how could they supply *your* place?”

He makes no reply for a moment, but presses his kisses faster upon the soft hair and sweet, up-turned face, and he is sad and heavy at heart; though he will affect as much cheerfulness as he can, with the object of making light of things. And there seems some excuse for her implied encomium, looking at him as he stands—ready and calm, entirely devoid of any affectation of the military in his dress or accoutrements; but yet, the very ideal of the frontier civilian soldier.

“Keep up a brave heart, my own,” he murmurs again. “The day will soon come when we shall look back to this, as one of the sad experiences of the past, even as we look back to that other time. This is a mere passing minute compared with that.”

“Ah, yes. Now I am delaying you, and you must go. God keep you, darling, and bring you back to me safe again. Good-bye.”

One more strong, loving embrace, and he is gone. He throws himself upon his horse, which Sam has with difficulty been holding, and its impatient hoof-strokes ring through the empty street as he turns for one last look at the graceful figure waving him a farewell from the gate, and for the moment he feels inclined to retrace his steps, go straight back and resign the post which, all unsought, has been thrust upon him, and allow the war to take care of itself as far as he is concerned.

And Lilian, returning to the deserted room, now so desolate and empty to her, as the dawn reduces the light of the candles to a pale garish flicker, feels the tears welling up afresh as she reproaches herself for not having kept him at any cost, for round her heart is a terrible foreboding of evil to come—how, when, and in what form the future will reveal. Yet the feeling is there.

We must follow the wayfarer. Throughout the whole day he rode mechanically forward, absorbed in his own thoughts. A heavy storm drove him for shelter to a wretched roadside inn; but ever impatient to be moving, he left before it was nearly over. The roads wet and slippery with the rain rendered progress slow, so that by the time it grew dark he was still some miles from Hicks’ farm, where he intended to pass the night.

“I’m afraid we’ve lost the way,” he ruminated, as having gone some distance up a long, bush-covered valley, he began to feel rather out of his bearings. “Sam! Where the devil are we?”

“Don’t know, Inkos. I never was here before. Look. There’s a house!”

“So there is. We’ll make for it,” and, picking up their horses’ heads, they approached the dwelling, which was a sorry-looking affair. Darker and darker it grew, and a drizzling shower began to fall. Suddenly a light gleamed from the ill-closed window, and at the same time a man’s voice, raised high in expostulation, reached their ears—a voice not unfamiliar to Claverton, withal, and in its tones he caught his own name. Quickly he dismounted.

“Sam,” he whispered. “Take the horses out of sight, there, in the bush—quietly, d’you hear? And if you hear a row, come and look after me without a moment’s loss. You’ll soon see which way to shoot.”

“Yeh bo ’Nkos,” replied the ready-witted native, whose eyes sparkled with excitement. Then silently, and with a rapid glide, Claverton made his way round to the back of the house. Through a chink under the window-joist he could see the interior of a room—a mouldy, disused room, with damp, discoloured walls, and rotting beams festooned with cobwebs; but the place wore a look of familiarity to him, even as a sight or a sound which now and then will strike our imaginations as in no wise to be accounted for save in the previous experience of a dream. For a moment he was puzzled; then it flashed upon him that he was looking into the room where he and Ethel Brathwaite had taken refuge on the night of the storm. Yes; there was the very place where she had slept and he had covered her with his cloak, and where she had sat when terrified by the wolf; and, straining his gaze further, he almost expected to see that quadruped’s footsteps in the dust by the half-open door. A fire burnt in the middle of the room, and there by the side of it lay the very stone he had used for a seat. It all seemed so strange that he seriously began to think he must be dreaming.

But he was wide awake enough as the sound of voices was heard, and two men entered the room from outside, closing the door after them. And in one of them Claverton recognised his recruit of yesterday; the other he had never seen before. He was an Englishman—a tall, dark man, well made and erect of carriage, evidently a gentleman by birth, and yet with a certain sinister expression that would have led the watcher to regard him with distrust even had he not heard his own name brought into the conversation.

“It’s all right, Sharkey,” this one was saying.

“Your ears must have played you tricks. There’s no sign of any one moving.”

“No, there ain’t. Well, now, Cap’n, about this devil Claverton?”

“Yes, I’ll be as good as my word. One hundred pounds, this day six months.”

“Make it two, Cap’n; make it two. He’s a devil to deal with—a very devil. You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“No; one. Not another stiver. And now, are you downright sure that Arthur Lidwell and Arthur Claverton are one and the same man? Could you swear to him?”

The mulatto laughed—a hideous, hyaena-like grin—showing the long, sharp, canine teeth which had gained him his repellent sobriquet.

“Swear to him?” he cried. “I’d swear to him in a million! I recognised him directly I set eyes on him in the crowd at ‘King.’ But the young lady spotted me sharp as a needle, and I had to hide. She does seem awful fond of him. Why, when I—”

“Drop that damned nonsense, Sharkey, and stick to the point?” exclaimed the Englishman, with a deep frown.

“Very sorry, Cap’n. Well, I was going to say, I knew him, and, what’s more, he knew me.”

“The devil he did!”

“Yes. He recognised me first when I met him on the road on Saturday, riding with the young lady; then afterwards I spoke to him, but he was that high and lofty! I told him my name, and watched him closely; then I called him by his name that he carried up there—just let it slip, like—and, would you believe it?—he never winced!”

“Didn’t he?”

“No, he didn’t. Says he: ‘Never saw you before in my life!’ as cool as you please. Ah, he’s a plucky devil is Lidwell; he always was!” said the mulatto, with a sigh of admiration.

“Why do you owe him a grudge?” asked the other, curiously.

“He knocked me down once, Cap’n—hit me here, bang on the nose.” And the speaker’s features assumed a look of deadly malice. “He shot me, too, and left me for dead. I could forgive him that, but not the whack on the nose.”

“So help me Heaven, I’ll repeat that operation with interest before you’re many weeks older, friend Sharkey,” muttered the watcher, between his set teeth.

“And then—one hundred pounds,” went on the fellow. “Hist! I’m certain I heard something.” And both men sat in an attitude of listening. For a moment there was dead silence; then the Englishman rose. “I’ll just take a look round, to make sure,” he said, producing a revolver and going out into the night, while Claverton, drawing his own weapon, crouched there, covering the angle of the tenement round which he expected his enemy to appear; for that this man was, for some cause or other, his deadly enemy was obvious. He would have the advantage of him, however, for his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, whereas the other had just come out of the light. For a moment he waited—anxious, expectant—but no one appeared; then he heard the two men’s voices inside again, and, peering through the crevice, saw the Englishman return, shutting the door behind him.

“All right; there’s no one moving. You do hear the most unaccountable noises, though, in this infernal bush at night.”

“Ha, ha, ha! So you do, Cap’n; and you’ll hear plenty more when you get up there to the front among the Kafirs,” said the other, with a mocking laugh. “When do you leave?”

“As soon as I get my command. Now, no tricks, Sharkey. In three months this fellow must have disappeared. No violence, mind; *but he must be induced to leave the country*;” and he emphasised the words with a significant look into the other’s face. “Mind, you mustn’t hurt him.”

“All right, Cap’n. I’ve joined his levies. What d’you think of that, hey? I’m not a bad shot, you know, and there’s no fear of my mistaking a Kafir for any one else, or any one else for a Kafir, eh? Ha, ha, ha!” and the villain winked his yellow eyes with a murderous leer.

The Englishman’s dark features grew red and then white. “By Jove, Sharkey, but you’re a knowing one,” he said. “I’m deuced glad I ran against you. One hundred pounds, fair and square.”

“Bight you are, Cap’n. One hundred pounds, and,” sinking his voice to a whisper, every word of which was audible to the listener, “in three months he’ll be out of your way, never fear.”

The gloom spread around, pitchy black, and the rain pattered upon the bush and upon the crouched form of the man who, with his eye to the chink in the wall, and gripping his revolver, witnessed these two calmly plotting his death, for there could be no mistaking the drift of their scarcely veiled hints. A wave of fierce wrath surged up in his heart as he gazed upon his would-be murderers. Why should he not quietly walk round and, flinging open the door, shoot the pair dead? It would be but the work of a moment. Then came the cold but none the less dangerous caution which always stood his friend—dangerous to the objects of his resentment in proportion as it preserved to him his own coolness. It would not do. How could he prove to the world at large that he had done it to save his own life? No. He would keep a close eye upon this ruffianly mulatto, and then the first time they were in action he could easily turn the tables on his sneaking assassin by shooting him quietly through the head—*in mistake for one of the enemy*—and he laughed sardonically at the thought of hoisting the villain with his own petard. He had no compunction, no nice scruples of honour in such a matter as this. It was *vae victis*. The other had put the weapon into his hand. And who was this Englishman who seemed bent on pursuing him in such a deadly manner? Who was this secret foe, so eager and anxious to plant the assassin's steel in his back? And as the firelight flickered into the corners of the grim old room, lighting up the faces of these two midnight plotters, Claverton scanned every feature of the reckless lineaments of the arch-schemer again and again, but could detect nothing familiar in them. He had never seen the man before.

Suddenly the latter rose.

"Well, now I shall be off," he said. "I leave it to you, Sharkey. Here's something to go on with," and there was a chink as of gold as he passed something into the mulatto's hand, who clutched it greedily. "We understand each other. Now, the sooner you join your regiment the better," he added, with a harsh laugh. "Good-bye. Are you going to stay here to-night?"

"Why, yes, Cap'n; it's warm and dry."

"Ha, ha! Supposing Claverton should want to off-saddle here. That would be a joke—eh?"

"He's better employed, that devil," replied the Cuban mulatto, and he chuckled to himself as the other passed out, frowning. And the listener heard the sound of footsteps, and then the tread of a horse receding in the distance. The man was evidently riding away up the kloof.

Left to himself Sharkey got up, fastened the cranky door, and threw some more wood on the fire. Then he took out his pipe, filled and lighted it, and drawing his blanket around him, lay down, prepared to make himself thoroughly comfortable. He grunted once or twice as his pipe went out, and then with a muttered imprecation threw it down, and, pulling the blanket over his head, began to snore. A few moments more, and the watcher arose and softly stole away into the bush, for he was revolving a merciless and coldblooded plan.

"Sam!"

"Inkos?"

"Tie the horses up and come with me. You remember the scoundrel we enlisted yesterday?"

"Yeh bo 'Nkos."

"Well, he is in that place, and you and I are going to take him. Directly I kick down the door, you will follow on my heels and collar him. Now come."

They stole back to the house, and Claverton took the precaution of once more peeping in. The mulatto lay quite still, rolled in his blanket, evidently asleep. Then he returned to the front of the building.

"Now, Sam—ready!" he whispered.

A sudden rush, and a tremendous kick, and the door went down with an appalling crash, as, staggering with the shock and the impetus, Claverton half fell half rushed upon the sleeper, gripping him by the throat before he had time to move; while Sam, seizing both his hands, twisted them behind him, and rolled him over on to his stomach.

"That's it, Sam; tie him up," cried Claverton, in a steely voice, restraining with difficulty his longing to throttle the life out of the prostrate villain, who, for his part, did not yield without a struggle—and a violent one. Indeed, it required all their efforts to hold him, for the mulatto was of powerful and athletic build.

"So!" said Claverton, approvingly, as Sam dexterously made fast the prisoner's feet with a *reim* he had brought for the purpose, having previously pinioned his hands. "Now, Mr Vargas Smith, alias Sharkey, alias the Cuban gentleman—now, may I ask, what the devil are you doing here?"

The man regarded him with a scowl of hatred. "I was on the way to join the levy, Baas, and came in here for shelter from the rain," he replied, sullenly.

"On the way to join the levy, were you? My good friend, this is not the way to King Williamstown. That, I believe, is where you were consigned to—but never mind that. Now, I want to know, who was the *gentleman* who has just left?"

The ruffian's yellow hide grew a dirty, livid colour. "I don't know his name, Baas," he said, falteringly.

"It's surprising how we live and learn," said the other, coolly. "Before I count twenty you'll not only have learnt his name, but you'll have told it to me. Sam, put up that door. And Sam, go to the corner and keep watch; and let me know if you hear anybody coming. It isn't in the least likely, but there's nothing like caution. Now, friend Sharkey, what is his name? Out with it."

"Don't know, Baas," repeated the other.

"That's unfortunate for you. Now, you see this?" taking a glowing faggot from the fire and blowing upon it. "With this I am about to tickle the soles of your feet until you do know. Come! Out with it," and he approached his victim.

"Mercy, mercy! I'll tell you, Baas," pleaded the mulatto.

"Well?"

"It's Wallace—Cap'n Wallace, Baas."

"Oh. No lies, mind," said Claverton, with a determined look. "You know me. I stand no nonsense. Well, now, where did you first fall in with this Captain Wallace?"

"At Port Elizabeth."

"Who is he?"

"That I don't know, really, Baas," pleaded the fellow, piteously. "He's going to raise a levy and fight the Kafirs, and he wanted me to join it."

"H'm. I believe the first statement, the last is a lie. No more lies, friend Sharkey, if you please, or we shall quarrel. And now, tell me, how do you purpose earning your hundred pounds?"

The mulatto's face grew livid as death, and great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead. He knew that from this man, whose murder he had just been plotting, he need expect no mercy; and he read his doom in every line of the other's features, as he stared at his captor with the haggard and hunted expression of a trapped wild creature. Again his shaking lips reiterated a prayer for mercy.

"You were going to be very merciful to the man whom you were about to put out of this Captain Wallace's way in three months, were you not? Who was the man, by the way?"

"Yourself. He hates you, Baas, I don't know why, I swear I don't. I think it's about some money you have that he ought to have—at least, so he says."

"Quite so. And he set you to watch me?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Then there was dead silence. It was a strange sight that the ghostly firelight flickered and danced upon in that lonely hut. The bound and prostrate-ruffian, and the quiet, refined-looking man sitting opposite him—sitting in judgment on his would-be murderer. Outside, the rain pattered with a monotonous, dismal sound, and the distant cry of a jackal floated upon the heavy night air.

"Well, now, Sharkey," said Claverton at length, "you are the greatest scoundrel that ever breathed, you know. I had almost made up my mind to amuse myself for the rest of the night by drawing figures on your carcase with this," and again he held up the glowing faggot; "but I will be merciful, and won't do that."

A look of relief came into the prisoner's eyes; but his tormentor went on:

"But, you see, you have confessed to having intended to murder me for the sake of a hundred pounds. Now, do you know what we do with murderers? We hang them; but I won't hang you." The look of relief increased, and the fellow began to murmur his thanks.

"Wait, wait, not so fast. I won't hang you. I say, because, to begin with, I haven't got a rope. But a couple of prods with this,"—touching the handle of a long, keen sheath-knife—"will answer the purpose a great deal better. For this is war-time, you know, Sharkey, and this hut is a devilish lonely place, so that when in about a month you are found here, a yarn will go the round of the papers as to how the body of a poor devil of a Hottentot—not even a Cuban *gentleman*, mind, they don't understand that distinction here—was found slain by Kafirs, with no end of assegai holes in him. Or it might be safer for us to dig a hole in the next room, and quietly drop you in—alive, of course—and cover you up. It would, perhaps, be a little more trouble, but safer."

The expression of the miserable man's face, as he stared at his tormentor with a frozen, hopeless look of despair, was awful to behold, while he listened to the terrible doom which the other pronounced upon him. Not a gleam of relenting could he trace in that stern, impassive countenance.

"Mercy—mercy," he moaned. "I will be your slave—your dog. I will kill the other man if you wish, only spare me," and his dry, bloodless lips could hardly articulate his hopeless entreaty. "Only spare my life—it is yours—I deserve to die; but spare me," and the miserable wretch grovelled on the earth.

Claverton contemplated him for a few moments with calm equanimity, unmoved by the extremity of his terror.

"Upon my word, Sharkey, I gave you credit for more gameness. Well, now, listen to me. It is as you say—you deserve to die, and your life is mine. Never mind about the other man, I won't have him hurt for anything. Now for yourself. You have gone through all the bitterness of death in the last few minutes, as I intended you should. That is enough. I will spare your life—richly as you have deserved to lose it—but listen to me. You will go from here as a prisoner, and not be released from arrest till we have joined the others. I will make no conditions with you—first of all, because you are absolutely powerless to harm me, now, or at any future time—the very events of to-night prove that; secondly, because, if I did, you would not keep them. So I forgive you completely your plot to murder me, and you shall join the corps as if nothing had happened. One word of warning, though. I shall have my eye upon you always, and wherever you may be. And remember this, in case we go into action together—*I'm not a bad shot, you know; and there's no fear of my mistaking a Kafir for any one else, or any one else for a Kafir*. Bear all this in mind, for if you are up to any more tricks, what you have just gone through is a mere joke compared with what's in store for you. You know *me*."

The prisoner looked at Claverton with a wild, superstitious awe. This man must be something more than mortal, and he shuddered as he reflected that he was indeed powerless to harm him. Then, as he realised that his life was spared, the look of relief returned to his livid features. He knew the other only too well, and that every word had been spoken in no mere spirit of empty threat, but in sober earnest. And now he felt like a man who has been reprieved from under the very gallows-tree itself. He had spoken the truth in his revelation in all good faith—indeed, he dared not have done otherwise—and had told all he knew, marvelling that he had been asked so few questions.

Claverton, meanwhile, was sitting opposite, watching his prisoner with a curious and thoughtful expression. By what stroke of luck had he been made to lose his way and brought to this place in time to overhear the plot against his own life? Who on earth could the other man be—the arch mover in the scheme? He had never seen him before; had never even heard his name; and then what the mulatto had said, about it being a question of money. Stay, could it be that some will existed of which he, Claverton, knew nothing, and under which the other would benefit in the event of his death? It seemed strange, certainly; but then his experience had taught him that nothing was too strange to be true. And then recurred to his mind, with all the force of a prophecy, the words which Lilian had spoken when first she discovered the ruffian was following them in the square at King Williamstown: “*Have you no secret enemy? No one who would owe you a grudge*?” and he had answered lightly in the negative; whereas, he was actually being dogged by two secret assassins—one of them no mere common ruffian like the cut-throat lying there before him, but a man apparently his equal in birth and station. With whom, however, he promised himself a full and complete reckoning, all in good time.

Then the recollection of Lilian’s words naturally recalled the image of Lilian herself. What was she doing then? Thinking of him ever—at that hour most likely praying for him—and he? With difficulty had he just restrained himself from an act of wild, lawless vengeance—justified, perhaps, but still vengeance—one which in earlier days he would not have shrunk from; and now, as he thought of her, his whole mood softened and he felt glad that he had spared the villain opposite, even though by doing so he might have jeopardised his own life. Not that he gave this side of the question a thought, for his experiences had made him a fatalist, and he really believed himself under a special protection for some purpose or other—be that purpose what it might. Thus musing, he fell into a doze; while the faithful Sam, having stabled the horses in the adjoining apartment, had barred up the door as well as he could, and sat, huddled in his blanket, smoking his pipe and keeping watch over the prisoner and over his master’s safety.

With the first ray of dawn they were astir. The horses being saddled, the prisoner’s feet were untied to allow him to walk.

“Yon dam Hottentot nigga?” said Sam, administering a sly kick to the crestfallen Sharkey, when his master’s back was turned. “You cheek my chief, eh? Now, you try to run away, I shoot—shoot you—so. My chief, he good shot, shoot you dead—ha, ha!”

With which salutary warning they set out. Sam, in his heart of hearts, hoping that it would be disregarded, and that the mulatto would really make an attempt at escape. But that worthy was wise in his generation, and the Natal native had no opportunity of showing his skill with the new Snider rifle wherewith a paternal Goverment had supplied him on the occasion of his joining “Claverton’s Levies.”

A curious contrast did this grim *cortège* present to the last occasion of his leaving that place in the early dawn, thought Claverton. Instead of the bright, laughing girl who was his companion then, he cast his eye on the sullen prisoner and his guard, and then on his own warlike equipment; and mingled, indeed, were his reflections as he found himself traversing the old roads, with all the features of the familiar landscape stretching around. There was old Isaac Van Rooyen’s homestead, down in the hollow, on the right, looking just the same as of yore, except that that slow-going old Boer had built a new room on to it, probably for the accommodation of the family of one of his children, who had quartered themselves upon him. In front, in the distance, rose the frowning face of Spoek Krantz and the heights from among which it stood forth. The mountains, too, on the sky-line, wore their well-known aspect; and every feature of the surroundings, whether bush or open, seemed to bring back the past. Even Hicks’ farm, whither he was now wending, was the one he himself had started to treat for, and had turned back, that day when he had heard his fate and been sent forth into banishment from all that made life for him—four years ago.

“Hallo, hallo!” cried honest Hicks, looking up in astonishment from some carpentering he was doing behind the house, as the trio rode up. “Well, this is a piece of luck! How are you, Arthur, old boy? And who the deuce have you got there?”

“A chap who joined my corps and began his service by desertion; I chanced to pick him up on the way.”

Hicks looked mystified for a moment. “Oh—ah—yes, now I remember! Jim told me you had got the command of some of the greatest blackguards under heaven. That bird, by the way, looks as if he would be quite in his element among them. But I should think you’d manage to lick them into shape if any one would, eh?”

“Oh, yes. And they’re not bad fellows to fight, once you get them away from the canteens. I’ll manage them, never fear.”

“But come in. Laura will be surprised. Don’t bother about the horses, I’ll see to them; and your boy will be enough to look after the prisoner, I should think.”

“He will. The rascal has been licking his chops over him like a bull-terrier contemplating a cat in a tree. There’s nothing he’d like better than a chance of practising at the fellow running away.”

By this time they had entered the house, which was a trifle small perhaps, but comfortable, after the style of the ordinary frontier dwelling, and Claverton took in at a glance the air of neatness and domesticity that pervaded it, from the sewing-machine and work-basket on the table to the rocking-cradle standing in the corner, which latter was the sole work of Hicks’ skilful hands.

And Laura? She was but little changed in appearance, and that, if anything, for the better. More matronly-looking and a trifle more demure perhaps than formerly, and if her greeting to Claverton lacked ever so slightly in cordiality, it might have been that she still cherished a latent spark of resentment against him on Ethel's account. But, after all, there was no altering the past. Whatever was to be—was—and there was no help for it. And being a good-hearted little woman she soon cast aside her first veil of reserve, and talked to him as in the old times, for she had always liked him, and besides, he had done her husband more than one good turn.

"And where is Ethel now, and how is she getting on?" asked Claverton, presently.

"She's down at Cape Town still."

"Does she ever come up to the frontier?"

"Oh, yes. Sometimes. She would have been coming just about now, only this new war broke out."

"Who's that? Ethel?" asked Hicks, returning. He had left the room for a moment to give some directions to one of his natives outside. "Oh, yes. She was engaged to some fellow down there and then choked him off all at once, no one quite knew why. Laura vows that—" Here the speaker became aware of a battery of warning glances being levelled at him from his wife's dark eyes, and suddenly collapsed in a violent fit of coughing, on recovery from which he threw open the door, and looking frantically up at the heavens declared, with a vehemence wholly unsuited to the occasion, that the rain would inevitably clear away before twelve o'clock. Claverton, on whom not one fraction of this by-play was lost, although he pretended not to see it, could hardly restrain his mirth. Good old Hicks, he thought, was always a whale at blundering, and he had done for himself again. Even in trying to extricate it, he had put his unlucky foot in yet deeper; for, to any one who did not know him, this violent prognostication as to the weather, taken in conjunction with what had gone before, would have had slightly an inhospitable smack; but Claverton enjoyed the situation only too well. By-and-by, when pursuing his journey, he would shout with laughter over the recollection; now, however, not a muscle of his countenance moved as he said, in the most matter-of-fact way:

"You might remember me to Ethel, when you write. We used to have rather fun together in the old times."

Laura said something in assent, though she mentally resolved to do nothing of the kind. No good would come of waking up old recollections, she reasoned, by mentioning this man who, even if through no fault of his own, had, at any rate, she told herself, cast a cloud over her bright, wayward, beautiful sister's life, and the sooner he was forgotten the better. For that sister's sake she by no means shared her husband's joy over his reappearance, and she sincerely hoped that those two might not meet again, and wished that he would be quick and marry Lilian Strange, or leave this part of the country, or both. Meanwhile here he was, still on the frontier, and Ethel might be coming up to visit her at any time.

Just then a chubby toddling—an exact infantile reproduction of his father—rushed into the room; and Laura, with a touch of pride that was very becoming, exhibited him to her guest, while the urchin opened his big blue eyes wide, and stood staring, with his finger in his mouth, at Claverton's long boots and shining spurs.

"Go and say how d'you do to Mr Claverton, Jimmy," said his mother, in the tone of half command, half entreaty, usual under the circumstances. "He's a soldier, you know, going to fight the Kafirs, like Uncle Jim."

"Uncle Jim" being Jim Brathwaite, who was the urchin's godfather.

"I'll be soja, when I big," lisped the prodigy, toddling up to Claverton, and tentatively stroking with one finger the shin of his high boot. "I got gun—shoot de Kaffa—bang!"

"Halloa," cried Hicks, re-entering. "Don't let that kid bother you, Arthur. Kids are a confounded nuisance unless they happen to belong to a fellow, and very often even then."

But Jimmy was not to be detached from his new acquaintance, to whom he had taken an immense fancy, and just then, fortunately for his peace of mind, a move was made in favour of breakfast.

They talked of the war and its progress. Hicks declared his intention of holding on a bit for the present, and joining Jim Brathwaite—who, with his troop, had already left for the front—later, if things got worse. Laura had been in a terrible fright the last time when he had gone, he said; but now, since she saw that none of them had been hurt, she didn't care—in fact, concluded Hicks, he rather believed she wanted to get rid of him, so he was determined to stay, just to spite her. Listening to the playful recrimination that followed, Claverton found himself thinking what a good thing it was to see two people happy like this, for there could be no doubt but that happy they were—thoroughly so—in their quiet and hitherto peaceful (for the tide of war had not yet rolled in so far as this) frontier home; though such may appear incredible to those who find their enjoyment of life in the whirl and feverishness of fashionable civilisation. And thinking it, he rejoiced greatly on his old chum's account.

And the said "old chum" was considerably crestfallen at the announcement that he must take the road again. "Why, hang it all," he grumbled; "you've hardly had time to look at us."

"My dear fellow—duty—inexorable duty calls. But I shall assuredly knock you up again, soon."

"Why, here's baby!" exclaimed Laura, as an approaching squall resounded through the passage. "You will just be able to have a peep at her before you go," and regardless of her lord's impatient protest that "Claverton didn't want to be bothered with a lot of kids," she took a limp bundle of clothes from the arms of its bearer and uncovered a wee red and—shall it be confessed?—rather wet physiognomy for her guest's inspection.

"H'm, I'm no judge of infants, Laura," said Claverton, good-humouredly, "but I should say this one ought to fetch first prize at the next show. But now I must be off—good-bye."

"Must you go? I'm so sorry," said Laura. "I should like to get Lilian up here to stay for a bit, only 'some one' would be sure to forbid it as unsafe," she added, archly.

"Well, good-bye, old fellow," said Hicks. "My horses are out in the *veldt*, and will take hours to get in, or I'd go part of the way with you. Mind you look us up again as soon as ever you can." He was going to add something about hoping "to see you both here before long"; but with his recent slip fresh in his mind, he refrained, fearing lest in some unaccountable manner he should put his foot in it again. "Good-bye—success to you. Mind you shoot lots of niggers and come back all jolly," and with a hearty hand-shake the two men parted.

Claverton rode on, reaching Fort Beaufort, where he tarried a day to recruit his men, or rather to collect them, for they had already been recruited by his lieutenant, a young Englishman named Lumley; and it was high time he appeared on the scene, for the rascals had taken the opportunity of getting on the spree, indulging in much inebriate jollification preparatory to starting for the seat of war. They would be all right, though, once away from the canteens and under proper discipline—and under proper discipline he intended they should be. So promptly mustering them he marched them off without any farther delay, not even waiting a day in Alice, the divisional town of Victoria East, where a fresh batch was picked up. At the latter place, however, a despatch awaited him, ordering him, instead of going to King Williamstown, to proceed straight through to join the main column on the borders of Sandili's location.

All along the road he met with fresh rumours and alarms. The rebellion was spreading; the whole of British Kaffraria and the Transkei was over-ran; nearly all the settlers' houses in the more exposed districts were burnt down; the Police express-riders carried their lives in their hands, as they darted across the hostile country, several of them having been cut off already. Added to which these districts were in a dire state of alarm, by reason of impending troubles nearer home, for the Gaika clans in the Waterkloof and Blinkwater fastnesses, under the chiefs Tini Macomo and Oba, were in a state of restlessness, and meanwhile signal fires burnt nightly on the higher peaks of the Amatola.

It was, indeed, a motley crew, was this "levy" of which the two Englishmen were in command, numbering between sixty and seventy men. Yellow-skinned Hottentots; dark Korannas; tall, light-coloured Bastards; every shade and kindred of the race which though inferior to them in many respects, yet looked upon themselves as the natural foes of the Kafirs, and with far more sympathies of rule, of civilisation, or rather semi-civilisation, and even of blood, with the white man, for few indeed but had some drops of white blood in them. Even two or three specimens of the ape-like Bushmen found part in the motley gathering—wiry, active little rascals, with skulls hard as iron and the agility of cats—and one and all by virtue of their white strain, and the weapons wherewith they had been supplied; and confidence in their leaders, felt themselves immeasurably superior in prowess to the naked tribesmen against whom they were burning to be led. Not a few of the older men—wrinkled, shrivelled-looking, sinewy creatures, but game to the backbone—had been rebels in the war of '50, when the old Cape Mounted Rifles, then composed of such fellows as these, had gone over in a body to the enemy, and, bearing in mind the salutary lesson they had been taught, both by their ill-chosen friends and their deserted employers, were now only too ready to retrieve the past, and to avenge themselves upon the treacherous savages who had then misled them. They were mostly plucky; fair shots and reliable at a pinch; but, as yet, in a state of indifferent discipline; and it required all their leader's promptitude and firmness to lick them into anything like decent shape. His first address to them was short and to the point.

"Now, men," he said, in the ordinary Boer Dutch, which was their mother tongue. "We are going out to fight—to fight in real earnest, and not to play. I have seen fellows I would far less sooner command than I would you, for I know you can hold your own against any number of these rascally Gaikas. Many of you are good shots, I know, and we'll soon have plenty of opportunity of peppering Jack Kafir handsomely, I promise you. Remember, we are going to fight—and to fight we must always be in a state of readiness and of order, because we are in the enemy's country and never know when we may have him down upon us. Now, mark my words. Any man who gets drunk, or is found asleep at his post, shall have six dozen well laid on with a couple of new *reims*, as sure as my name's Claverton, and the second time he'll be shot. Mind, I'll stand no hanky-panky. When we get home again you can get on the spree as much as you like; in camp, steadiness is the order of the day. Your rations you'll get just as I get mine, neither better nor worse. I shall ask no man to go where I won't lead him, and now we'll just go and thrash Jack Kafir into a cocked hat—yourselves and Mr Lumley and I. So we understand each other. I am commanding men, not fools or children—isn't it so?"

"Ja, kaptyn—ja!" they cried, cheering him vociferously. "We shall show you we are all men—good men and true."

"That's right. Now I am going to let you elect your own sergeants and corporals, and, having elected them, by Jove, you'll have to obey them. I should recommend, for choice, Gert Spielman, Cobus Windvogel, Dirk Hesler," and he ran through a list of about a dozen of the most trustworthy veterans, knowing full well that those who were elected would be devoted to him, and those who were not, scarcely less so for his having recommended them. And thus having got his corps into working order, and, in fact, it became more manageable every day, Claverton and his lieutenant journeyed with light hearts towards the seat of war.

"These fellows will turn out a very creditable lot, or I'm much mistaken," remarked Lumley, as they were advancing through one of the defiles of the Amatola. "They are cool and reliable at a pinch, and not susceptible to panic like the Fingoes. I'd rather have fifty of them than five hundred Fingoes."

"I quite believe it," assented Claverton. "Some of them are tough customers, and once beyond the reach of grog they're all right."

"Yes. Look at that old Gert Spielman, for instance," pointing to a shrivelled, little old Hottentot, with a skin like parchment. "He's a dead shot. The infernal old scoundrel was a rebel last war, and only escaped hanging by the skin of his teeth. I suspect he's drawn a bead with effect many a time on poor Tommy Atkins in those days. Well, now—if occasion offers—you'll see he'll turn out to be one of our best men."

"No doubt. But I say; this is a queer place, and the sooner we get through it the better."

They were threading a long, narrow defile. Overhead the forest-covered slopes rose to the sky, and down to the path stretched the jungly bush—dense, tangled, and apparently impenetrable. Great yellow-wood trees here and there reared their grey, massive limbs, from which the lichens dangled, above the lower scrub, and monkeys chattered, and birds flitted screaming from the road as the troop moved forward. Some fifteen or twenty of the men had horses of their own, and these, Claverton, like a prudent commander, had thrown forward as scouts, if not to clear the way at any rate to give warning of any assemblage of the foe threatening to oppose their progress—which they could easily do, being as quick of eye and as agile of limb as the Kafirs themselves. But no sign of obstruction was encountered, and soon, emerging from the gorge, they found themselves in more open country, bushy still, but not densely so—indeed, such that in the event of attack the advantage would not be wholly on the enemy's side.

Volume Two—Chapter Twelve.

"The Land is Dead."

For two days "Claverton's Levy" has continued its march farther and further into the disturbed country, meeting, as yet, with no opposition. Now and again, far away on a hill-top, like a black speck, would be descried the form of a Kafir scout watching their movements, and on two or three of these occasions shots had been fired, though futilely, for at present the wily foe was showing a discretion eminently the better part of valour, and kept his distance. Deserted kraals and mealie-lands, here and there even the ruins of a once prosperous homestead, tell in significant, if voiceless testimony, that the "land is dead" indeed; and no sign of life is visible along the path, save for the occasional presence of the wild creatures of the waste, who, for their part, lose no time in getting out of the way of this quaint-looking crew. Once, indeed, a number of Kafir women came into the camp with a plausible tale of how they were fleeing from the rebels, and were on their way to join their husbands and fathers in the colony, who were loyal to the Government, and wouldn't the white captain give them rations to carry them on their road? But Claverton, who saw through the trick, had ordered them out of camp at once, threatening to make prisoners of the lot if they were even within sight half an hour later. He knew they were spies—these confiding creatures—sent in by the enemy to see how great a fool the white chief was, and to report accordingly; but in the present instance they found him in no sense a fool at all.

Very careful and precise has Claverton been in the matter of guard; visiting the sentries himself, and that often. Indeed, there has been a tendency among the men to growl a little—always in secret, for they have already begun to look upon their leader with no inconsiderable awe—at the extra precautions he takes in posting rather more than the absolutely necessary number of guards. Very careful and precise is he in matters of discipline, although, within limits, the men are allowed and encouraged to make the time pass as cheerfully as possible; and many are the yells of laughter round the evening camp-fire over the antics of some yellow-skinned monkey; or another discourses the sweet music of a Dutch Hottentot song to the accompaniment of a concertina and a battered old fiddle, for they are fond of music in their way, are these light-hearted, scatter-brained half-breeds—their own music, that is—a weird, shrill, bag-pipish chorus, unparalleled in its discordant monotony. But at a given time all lights out, and woe to the delinquent who should think it safe to begin "trying it on" in this or any other respect. So the corps is in capital order for its rough work, and, thanks to the carefulness of its leaders, runs no more jeopardy than that provided by the ordinary chances of war—which, indeed, is fully sufficient.

And now the troop is halted in a hollow, by the side of a small stream—at this season nearly dry—dry, that is, in places where it should run, though there are several deep pools of standing water very inviting on a morning like this, for, though not yet high, the sun is making his rays disagreeably felt. Around, for a distance of about half a mile, the slopes are dotted with *spekboem* and aloes; the straight, prickly stems of the latter looking like an array of dark Kafirs stationed about in the shimmer of the rising heat. It is the third morning of their march, and to-day they expect to reach the main body; meanwhile, having been on the move since dawn, they are halted for breakfast.

As usual, the sentries have been carefully posted, for their leader has noticed among his men a certain tendency to carelessness, in proportion as their advance is made without sign of opposition, and, knowing their characteristics and their failings well, his watchfulness never relaxes. And now, as the sun shines pleasantly down, on this cloudless morning, the men sit and lounge about, taking their well-earned rest ere the word is given to set forward again. Some are cooking their breakfasts and those of their fellows; others lie about smoking their pipes and indulging in drowsy gossip; some lying on their backs, with their ragged hats between their faces and the son, are fast asleep; while others are still splashing merrily in one or two of the water-holes, diving into the water or sitting on the brink basking in the sun. Claverton himself has just returned from his bath, and stands, in scanty attire, looking placidly round upon those under his command, in their various attitudes of ease and restfulness.

"Not much use tubbing if one has to walk a hundred yards after it," he is saying. "One wants to go in again directly one gets here."

"Yes," answers his lieutenant, dreamily. "By the way, I was thinking what we should do if Jack Kafir were to make a sudden rush on us while we were splashing away down there. But I don't believe we shall get a glimpse of the beggar until—"

Bang!

A shot is heard just over the brow of the rise about seven hundred yards off. It rings out on the still morning air with a sharp clearness that is startling, and immediately it is followed by a second. The effect is like magic: loungers sit bolt upright, sleepers wake, those in the water scurry out, and all eyes in camp are turned in the direction of this unlooked-for alarm.

“Kaptyn, Kaptyn—Kyk dar so!” (Captain, Captain—Look there!) cries one of the sergeants, a wiry little Hottentot of some sixty summers. But even before his warning is uttered Claverton’s quick eye has caught the cause of alarm, and more, has mastered the fact that nothing but the utmost coolness and determination will save every soul in that camp from destruction. For the whole ridge is alive with Kafir warriors, swarming over the brow of the hill like a crowd of red ants; on they come, straight for the camp, evidently with the intention of carrying it by a rush. A man is fleeing before them as hard as ever he can run—apparently the sentry who has fired the shot—but he has a small start and they are gaining upon him. Suddenly he falls, then disappears, pierced by a score of assegais, and the crowd pours over him.

“Steady, men—steady!” cries Claverton, his clear voice ringing like a trumpet. “Every man to his place. No one to fire before the word is given.”

And now the state of discipline into which the corps had been brought, bore its fruit, as, quickly and without flurry, each man knew exactly where to find his rifle and ammunition, and found it—for the arms had been placed separately in a circle, not piled—and now, inspired by their leader’s coolness, every man stood armed and ready, only waiting the word of command. Once or twice Claverton detected signs of flurry and scrambling; but a word or two thrown in, and an invincible coolness—which could not have been greater had they been on parade, instead of waiting the furious onslaught of a savage horde, rushing down at a pace which three minutes at the outside would bring right upon them—instantly had the effect of restoring order.

“Steady, men,” cried Claverton again, as the whole force knelt behind the light breastwork of thorn-bushes, which a quarter of an hour’s work had sufficed to throw round the camp when they first halted. “Steady. Don’t put up any sights, and aim low. Now—Fire!”

Truly the attacking force presented a terrific and appalling spectacle. In a semi-circular formation on they came at a run—hundreds and hundreds of fierce savages, their naked bodies gleaming with red ochre, as they poured through the bush like demons, shrilling their wild war-whistles, and snapping their assegais across their knees to shorten them for the charge and the irresistible hand-to-hand encounter which it seemed nothing could stay.

Crash!

A roar of the detonation of many rifles. The smoke clears away, and a confused mass of fallen bodies and red struggling limbs, is descried. Another and another volley; the assailants roll over in heaps, their ranks literally ploughed through by the heavy and terribly destructive Snider bullets—almost explosive in their effects—poured in at such close quarters. The advancing mass halts a moment like a wave suddenly stopped by a breakwater, fairly impeded by the fallen bodies of its slain and the frantic convulsive throes of the stricken.

“That’s right, men!” shouts Claverton. “Give it them again! Hurrah!”

A wild cheer breaks from his followers as they pour in their fire—a shrill yell of maddening excitement, nearly drowned by the fierce, frenzied war-cry of the Gaika warriors. But these are beginning to waver. The tremendous loss they have suffered, the determined and wholly unexpected resistance they have met with, all tells, and promptly they drop down into cover, and commence a rapid and heavy fire upon the camp. Their shooting, however, is ludicrously bad, and the bullets and “pot-legs” whiz high overhead, imperilling no one. The Hottentots answer with a derisive cheer, and every time a Kafir shows his head a dozen shots are blazed into him, generally with effect.

Suddenly a tremendous fire is opened upon the camp from quite a new quarter. One man drops dead, and two or three others are badly hit, and then on the opposite side a great mass of Kafirs rises from the bush and sweeps down upon the frail breastwork, uttering a terrific shout. A chief is at their head—a slightly-built, handsome man, with bright, clear eyes and a heavy beard for a Kafir—waving his tiger-skin kaross as, sounding his rallying-cry, he charges straight forward. Claverton spots him at once, and, coolly drawing a bead upon him, fires and misses. The chief laughs—a bold, defiant laugh—showing a splendid set of white teeth, and poising an assegai, hurls it with good aim at his would-be destroyer, who manages to dodge it, or his hopes and fears would come to an untimely end then and there. And the rifles roar and crash into the red, bounding mass, and the smell of powder is heavy in its asphyxiating denseness; and the demon figures flit athwart the smoke and jets of belching flame, while the gun-barrels grow hot, and the brain begins to reel amid that awful, deafening din, and the foot slips in a dark stain of fresh warm life-blood welling forth upon the grass. Truly all this is unsurpassed by Pandemonium in its wildest conception.

The last volley has broken the neck of the charge, but the impetus has carried a number of the enemy within the breastwork, and among them the chief, who, grasping a short, broad-bladed assegai, is stabbing right and left. Claverton sees him, and, amid the frightful turmoil of the hand-to-hand conflict, cannot help admiring the cool intrepidity of the man. He tries to get at him, but finds enough on his hands with a huge Kafir who hurls himself upon him, making herculean efforts to brain him with a clubbed rifle. A neat revolver shot and the savage falls—the bullet cleaving his skull, entering straight through the right eye—and in falling nearly upsets Claverton by stumbling forward on him.

“The chief! Stop him or kill him!” cries the latter. “Twenty pounds to whoever kills the chief!”

He cannot get near him himself, however. He sees his quondam prisoner, Sharkey, lay hold of one of the enemy and by main force brain the Gaika warrior as he hurls him head downwards upon a stone. He sees Sam kill two Kafirs with his own hand by as many strokes with a powerful Zulu-made assegai, as he replies to their fierce challenge with the most ear-splitting of whistles. He can make out Lumley and the cool-headed little Hottentot, Gert Spielmann, with the utmost calmness keeping up, together with a section of their men, such a fire upon the Kafirs outside that these are already in full retreat; but get at the chief he cannot. And, indeed, that bold leader seems to bear a charmed life as he charges through the camp, till, seeing that the game is up, he bounds like a deer over the breastwork unharmed amid the shower of bullets that flies round him, and, shouting his war-cry, regains the friendly cover with such few of his followers as have had the good fortune to escape.

The fight is over and the day is saved, and the Kafirs may be seen slinking off in squads through the bush—some, indeed, dragging the wounded with them. Orders are given to cease firing, and then about twenty of the best shots are told off to pepper the retreating enemy at long range, while the rest are held ready in the event of a fresh and unexpected attack; for their leader is not the man to overlook the smallest possibility in the chances of war. But a rally is not among them in this instance, and, after a sufficient time has elapsed, the men are paraded. It is found that the loss has been fire killed and twelve wounded. Silence is restored—all but restored, that is—for a voice might still be heard in the ranks in half-smothered dispute with a comrade, and then, with a vehemence which sounded loud upon the silence, it exclaimed: “Haow! Amaxosa nigga no good!” And at this sudden and evidently unintentional interruption a roar of laughter broke from one and all of those present, from their leader downwards, while our friend Sam, whose feedings had found vent, in his uncontrollable excitement, in his favourite ejaculation, stood there looking sheepish and guilty to a degree. Then Claverton addressed them.

“My men,” he said, “you have just shown the stuff you are made of. Half an hour ago we didn’t know there was a Kafir within ten miles of us, and now in that time, taken by surprise as you were, you have beaten off an enemy outnumbering you by six to one. You have behaved splendidly to-day—splendidly, I say—and I am proud to command you. You fought as well as any Englishmen could have done, in a tough action partly hand-to-hand, and you have won it by sheer pluck and hard fighting. We have lost five men, unfortunately—five good men and true. They fell doing their duty—fell with arms in their hands, like soldiers, and I shall make it my business strongly to recommend their families to the Government for a pension. Now, we must keep up our discipline in the camp stricter than ever after this, as you must see, if only for our common safety. So we’ll just give three cheers for the Queen, and then we’ll set to work and get into marching order. Now, then—”

Cheer upon cheer went up—three times three again and again; but it is to be feared that amid their acclamations the men thought far more of their present leaders than of their absent Sovereign. However, the effect was that intended—an inspiriting one.

“One word more,” cried Claverton. “The Kafirs have fought us like men—in fair, open fight, and we’ve thrashed them, and thrashed them well. Now, there are many of them lying wounded round here in the bush. It is hardly necessary to remind you that soldiers—true soldiers—don’t hurt wounded men after a battle; so when we go round to count the dead directly, no harm is to be done to the wounded. Leave the poor devils in peace until their kinsmen come to carry them off, as they will do when we are gone. So mind—they are not to be hurt.”

“Ja, ja, Kaptyn. Det is recht!” cried many of them.

“You put that neatly,” remarked Lumley. “There’s nothing like giving people a good opinion of themselves.”

“Well, yes,” answered the other, with a slightly cynical laugh. “These fellows are like children—take in everything you tell them in praise of themselves. Now they’re as pleased as Punch, and ready to go anywhere.”

“I wonder what would have been the upshot if the Kafirs had come on more slowly. These chaps of ours are not half such good shots as they think themselves, for I noticed some of them firing awfully wide. They couldn’t help hitting the crowd, you see; and being under the influence of excitement, didn’t stop to think. Otherwise the effect of their poor shooting would have been disheartening to them and encouraging to the enemy. And the odds were frightfully against us, you know.”

Claverton looked grave. “There’s a great deal in what you say, Lumley. More than ever, then, must we keep the fellows thoroughly up to the mark.”

Accompanied by ten mounted men, Claverton made a wide circuit of the camp, by way of reconnaissance. From the ridges not a Kafir was to be seen, and it seemed incredible that on this spot, within the last half-hour, a furious conflict had raged. Beyond the camp a film of smoke still hung heavily upon the air, and there was a thick, sulphurous smell; otherwise, all was quiet and serene, as if the peace of the morning had never been disturbed. And then they came upon the bodies of the slain foe, lying thickly around the camp, most of them struck dead where they lay, and terribly mangled by the great tearing shock of the Snider bullets. Some had managed to crawl a few yards, and lay with their fingers dug deep into the hard earth, which they had clutched in their convulsive agony. Now and then a shuddering tremor would run through one of the bodies, and lips would move, and glazed eyes half unclose. It was a terrible thing to contemplate that mass of humanity so lately pulsating with life and vigour, now a mere heap of inert corpses, mangled and hideous, lying there doubled up and contorted by the throes of death—a sight which, could the intriguing heads of the war faction in the tribe have seen, would surely have caused a dire sinking of heart and a regret, all too late, that the counsel of the older men should have been set at naught. *They* had had experience of these things; and such a sight as this hecatomb of their nation’s manhood in its vigour and prime, must have been before their eyes when they uttered their warning, oft repeated but all unheeded.

Suddenly they came upon a horrible sight. In the midst of a pile of bodies, about thirty yards in front of them, a great gaunt savage rose slowly up to a sitting posture. The whole of his face, neck, and shoulders was one mass of blood, and he appeared to be intently listening. Not a muscle moved as, with his head turned sideways towards them, he awaited their approach. “Poor devil!” muttered Claverton, contemplating the grisly figure, while even the Hottentots were vehement in their expressions of commiseration. Then a rapid movement was seen to agitate the Kafir’s limbs, and, springing half up, he discharged his gun quick as thought right into the astonished party barely ten yards distant, slightly wounding one of the horses, but doing no further damage.

“Stop!” cried Claverton in a tone of command, seeing that his men were about to fire on the unfortunate savage. “Stop! Not a shot to be fired; his gun’s empty now.” Then halting, he ordered the Kafir to lay down his arms; but the man never moved.

“Whaow!” he cried, ferociously. “Did I kill any one? But come and kill me, cowards, as you have sent me into night. Come and kill me. Do you hear, cowards? Or are you afraid of a man *who cannot see*?”

His last words were indeed true. A ball had passed through the upper part of his face, taking away both his eyes. The poor wretch was stone-blind. And in this condition, maddened by the frightful pain of his wound and a sense of his calamity, he had quietly awaited their approach, and then, guided by the sound, had struck a parting blow at his hated foes. Something very like a shudder ran through the spectators.

“No. We are not going to kill you,” replied Claverton. “Listen. We shall soon be away from here, and then your friends will come back and find you. You may yet live a long time, and there may yet be some little pleasure in life even for a man who cannot see. So we shall not harm you. It’s the fortune of war—you to-day, myself to-morrow.”

The only answer was a moan of exhaustion as the sufferer sank back on the ground. Claverton sent one of his men for some water, of which the wounded man drank copiously. Then he washed his face, and, placing the poor wretch in a more comfortable position, left him and passed on his round of the field of slaughter. Many a sickening sight met his gaze—a sight to curdle the heart’s blood and make the brain grow sad, but none to equal that, and never in after years would he quite forget the spectacle of the stricken savage all covered with blood, rearing himself up in the agony of his sightlessness, guided by his hearing alone, to strike one last blow at his hated foes.

No time was there to do more than hurriedly bury their dead. They must get on, and the sooner the better. So the five slain Hottentots were buried in a common grave, one wizened little old fellow, by virtue of his office as “elder” of a native chapel in one of the settlements, making a rambling, incoherent prayer, and leading off, in a nasal twang, a cracked, doleful Dutch psalm. Scarcely was this impromptu dirge brought to a close when a group was descried advancing towards the camp, waving something white.

“Three Kafirs with a white flag, by Jove!” said Lumley, scanning the approaching group through his field-glass. “Ah! Lucky for him,” he went on, as on further investigation he made out the sentry, with his piece at “present,” walking distrustfully some twenty yards behind.

All present were disposed so as to be in readiness should this last move prove to be a mere ruse—it would not be the first instance in savage warfare of the abuse of the white flag—and the Kafirs were suffered to approach. All three were good-looking men of about middle age, shrewd of countenance, and lithe and well-made of figure. They halted just outside the camp, and saluted Claverton gravely as he went forth to meet them. He nodded in reply, looked them rapidly up and down and asked shortly:

“What do you want?”

“We have come to ask the white chief to let us carry away our wounded. Many of our brethren have fallen, and are lying about in the bushes. They will die if we do not attend to them.”

For a few moments Claverton made no reply, but stood meditatively flicking his boot with a small switch he held in his hand, the savage delegates, the while, eyeing him narrowly. He was turning over the situation in his mind. Why were they in such a hurry to look after their wounded—it was not in accordance with their usual practice? Could it be with the object of keeping his attention employed, of disarming watchfulness while a large force stole up to surprise them? Or were they merely enacting the part of spies? At length he replied—and his suspicion and deliberateness, so far from offending, caused him to rise in their estimation; for anything like hastiness either of speech or decision does not find favour in the eyes of these people:

“How is it you were not afraid to trust yourselves in our hands? It is not the time of peace.”

“Aow! The white captain is brave. He will not hurt three men alone in his camp,” replied the spokesman. “We are not afraid. See—we have the white flag.”

The insidious flattery conveyed in this speech was quite thrown away. For all the change that came over Claverton’s face he might not have heard it.

“Who was your leader?” he said. “The man with the leopard-skin cloak?”

“Matanzima.”

“The son of Sandili?”

“Yes.”

“He is a brave man and fought well. Now, why are you so anxious to look after your wounded at once, instead of waiting until we are gone?”

“The chief’s uncle is among them. The chief fears that his kinsman will die.”

“H’m. Who are you?”

“I am Usivulele the son of Sikunaya,” replied the spokesman of the three.

“H’m. Well, now, listen you three. These are my terms,” said Claverton, decisively. “If you, Usivulele, will remain with me as a hostage till the sun is there” (designating a point in the heavens which that luminary would reach by about four o’clock), “then your people may come and look after their wounded, but not until we are over that second hill. Should they come before, we shall fire on them again, and if they attack us before the hour named, you, Usivulele, shall die the moment a shot is fired. At that hour, if your people observe my conditions, you shall go free and unharmed. Those are my terms, they are not hard; you are at liberty to accept or to reject them."

The Kafirs debated rapidly for a moment in an undertone. Then Usivulele stepped forward, looking Claverton full in the face.

"We accept them," he said. "I am ready."

"Very well. Now you two may return and carry my 'word' to Matanzima. When he comes he will find his friends just as they fell. We do not harm wounded men."

The two ambassadors saluted again, and turning, strode away from the camp, escorted to the brow of the hill by a couple of sentries, while the hostage was placed under a strict guard. They gave him something to eat, and he was well treated though carefully watched. But not for a moment would he unbend from the grave, dignified reserve wherewith he had wrapped himself. Communicativeness was not in the bond, and to all their questions he returned laconic and evasive replies. It was evident that he was not to be "drawn." Once during their march Lumley, having just given him a pipe of tobacco, asked where Sandili was.

"Chief," replied the Kafir, in a tone of quiet rebuke. "If I were to ask you where your general and your *amasoja* (soldiers) were at this moment—what should you say?"

"I should say, 'Damn your impudence,'" muttered Lumley, half angrily, as he turned away feeling very much snubbed; but Claverton, listening, thoroughly enjoyed the retort.

"Don't be unfair, Lumley," he said. "This fellow has his wits about him. He's no ordinary nigger, I can see."

"No, he isn't, confound him," growled the other, unmollified.

Meanwhile the hostage stalked along among his guards, and showed not the smallest concern as to his own fate. Evidently the conditions would be observed in good faith, and of that fact he was aware. In a trifle more than an hour, now, he would be set at liberty—when lo, cresting the brow of a hill, one of the saddest and most eloquent tokens of savage warfare burst upon the eyes of the party. Beneath, lay what had been a flourishing homestead, now a heap of *débris* and blackened ruins, from which, as they gazed, little lines of smoke still arose, showing that the work of destruction was but recent. The roof had fallen in but the walls still stood, with their gaping window-holes like the eyeless sockets of a skull, and fragments of charred rafters stood out overhead, the fleshless ribs of the frame of the once sheltering roof-tree. And in contrast to this sad work of desolation, a fine fruit-garden fronted the house, the trees weighed down beneath their luscious burdens—the fig and the pomegranate, blushing peaches and yellow pears, golden apricots, and quinces ripening in the high, straight hedges which shut in the orchard. Extensive lands under cultivation lay along in the bottom, and these had not been interfered with.

"This can't have been done long," observed Lumley, surveying the ruin. "Shouldn't wonder if it was the same gang that attacked us."

"Very likely. Stop. Here's a part of it not so smashed up. Let's have a look round," said Claverton, dismounting.

One end of the building seemed to have partially escaped—a largish apartment, evidently a bedroom. A fall of rubbish across the narrow window had blocked it, and it was almost in darkness.

"Good heavens! look here," cried Lumley, with a shudder, examining the ground. Their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, and both made out a broad red stain, whose nature there was no mistaking. Upon that rude floor had been spilt the stream of life, and the greedy earth had absorbed it. "I don't care for this sort of investigation," continued he. "It's one thing bowling fellows over in the open air, in fair, lively scrimmage; but, hang it all, nosing about in this infernal gloomy den is another. Let's get outside," and again he shuddered, as if dreading what they might find.

"Wait a bit," said Claverton, "Look. Some one has come to grief here—there's no doubt about it."

Nor was there. Another great red patch and a few smaller ones were seen, and then, following a mark made by something heavy trailed along in the dust, they came to a doorway leading into the burnt part of the house, and here, among the dust, and bricks, and fallen *débris*, lying in the gloom cast by an overshadowing fragment of roof, which looked as if it was about to fall on them, they came upon the charred remains of three human beings—apparently two men and a woman, for portions of female attire still hung about one of them. Indeed, only presumably could their European nationality be pronounced upon, for the ghastly relics were little more than a few calcined bones.

"Good God!" exclaimed Lumley, turning sick and faint at the horrid sight. "They've been burnt alive."

"No; I don't think that," said Claverton. "Poor wretches—they were killed first and then flung in here. The marks in the other room show that, if it's any comfort. They were probably surprised in their beds and murdered; this very morning, too, I should say. What's this?"

Something shining, which lay on the floor in a dark corner, had caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a small crucifix, about eight inches in length, such as is constructed to stand on a bracket. The cross was broken and splintered in two or three places, but the figure, being of metal, was intact. It was exquisitely wrought, and Claverton stood gazing sadly down upon the holy symbol, which he held in his hand amid this gloomy scene of ashes, and tears, and blood; and it seemed to him that a wave of ineffable sorrow swept across the suffering, lifelike countenance as he gazed. Wrapping the relic in his handkerchief, he placed it carefully in his pocket. Lilian would certainly value it.

"By Jove, Lumley; but war isn't all fun, after all!" he said, with something like a sigh.

“No, it isn’t. I’m glad now that we peppered those black devils this morning—cowardly, sneaking brutes. I wish we had done for a thousand of them.”

“Let’s see if we can find anything more among this rubbish,” went on Claverton, not heeding his lieutenant’s honest vehemence. But nothing was to be found. The savages had gutted the place, and how the holy relic had escaped them was incomprehensible, unless it were that, with superstitious awe, they feared to touch it. A few battered bits of iron, the remains of a bedstead, and some broken crockery lay strewn about; but everything combustible—chairs, tables, curtains, etcetera—had been given to the flames.

They went out into the air again. The sun shone placidly down from an unclouded sky upon this gloomy scene of desolation and death; around, a fair vision of hill and dale lay spread afar, and now and then the melodious call of the hoepoe would float upon the summer air as if no frightful tragedy had been enacted in that peaceful spot, where the torch and assegai of the savage had been glutted in his lust for blood.

“I suppose we must let this devil go, too,” said Lumley, with a fierce, vengeful glance at their hostage.

“Oh, yes,” said Claverton, decisively; “no question about that. Usivulele,” he went on, addressing the Kafir, “is this the work of your band? It’ll make no difference to you; I shall let you go all the same.”

The man gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“Chief,” he replied, “we are not the only party of warriors in the bush. The land is full of them. Some were here this morning, and are yonder to-night,” pointing to the horizon. “Why should it be our work?”

“A true native answer, but a fair one,” said Claverton. “No one’s bound to criminate himself. Hallo; here’s a book!”

For, agitated by the faint breeze, some leaves of paper might be seen stirring amid the grass a few yards off. He picked it up. It was not a book, but a few pages of one, in the German language—a hymn-book, from all appearances—and it must have been flung there by the savages when they had completed their ruthless work. The finding of it, however, and some other fragments of books all in the same language, scattered around, threw additional light upon the incident. Evidently the unhappy victims were German immigrants, of whom there were many in Kaffraria, and who either disbelieving the alarming reports, or trusting to the friendliness of the natives, had been loth to leave their prosperous, and, as they thought, peaceful home; and had suffered the penalty of their imprudence.

A grave having been dug the remains were carefully deposited within it, and, knocking together a rude cross out of some of the wood-work of the ruined dwelling, Claverton planted it over the last resting-place of the unfortunate immigrants slaughtered beneath their own roof-tree. Then comparing his watch with the sun he addressed the hostage:

“Usivulele, you have kept your side of the compact and I will keep mine. The time has come and you are at liberty to return to your chief. Go. You are free.”

The Kafir’s impassive countenance relaxed into a slight smile, and, with a murmur of assent and a courteous salute to Claverton, he gathered his blanket about him and strode away into the *veldt*. Many a scowl followed the retreating figure as the bystanders grasped their rifles and stole a furtive glance at their leader’s face. They longed to send a volley after the retiring Kafir; but each man knew that to do so would mean instant death to himself.

Claverton watched his late prisoner till he was out of sight, and then returned to explore the ruins afresh, while his men regaled themselves on the ripe fruit which grew in the garden in such profusion; and very grateful was the luscious feast to their throats, dry with the smoke of powder and the shouting and excitement of the morning’s fray. Just as he was about to enter, the part of the roof which had escaped fell in with a crash, nearly smothering him in a cloud of dust and cinders.

“I say, Lumley. That was a narrow share of your getting promotion,” was all he said.

Further investigation was of course barred, and the time for halting having expired, the “fall-in” was sounded. As they wound their way out of the valley, they turned to look back. The fall of the roof had disturbed the still smouldering embers beneath, and now a volume of smoke was rolling up from the blackened ruins, darkening the azure sky, and casting a fell shadow upon the sunlit earth. And all Nature smiled around, in fair, mocking contrast to these hideous tokens of the vengeful hate of men.

Volume Two—Chapter Thirteen.

The Main Camp.

It was after sundown when “Claverton’s Levy” reached the camp of the main body of the forces detailed to operate in the Gaika Location.

The camp was pitched on an open flat, well situated for defensive purposes, and commanding a wide open sweep of half a mile on the most closed-in side. In the event of attack upon it the enemy would have to bring more than his wonted *verve* and determination to the fore, if he would render the chance of even partial success so much as possible; for here were gathered over eight hundred men, all handy with the rifle, and a few volleys, sweeping across that open approach, would tumble the advancing foe over so quickly that he would turn and flee before half the space was covered. A likely-looking force. Border farmers, up-country transport-riders, frontiersmen all—ready for the roughest work and the hardest of tussles, at the earliest opportunity—with many a long score of petty depredation and wholesale marauding, and insolence, and defiance, and menace, and desertion of service to pay off upon their erewhile turbulent neighbours, and now open enemies. Dutch burghers, from the Tarka and Cradock districts—past masters in the art of skirmishing, competent to pick off an object the size of an orange at three or four hundred yards, while exposing the smallest fraction of their own ungainly frames to the enemy's fire. Volunteers—mostly townsmen—full of fight, if less reliable in their aim than their more practised brethren, all had their separate camps pitched in close proximity. Some of the corps were fortunate and had tents, others were unfortunate and had none. A few waggons were there, containing the supplies and baggage of each corps, or the ventures of private and speculative individuals, who retailed indifferent grog and other "luxuries" at their own prices. On one side of the camp, like a dark cloud, might be seen a swarm of native warriors; this was the bivouac of the Fingo levies, and like a disturbed ants' nest, its area was alive with black forms moving to and fro and making themselves comfortable for the night, while the hum and murmur of their deep-toned voices rose upon the air.

Having fixed upon a camping ground for his men—to augment whose numbers an additional batch had arrived from King Williamstown—Claverton left his lieutenant in charge, and proceeded to report himself at head-quarters.

"I think you've done exceedingly well, Mr Claverton," said the Commandant of Colonial Forces—a tall, quiet-looking, middle-aged man—as he listened to the narrative of the attack upon the Hottentot levy. He was a frontier farmer, and something of a politician, clever and prompt in the field, and of good administrative capacity, by virtue of which qualities he had been elected to, and subsequently confirmed in his present post. "In fact, we hardly expected you so soon. I'm very glad to find that your fellows are made of such good fighting stuff; and, by the way, you may hardly like to leave them now. I mean," he went on, seeing the other's look of surprise, "when I say, you may not like to leave them, that I think we can find you something better. The fact is, Brathwaite wants to get you into his troop—Garnier, his third man, was invalided on the way up, fever, result of bad water or something; and he wants to pitchfork you into his place. I told him I didn't think you'd care to give up a regular command of your own to put yourself under another fellow, and, now, while I think of it, you have managed those Hottentot chaps so well, that I don't much like your leaving them just as you've got them ship-shape. Still, you'd probably rather be among your friends, and if you care about taking the post, I'll get you appointed at once."

"It's very kind of you," replied Claverton. "If I might, I should like to think it over. Would it do if I let you know in an hour's time?" It was even as the other had said; he was not quite prepared to throw up an absolute command of his own to serve in a subordinate capacity, even among his old comrades.

"Oh, yes. Let me know to-morrow morning, that will be time enough," was the good-natured answer. "Why, there is Brathwaite," and, gaining the door of the tent with a couple of strides, he called out: "Here, Brathwaite. Tumble in here for a minute, will you."

"What's up?" cried Jim, turning. "Why, Arthur! You here? When did you turn up?"

"He's had a scrimmage, and a good one," pat in the Commandant before he could answer. "But look here, Brathwaite. I've been telling Claverton about your idea, and he'll let us know in the morning. If you can talk him over meanwhile so much the better—for you," he added, with a smile.

"Oh! Well, look here, Arthur. Fetch up at my tent as soon as you've got your camp fixed, and we'll talk things over and make an evening of it. I can't stop now—got to see about that ammunition that's just come. So long!" and he wae gone.

From head-quarters Claverton betook himself to the commissariat department to arrange for the rationing of his men. He was well pleased with his reception, and might have been more so had he heard the remark of the chief authority to a volunteer officer who had dropped in just after he left.

"A smart fellow, that—a fine, smart fellow. Wish we had a few more like him! A cool hand, too. I could see it in his eye." And as the officer turned to gaze curiously after the receding form, he told him about the action which Claverton had reported; and the listener, brimming over with such a piece of veritable "news"—gleaned, too, at first hand, on the very best authority—was not long in delivering himself of the same, first to one auditor, then another, till the story, gathering sundry additions and exaggerations as it went, soon spread throughout the camp.

The daylight waned, and hundreds of red fires shone out in the gloaming as the cooking of the evening meal went merrily forward. Here and there might be seen a rough, bearded fellow in shirt and trousers, seated on a log or an upturned biscuit tin, stirring the contents of a three-legged pot with a long wooden spoon, while his comrades lay or sat around, smoking their pipes and chaffing the elective cook—on duty by rotation—suggesting that, as long as he watched the old pot with that hungry and particularly wolfish stare, it would never boil; or that he needn't think to keep them all waiting long enough to send them to sleep, and enable him to polish off half the rations—and so on. Here and there, too, through the open door of a tent, a man might be seen, by the light of a lantern, writing on a box turned bottom upwards; or others, needle in hand, busily stitching at some article of saddlery, or haply of more personal accoutrement; but for the most part they were taking it easy. And now and again a buzz of voices suddenly raised or a burst of laughter was heard, telling of discussion or argument, or jest, or successful chaff. Prompt at "spotting" a new arrival, not a few were the glances of inquiry turned upon Claverton as he made his way back to his quarters. "Who is he?"

"Where's he from?" would be the half-whispered inquiries as each group, sinking its occupation for the moment, turned to gaze after the stranger. "Looks fit, anyhow!"

"One of Brathwaite's chaps?"

"Not a 'swell,' is he?" was the varying comment as he passed.

True to his promise, Claverton, as soon as he had seen to the requirements of his men and posted his sentries, made his way to Jim Brathwaite's tent. That jovial leader wae busily occupied in setting out a variety of stores comestible upon a couple of upturned packing-cases; preserved-meat tins, biscuit, pepper and salt, cheese, knives and forks, and plates of debatable crockery warranted not to break, while upon the ground stood several bottles of Bass, and two or three of something stronger.

"Now, Klaas," he was saying to his sable acolyte, "I don't want you here any more, so collar that bucket and go and 'skep' out some water from the clean part of the river—up above; you understand. And look out that the sentries don't shoot you, or your own countrymen either. Hallo, Arthur! here we are. Got a dinner-party on to-night."

"Looks like it—"

"Rather! No one admitted if not in evening-dress," cried Armitage, bursting into the tent, followed by Naylor and another man belonging to the troop.

"Where's the post-horn, Jack?" was Claverton's first inquiry.

"Left it at home," replied Armitage, looking rather sheepish.

"Now bring yourselves to an anchor," cried Jim. "You must sit where you can, and balance your plates somehow. They forgot to send a supply of tables. Here, Klaas, drag in that stew. We won't wait for the other fellows."

"Won't ye? Indade and that's illigant of ye! Company manners, I should call it!" And the speaker—a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, with a curly, reddish beard—entered the tent, a whimsical expression lurking in his blue Milesian eyes. His companion—a volunteer officer, by name Barlow—not looking where he was going, stumbled over the tent-rope and would have fallen had not the Irishman caught him in his athletic grasp.

"Hould up, me boy! Sure it's too soon by six morthal hours for ye to be thrying to stand on one leg!"

The other laughed, and there was a fresh move in order to make way for the late arrivals, during which a newly-opened tin of salmon emptied its contents into Armitage's hat, while simultaneously some one managed to upset and extinguish the lantern.

"Hold on! Don't move!" cried Jim, striking a match. "There?" And lighting the lantern again, they surveyed the damage.

"See what comes of unpunctuality, McShane," said Armitage, gravely, holding up his hat.

"Bedad, and ye oughtn't to complain, for ye've got your own rations and all of ours, too," retorted the Irishman.

"Never mind; shy it outside, Jack, or give it to Klaas. He'll soon polish it off," said Jim. "Here," he went on, handing round the Bass bottles. "Just one apiece; make the most of it because it's the last."

"Last of the Mohicans," inevitably and simultaneously quoted every one.

Corks popped and jollification reigned paramount; and sitting there in that rough tent, whose sole furniture consisted of a camp-stool or so, and a few old packing-cases turned upside down, Claverton began to find himself in a very comfortable frame of mind. The not very brilliant light of the tin lantern shone upon faces full of mirth and good fellowship, and many a hearty laugh rang out as they discussed the cheer before them—rough in all conscience, but plentiful and indeed luxurious compared with what awaited them. His mind was made up. He would accept the post offered to him.

The tinned meats disappeared, and so did the rather tough camp rations in their turn; and the Bass having long since vanished, the grog-bottles were beginning to show symptoms of decay.

"Tell you what it is, Claverton, old boy," began Armitage, benignly contemplating him through a cloud of tobacco smoke. "You'd better cut in with us; just look how well we live here."

"Jack, an' it's blarneyin' ye are," remarked the Irishman. "Ye needn't think to find such a spread ivery night, me boy. It's glad ye'll be to get your eye-teeth into the hind quarters of the toughest old trek-ox in the span before you're a week oulder—'dade and it'll be Hobson's choice for ye then. Tell ye what, Misther Claverton; that fellow Jack Armitage's the damnedest old humbug in this camp. Now, what d'ye think he did, when we first came up here?"

"What?" Claverton was bottling up his mirth. He saw at a glance that this droll Irishman and Jack were sworn foes—rival wags, in fact—and was prepared for some fun.

"Why, he had a dirty, batthered ould tin trumpet, that his father used to toot on when he drove the Dublin coach, and it's no wonder that same shandradan came to mortal smash twice a week wid such a dhriver. Well, this fellow Jack, the first time—and it won't be the last, I'm thinking—he got his skin too full of Cape smoke, what's he do but go outside his tent in the middle of the night and blow off a blast on his old post-horn. I give ye me word it was enough to wake the dead; anyhow, it woke the whole camp. Ye needn't laff, Jack, ye unfalin' divil, when it's five innocent men ye blew to death with that trumpet—five—I give ye me word."

"How was that?" asked Claverton.

"Well, in this way," went on the other, delighted to find a new listener whom he could regale with Armitage's delinquencies. "Ye see the fellow kicked up such a shilloo that every one tumbled out like mad, thinkin' the camp was attacked, and the Fingo levies there, began lettin' off their guns as hard as they could bang. They knocked over five of their own men and winged a lot besides, and the bullets were flying about all over the place. As soon as they could be prevailed on to cease fire, and the cause of the scare was known, no end of fellows came cruising up this way, wanting to find the chap who’d sounded the alarm, but Jack, the villain, he stowed away the old trumpet and joined in the search louder than any of them, and it hasn’t been seen or heard of since. Anyhow, he killed five innocent men wid his infernal old bray, and about thirteen of ’em—well, I was hard at work for hours next morning dhiggin’ out the bullets their chums had plugged ’em wid, and nately they’d done it, too. One chap had his—”

“Oh, don’t go lugging your old butcher’s shop in here, Dennis,” interrupted Armitage. “Even at your own trade you’re the clumsiest old sawbones that ever hoodwinked the examiners and slipped through.”

“Clumsy, am I? The divil!” cried McShane, who was accompanying the colonial forces in the capacity of surgeon. “Wait till I get me probes into ye, Master Jack Armitage—some of these days when ye get a couple of pot-legs through ye—and we’ll see if it’s clumsy I am.”

“Oh, hang it, Jim, only listen to the fellow. Do put an extinguisher on him. If we must have a butcher, at any rate he might leave the shop outside.”

There was a laugh.

“Wait a bit, Jack, me boy. It’s meself who’ll live to hear ye change your tone, as sure as me name’s Dennis McShane!” cried the other.

“Well, this is lively sort of talk,” put in Barlow, who was of a melancholy disposition, except when “elevated,” and then he was uproarious to a degree. “Haven’t you two fellows ever heard of the proverb, ‘Many a true word spoken in jest’?”

“If Jack gets hit now at any time, he ought to sue the doctor for big damages,” said Naylor, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

“Or make him put him right for nothing,” said Jim.

“An’ that’s what I’ll do, faith,” said the Irishman, “an’ it’s mighty small he’ll sing when the time comes.”

“You! I wouldn’t have you digging for bullets in me, if I had to carry them for the rest of my natural life,” cried Armitage in withering scorn. “If it came to that I’d send across for old Pollock. A blacksmith’s better than a butcher under those circumstances, and being a Cornishman he might understand lead mining.”

“An’ if it was in your head he had to look for the lead, it’s a bull’s-eye lanthern he’d want, for he’d find it mighty foggy in there, I’m thinkin’,” retorted McShane.

“By Jove, Dennis,” cried Armitage, suddenly, “It’s deuced queer that I never noticed it before; but as you sit there you’re the very image of poor Walker—Obadiah Walker.”

“I am, am I? An’ who the divil is Obadiah Walker?”

“The man who wouldn’t help himself and wouldn’t pass the bottle, though I must say that it’s only in the last particular the likeness holds good.”

“The bottle!” cried McShane, amid the roar that followed, for it was not often that even such an old hand as Jack managed to get a rise out of the astute Milesian. “Is it this one ye mane?” holding it up to the light. “Because, if so, she’s come to an end—as the gossoon said when he slid down the cow’s tail and she kicked him into the praist’s strawberry bed.”

There was other sign of the bottle having come to an end, and it needed not the misadventure of the too-enterprising youth just quoted, to support the announcement, for Barlow having passed out of the confidential stage, during which he had endeavoured to impart to Claverton, who was sitting next to him, his whole family history and circumstances, was beginning to wax extremely talkative, his utterance increasing in levity in proportion to its thickness. Armitage, who had his eye upon the unconscious sinner, was meditating what practical joke, that would bear the additional charm of originality, he could play off upon him as soon as it should be time to convey him to his own tent, when a tremendous row was heard outside—voices in remonstrance, and, loud above them, one screaming out torrents of imprecation upon everything and everybody. Quickly they all turned out, and there, not half-a-dozen yards off, stood a man of tall, powerful build, brandishing a revolver, while following on his footsteps, but keeping their respectful distance, were at least a dozen others. The fellow was mad drunk, and, as he stood there in the uncertain light, raving and dancing as he flourished his weapon, and bellowing out the most awful blasphemies, he looked quite formidable enough to afford a very sufficient excuse to the onlookers for their scrupulous and praiseworthy resolve to refrain from interfering in what was not their business. An infuriated drunkard brandishing a loaded six-shooter, is not an attractive person to interfere with.

Quickly McShane stepped up to the raving giant.

“See here, Flint,” he said, in his persuasive Irish way. “What’s all this about, now?”

The madman glared at him and started back a pace, gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth.

“I want my officer,” he yelled. “Where the hell’s my blanked officer? I want to blow his blanked brains out.”

“But see; your pistol isn’t loaded,” said McShane, in the quietest way.

The fellow stared, struck all of a heap by the idea, and, holding up the weapon to his eyes, began examining it in the dim flickering light. In a moment it was snatched from his hand by the intrepid Irishman who repelled his immediate onslaught with a blow in the chest, which sent him staggering back half-a-dozen paces, and before he had recovered his balance he was seized by the bystanders and firmly held.

“And why the divil didn’t some of ye do that before?” asked McShane, wrathfully. “Why, he might have blown up the whole camp while a dozen of ye were standin’ thur open-mouthed. Is it afraid of him ye were?”

The men looked sheepish, and muttered something about “were just going to” as they secured the arms of their fallen comrade, who lay on the ground still raving and cursing.

“Just going to, were ye!” cried the irascible doctor. “It’d serve ye right if he’d blown half your heads off. Now take him away. Don’t knock the poor divil about, Saunders,” he added, noticing a disposition to use the prisoner roughly.

They marched off the erring Flint, who had subsided suddenly, and became quite rational again; but it would not do to let him get abroad that night, so he was kept under arrest.

“Who’s that fellow?” said Jim. “If he belonged to my corps I’d bundle him out, sharp.”

“Yis; it’s bad enough havin’ such a chap in it as Jack Armitage. He’s a handful in himself, bedad.”

“Well, I’m going to turn in,” said Naylor. “Any one going my way?”

“Yis; hould on,” replied the doctor—and there was a general move made. Now and then a burst of laughter came from one of the tents, which, like this one, had been holding festival; but for the rest the camp was in slumbrous quiet, only disturbed by the occasional challenge of sentry, or the footfall of such loiterers as these our friends.

“Jim,” said Claverton, the last thing as he bade him good-night, “I’ve made up my mind about that offer of yours.”

“You’ll take it?”

“Yes.”

In the morning, who should turn up but Hicks and some twenty others, whose restless spirits would not allow them to remain quiet at home; and later in the day two more troops of burghers from the Western districts. And the available forces being thus strengthened, it was resolved that a forward move should take place at once.

Claverton’s swarthy followers growled considerably at losing their chief, whom, in the short time he had been with them, they had already began to look up to and respect. Lumley, especially, put his discontent into words.

“Always the way,” he grumbled. “Directly you get a fellow you pull well with—off he goes.”

“But, Lumley; you’ll be in command yourself now, don’t you see?”

Lumley evidently didn’t see, for this side of the question now burst upon him with a new light.

“Don’t know. They’re sure to keep me out of it,” he growled, but as if he thought the contingency not an unmixed evil. And the fact was, his late chief thought the same.

So Claverton, with the faithful Sam as body-servant, entered upon his new rank of Field-Captain in “Brathwaite’s Horse,” *vice* Philip Garnier resigned.

Volume Two—Chapter Fourteen.

“Summer has Stopped.”

“No, it’s of no use, old fellow. But look as much as you like, that’s everybody’s privilege. Deuced pretty girl, isn’t she?”

“Well, yes, now you mention it—that is, I think so.”

“Now I mention it! That’s good. Of course it was all piety, pure and simple, that trundled such a hardened reprobate as your redoubtable self into church on Sunday evening; an institution you, I make bold to say, have not patronised since the days of your downy youth. And, of course, it was by the merest accident that you happened to find a seat not far from the beautiful Miss Strange within that same tabernacle. Furthermore, it is purely accidental that she should be on one side of the street this morning, and you staring at her from the other. No, old boy. In the words of the poet, it won’t wash,” ironically concludes the first speaker.

A crowd has assembled in High Street to-day to witness the passage through Grahamstown of a body of men *en route* for the seat of war, and, for the time being, those who can do so, leave their shop, or store, or office, to come and look at this fresh batch of defenders, and give them a good, hearty cheer as they file away up the King Williamstown road. Those who have time and inclination to do so, make their way along the said road to the point where the band, which, discoursing inspiriting music, precedes the intending warriors, will cut adrift from them, and where some of the honest townsmen will, in the fulness of their hearts, air their rhetoric in speeches of an encouraging order as they weep over their martial brethren. And among those assembled at this point, to witness the ceremonial, is Payne and his household, and merged in the crowd about thirty yards away stand our two speakers.

“Bosh, Chadwick,” answers the butt of the good-humoured raillery. “Can’t a fellow look at a girl without your trying to evolve a ‘case’?”

The other laughs light-heartedly. He is a young fellow of five-and-twenty—slight, fair, and of middle height. His companion is ten years older, and exactly his opposite in personal appearance.

“A fellow can do anything he likes in that line—at least, a fellow like yourself can,” he replies. “But in this instance I fancy not. She’s booked, my good friend—booked as deep as the Dead Sea—and you haven’t a chance. You’re a day late for the fair.”

The elder man frowns slightly, which to conceal he half turns away.

“Who’s the fortunate individual?” he asks, carelessly, with a sneer.

“A man named Claverton. He’s away at the front now, and the fair Lilian is looking forward to the time when he shall come back ‘crowned with Triumph’s flushing honours.’ I deeply sympathise; but, barring the friendly thrust of an assegai, or the good offices of a peripatetic pot-leg discharged from the blunderbuss of the noble savage, you haven’t a chance. Not even then, for, from all accounts, I don’t think she’d let go the shadow of the departed Claverton in favour of the substance of even such a fascinating dog as Ralph Truscott. It is with grief that I say so.”

“It is with grief that I find myself constrained to listen to your maundering bosh. Now shut up for a moment, Chadwick, because I can’t talk amid the infernal din of this tin-kettle band.”

Shrill shrieks of laughter, much chatter, and some vituperation, drown their voices as the ragged portion of the crowd—slatternly Hottentot women and impish dust-coloured brats—fall back precipitately before the advancing *cortège*. Big drum puffs up the hill letting off a worthy sense of the importance of the event in well-timed whacks lustily laid on; and red in the face, hot and breathless, and with loving thoughts of that cool brandy and soda awaiting their return at the “Masonic Hotel” bar, the gallant musicians do their utmost to render with effect the cheery quick-step march destined to invigorate the pilgrimage of their brethren, going—as one of the orators subsequently puts it—to defend “their ’arths, ’omes, and haltars.” Then a halt is called, and, after some speech-making, the guard of honour—formed by a detachment of volunteer infantry—lining the road, presents arms, as the band strikes up the National Anthem, and the cavalcade of tough-looking, sunburnt men, two hundred and sixty strong, rifle on hip, and mounted on wiry, serviceable nags, files past, two deep, between the open ranks, and everybody feels exuberantly patriotic, and hoorays, and waves hats and handkerchiefs accordingly.

“Good compact lot of men, that,” is Payne’s verdict, as he watches the retreating burghers somewhat wistfully, for he is tired of hanging about the town, as he calls it, and would fain go to the front, only just at present he cannot. His wife detects the wistful expression, and rejoins mischievously:

“Yes. If anything, a trifle smarter than your old corps, George.”

“Not a bit of it,” says Payne, stoutly. “But—I forgot—you never saw it. They were all away, and in the field, before I got back from looking after you womenfolk. As it was, you did me out of half the fun.”

“Of course. Look, Lilian. There’s such a handsome man over there, who has done nothing but stare at you. He almost seems as if he knew you.”

Lilian is gazing after the retreating troop. It is little more than a fortnight since she bade farewell to her lover in the grey dawn, and now she is thinking that in three or four days that body of mounted men will be his camp-fellows; for the forces in the field have been concentrated for a combined movement. She has heard from him more than once—long, cheerful, tender letters, written during hours snatched from his hard-earned sleep, and despatched as opportunity served—rough scrawls, indeed, as was inevitable from the lack of appliances, and even of a knowledge of what time there would be to finish in—but to her so precious. And to-day, as she stands here gazing up the road, with a soft love-light in her eyes reflecting the burden of her own reverie, it is no wonder that the beautiful figure in the cool summer dress, with the dark, straight, patrician features, attracts many a look of admiration from several in the crowd. She starts, and softly twirling the handle of the open sunshade resting upon her shoulder—a pretty trick of hers when absent-minded—follows the direction of Annie Payne’s gaze. And a sudden flush suffuses her cheek, and fades, leaving it deathly white. Her glance is riveted to the spot, and it seems as if she must fall to the ground beneath the suddenness of the shock, for she gazes upon a face which she had never expected to look upon again in life. No, it could not be. He was dead, she had heard it for certain. It could not be. It must be a likeness—a marvellously startling one—but still a likeness. But on this point she is prevented from reassuring herself, for the owner of the face has turned, and is walking away through the crowd.

“Hallo!” says Payne, and it seems as if he was talking inside her brain. “There’s Truscott.”

“Who?” inquires his wife.

“Truscott. A man I met in the town yesterday. He was asking a lot about the war. Says he wants to raise a corps or something. That’s him—that tall fellow walking away.”

His wife manifests no further interest in the stranger, but with ready tact begins to talk about other things. Poor Lilian’s agitation has not escaped the kind-hearted little woman, who would rather die than do anything to increase it, as they return home. And Lilian, if she had a doubt before, Payne’s words have mercilessly dispelled it; and now she understands the foreboding of evil which came over her at the sight of the spy following them at King Williamstown for an unerring instinct leads her to connect that incident with the one of to-day. Her heart seems made of lead within her, and daring the walk home she hardly speaks, and even then at random. Even good-natured Payne notices it, but puts it down to the remembrances called forth by the sight of a number of men going to the war; but the remembrances called forth are, in fact, of a very different nature. They go back to a time when she was light-hearted and happy, and without a care or anxiety in the world; then to a time of love and trust succeeded by blank, bitter disappointment; to a hard, uphill struggle for daily bread, alone, uncheered and unaided. Still her memory carries heron, over afresh start in a sunny new world, free, indeed, all but for one shackle which the captive herself had riveted. Then a period of brief, contraband happiness, and long years of a kind of living death; the fetter falls off and she is free, and then the cup of life is full—full to overflowing. These are some of the memories which the sight of that face in the crowd calls forth. Yet, why should she dread? What can harm her, secure as they are in each other's love—a love which has been tried, as by fire, and has come out brighter and more beautiful from the flame? Yet an unaccountable foreboding is upon her—a dread, chill presentiment of evil to come.

The day is overwhelmingly hot, and Payne playfully chides her for running the risk of sunstroke by standing all the morning on that dusty road, in which event he would, by the first law of nature, be compelled to spend the rest of his days speeding about the habitable and uninhabitable globe, with Claverton six hours behind him, fiercely on his trail with pistols and coffee. It is not fair of her to risk the life of a respectable father of a family, he says, even if she is tired of her own. As it is she is let down easy with a headache, whereat no one can wonder.

Poor Lilian smiles, rather faintly. Yes, she has a bit of a headache, she says; nothing much, she will go and lie down for a little while. Once in her room, however, she does not lie down, but sits and thinks. Then she opens a writing-case and begins a long letter to her lover. She does not know when it may reach him, perhaps not for more than a week, the movements of the Colonial Forces are so uncertain; but still the very fact of writing it is a source of comfort to her just now. She will tell him all about her foolish fears and forebodings, and as she does so it almost seems as if the calm, tender presence on which she has learnt to lean is at her side now, and for two hours she writes on, feeling comforted and happy. She lays aside her pen at last, thinks awhile, and then begins to read over the letter. She will not send it; on second thoughts—no; she will not worry him with mere foolish and superstitious fancies such as these—why should she? Has he not enough to think about up there, without having his mind troubled by such chimeras, perhaps just at the time when it should be most undisturbed to attend to the more serious game of war? As it is, she looks back to the way in which she yielded to her imaginary fears before, and will not trouble him with them now, when perhaps his life is in hourly danger. So with a sigh, she tears up and burns the letter which has taken her hours to write. Still, the composition of it has done her good, and her spirits have in great measure returned as she goes downstairs. The house seems deserted, so quiet is it. Payne is lying fast asleep in a hammock which he has slang in the little garden at the back, and his wife is either in the same blissful state of oblivion, or has gone out; the children are at school, and, meanwhile, quiet reigns. Lilian reaches the passage just as a man stands in the front doorway, holding the knocker in his hand as if about to knock, and, seeing her, refrains, and advances into the hall. She stops short, seeming rooted to the ground. For the man to whom she made that fatal promise which has blighted some of the best years of her life, is standing before her.

"Why, Lilian," he exclaims, taking the hand which she mechanically holds out. "You look as if you hardly knew me."

"Do I? This is—rather sudden, you know. But, come in. I'll tell Mrs Payne you're here."

"By no means," says Truscott, quickly, placing himself between her and the door—they are in the drawing-room by now. "This is the most fortunate thing in the world. Couldn't have been better if we had arranged it so. You don't suppose I want a third party present the very first moment we are together again after all this time."

This bracketing of them jars horribly on Lilian's ear; but she only answers, somewhat irrelevantly:

"I thought you knew the Paynes. You do; don't you?"

"Confound the Paynes. Here have I been searching the world for you these years and found you at last, and—hang it all, Lilian, you don't seem in the least glad to see me."

In fact, she is not. And the statement as to the comprehensiveness of his search she does not altogether believe. She cannot forget that when she was thrown upon the world, destitute almost, and alone, at a time when she most needed help, encouragement, protection, this man had held himself aloof from her, and now, when after years of desolation of spirit and of a struggle almost beyond her strength, the battle is won, and she has found happiness and rest and peace, he jauntily tells her that she doesn't seem in the least glad to see him. Her heart hardens towards him; but she checks the impulse which arises to tell him in words of withering scorn that she is not. Yet she does not contradict him, for she remembers vividly with what relief she heard that news, and how thankfully she had accepted the restfulness it brought her—a restfulness undisturbed until that morning.

"H'm, well, you don't seem very glad. And yet I've come a good way to find you, and had a narrow shave of my life, too—as narrow a shave as a man could well have and escape."

"Yes? How was that?" she asks, hardly able to restrain her eagerness. He sees it and is gratified. The old interest is waking, he thinks; Lilian was always tender-hearted to a fault.

"Why, out in California. Fact is, I was awfully down on my luck and went wandering. Well, I got into one of these street rows and was hit—hit badly. For thirteen weeks I was lying in a hospital, the most awful lazar-house you could imagine, and at the end I crawled out more dead than alive. The best of the joke is that my affectionate relatives thought I was dead, and advertised me accordingly."

Lilian makes no answer. It was this advertisement that, seen haphazard two years ago, had emancipated her from her fatal bond.

"But didn't you hear of all this?" he asks.

"You know I have been out of the world for more than four years. When did it happen?"

"Only a year ago," is his reply. And then she knows that he is lying to her—endeavouring to play upon her sympathies—for she has the number of the newspaper containing the advertisement safely locked up in an inner drawer of her writing-table, and its date is rather more than two years previous. "Those fools Grantham, the lawyers, could tell me nothing about you, though I pestered them with inquiries, till at last I began to suspect they were telling lies just for practice, to keep their hands in. But at last I've found you?" And there is a ring of real warmth, to Lilian's ear, in his voice, which fills her with dismay. Can it be that he has not heard of her position now, that he comes upon her suddenly like this and takes possession of her in his tone, so to say? At all risks she must tell him.

Just then a cheery voice is heard in the passage, humming an old colonial song, and Payne walks into the room. He stops short on seeing the visitor, snatching his pipe from his mouth with one hand, while with the other he welcomes the unexpected guest.

"How d'you do?" says Truscott, in his silkiest manner. "I was hoping to have found Mrs Payne at home this afternoon. Meanwhile, I have been fortunate enough to renew a very old acquaintance with Miss Strange here."

"So?" replies Payne, looking from one to the other. "Well, I'm glad you've found your way up. I saw you this morning, at a distance, when we were seeing those men off to the front. Good all-round lot, weren't they?"

"Yes, yes; a very fair lot indeed. I suppose there's a tidy number of men in the field by now?"

"Too many. If it depended on mere numbers, the war would be finished to-morrow; but it's the management—we always break down in that. If we were allowed to go ahead in our own way, we should do the thing properly; but there's such a tremendous lot of red-tape and despatch-writing that the forces are kept doing nothing for weeks, eating their heads off in camp. By the way, have you heard anything more about your application?"

"No, nothing. I suppose I shall in a day or two."

They talked about the war for a little longer, and criticised the Government, the tactics, and the Commandant-General, and all connected with the campaign, and then Truscott got up to leave. He was sorry, he said, but he could not wait; perhaps another day he would be more fortunate. And so, with a cordial hand-shake from his host, on whom he had made a golden impression, he took himself off.

"I like that fellow!" said Payne, returning to the room. "No nonsense about him."

"He can be very pleasant," assented Lilian, ambiguously.

Doubtless the reader is wondering how Truscott got out of durance vile, whither he had just been consigned when last we saw him. The method of his liberation is immaterial to this narrative; suffice it that he did get out—obviously, since here he is, at large in Grahamstown. And now, as he walks away from Payne's door, he is turning over in his mind the results of the speculation. So far, he is bound to admit, they are not promising. His influence with Lilian is evidently dead, and to revive it, he feels, will be no easy task; but that everything depends upon his ability to revive it he is only too fully aware. Moreover, there is an additional incentive to success which hitherto he had left entirely out of his calculations. He was prepared to find Lilian "gone off" in appearance; a number of years like that—how many he did not care to reckon—are apt to tell. But the hand of Time, so far from buffeting, had been laid caressingly on the soft but stately beauty, which had grown graver, indeed, but far more sweet and attractive than in the earlier days of girlhood; and when he met her eyes that morning in the crowd a thrill shot through him as he thought how luck might throw into his hands, at one *coup*, such loveliness combined with such a reversion. Might? It should! And now, as he walked down the street, he revolved and elaborated his plans. He had never seen this lover of hers, who, he more than feared, would be no ordinary rival; but then the fact of his absence was an immense advantage. He might be killed in action, as the light-hearted Chadwick had airily remarked; and there's many a true word spoken in jest, as we all know. But putting aside this contingency into the category of exceptional luck, he—Truscott—had other cards to play, and that warily, for he would not endanger success by any rash move. If the worst came to the worst, he could always use the double-edged weapon which chance had thrown into his hand in the shape of his scoundrelly friend, Sharkey; but win he must. Meanwhile, he would begin by sedulously ignoring Lilian's engagement. He would show her the most marked attentions—in fact, compromise her—till at length this absent lover of hers should hear of it, and hear of it, too, in such a way that a split would be inevitable. Not that he intended to do this all at once—oh, no. He would take time, and the while his rival might be removed to a better sphere by accident or—well, things could not always be helped.

So he lost no time in calling again at the Paynes'; and having, with the attractive manner that he could so well assume, won the heart of that honest frontiersman, set himself to lay siege to that of his hostess, and succeeded. Not altogether, for Annie Payne was a shrewd little woman, and though she found this new acquaintance pleasant and amusing, watched him narrowly. She remembered the look which had passed between him and Lilian, and held her true opinion of him in reserve. Meanwhile, she waited and watched.

In his intercourse with Lilian, too, he was all that was kind and thoughtful—scarcely ever referring to the past, and only then with a half regretful, half aggrieved air that was the perfection of acting. But somehow or other he was seldom away from her. If she went out, she was sure to meet Truscott; if she stayed at home, he was sure to call; or Payne would pick him up in the street—of course, by chance—and bring him home to lunch; and though she avoided him as much as she possibly could, without being rude, yet somehow it seemed to her that she was never seen in public without this man at her side, till at last the gossips used to say to each other, with a wink and a smile, that "it was a very convenient arrangement to have a lover away at the front, my dear, whose place could be so well supplied; and that really Miss Strange, for all her demureness, was no better than the rest," and so on. Which tattle, however, fortunately or unfortunately, never reached Lilian's ears; and the intimacy between Truscott and the house of Payne grew apace. Not that this state of things had come about all at once—Truscott was far too cautious for that; on the contrary, it had been one of the most gradual growth—so gradual, indeed, that the plotter had been inclined to blame himself for dilatoriness; but it was a fault in the right direction. So he bided his time, and was rewarded. Things were progressing as smoothly as he could wish.

To Lilian herself, his attentions are a terrible source of annoyance, and at times she feels as if the toils were closing in about her. She has never mentioned this new trouble in her letters to Claverton, thinking—and rightly—that it would bring him to her side at once; and she does not wish that, for his sake, if it can be avoided; but for her own, oh, how she longs for it! Why should this man, whom she had thought never to see again, return to persecute her? Had he not escaped—by a hair's breadth merely—blighting her whole life, after embittering some of the best years of it? She feels that she is beginning to hate him; and it is while in this vein that she goes down to the drawing-room one afternoon to fetch a book, for she has taken to remaining in her room when the Paynes are out, as they are now. To her intense mortification, Truscott is there.

"Ah! At last!" is his greeting, in a tone which to her ear is provoking in its cool assurance. "I knew I should find you here, Lilian mine. The rest of the world has gone picnicking, hasn't it?"

She had intended to make some excuse, and to leave him at once; but that possessive alters her plan. Now, once and for all, he must be made to understand her position, and that this tacitly assertive air of ownership which he has chosen to set up over her must cease.

"I don't know why you should *know* anything of the sort," she replies, very coldly.

"Don't be angry, Lilian. You never used to fly out about trifles. What I meant was, we've had so little opportunity for a quiet talk together of late, that when I heard you had not gone with the others I thought it would be a capital opportunity for one now."

It happened that that day a picnic in a small way had been organised; but Lilian, somewhat to the Paynes' surprise, excused herself from going. She felt she could not take part in anything approaching to a festivity at such a time as this. It might be only a silly fad of hers, she said, and no one need know of it; still, she would rather stay quietly at home.

"But Lilian, child," objected Mrs Payne. "It'll do you a world of good, and, after all, it's a very mild form of festivity—not like a ball, you know. And I'm sure Arthur wouldn't wish you to mope yourself to death just because he is away."

"It isn't because he's away, but because he's away *as* he is," she answered. "He may be risking his life every moment, while I am enjoying myself as if no one I cared for in the world was in danger. Only think, he might be lying shot down in the bush at the very moment we are all laughing and joking," and her voice sank to an awed whisper. "No. I'd rather stay at home quietly to-day." And the good-hearted little woman had kissed her, and vowed she was perfectly right; and then they had gone, and Lilian had her way and the house to herself, instead of accompanying them to rove about the deep rocky recesses of Fern Kloof and to eat a scrambling luncheon beneath its tangled shade, looking down, as in a splendid panorama, on the sunlit plains of Lower Albany.

The consciousness of this, in conjunction with Truscott's remark, causes her face to flush with something very like anger, and she answers, icily:

"In other words, you thought I had remained at home to receive visitors in Mrs Payne's absence. Thank you. I might have remembered—were it not that our acquaintance was a matter of such a long time ago—that that would be just the interpretation Ralph Truscott might be expected to put upon my actions."

"Why will you always harp upon that string, Lilian? You know it wasn't my fault. You would run away from every one and bury yourself in this beastly country among Dutchmen, and niggers, and all that sort of thing, where it has taken me years to find you; and now, when I have found you, you turn the cold shoulder on me. But, perhaps, you don't believe that I have done this?" he concludes, dashing his tone of sorrowful reproach with a touch of irony.

"No. I do not."

She looks him straight in the face, and there is a shade of contempt in the calm eyes. Why should the man tell her such a pitiful falsehood?

"Oh, you don't?" he says, staring at her from the arm-chair in which he is lounging, fairly startled by her straightforwardness.

"No. But why talk about that?" she answers. Her hands nervously grasp the back of a chair as she stands, speaking in a low, rapid voice. "It is past, and there is an end of it. What I have to say to you now is of the present, and it is best said frankly and without reserve. You have come here and assumed a kind of possession over me, which I must ask you to discontinue. Of course I have no actual right to request you to drop your intimacy with the Paynes, but I have a moral right as a defenceless woman appealing to a gentleman, and therefore presumably an honourable man, to ask you to discontinue those very marked attentions by which you have made me conspicuous of late. Whatever has been is past and done with, nothing can alter that, and under the circumstances there can be no question even of intimacy between us. I do not wish to say anything unkind, but it would be better for us not to meet again, much better, believe me."

All this time Truscott's countenance has been wearing an expression of blank and well-feigned amazement.

"Better not to meet again? No question of intimacy between us? Good Heavens! Why, Lilian, what *do* you suppose I've come from one end of the world to the other for, then?"

"I don't pretend to guess. But it must be even as I say, and I am sure you will agree with me that it is best so."

“Indeed, I am sure I shall do nothing of the sort,” he cries. “You are only playing with me, Lilian, only doing this just to try me. You are; say you are, my darling. It is not kind of you after I have come far to find you.”

For all reply she shakes her head, sadly but firmly, and Truscott can see that every particle of faith she ever had in him is dead and buried.

“But your promise!” he cries. “I have your promise, at all events. You cannot get out of that, nor do I intend to let you.”

“My promise!” she answers, and there is a scornful curve in the beautiful lips and a hard ring in the rich voice. “My promise! To a man who woos in prosperity and deserts in adversity; who sees an unprotected girl thrown upon the world, lonely and unfriended; and makes no sign. Who, when she departs to live among strangers in a far-off land, suffers her to go without so much as a word of farewell and encouragement; and that, too, the girl whom in palmier days he professed to love. No, Ralph Truscott, you have cancelled my promise by your own act, and, even if no other bar existed its conditions should never be yours.”

Truscott’s face is white with rage. He sees that his game is played out—that there is not a chance. He was prepared for some reproaches; in short, a good deal of unpleasantness, but not for such decision as this. His whole being quivers beneath a sense of overwhelming defeat, mortification, disappointment—nay, despair—and now, as he sees the prize slipping from his grasp, he is not sure whether he hates or loves her most.

“So the good, the pious, the saintly Lilian Strange can perjure herself in a way the most unregenerate would shrink from,” he sneers. “The privilege of godliness, I suppose. Oh, so a ‘bar’ does exist, does it? You should have told me that before.”

“It is impossible that you could not have known of it,” she replies, gently, but with quiet dignity. “That I am plighted—to another.”

His answer is a harsh, jeering laugh.

“Oh, I have heard some nonsensical story of the kind, but I knew it couldn’t be true. I thought you were only amusing yourself, in fact, knowing that anything serious was impossible, considering. So, of course, I didn’t believe it.”

“What do you mean?” says Lilian, outwardly calm, but with indignation and contempt in her voice, for there is something so maliciously significant in his tone that she is disturbed in spite of herself. “Don’t deal in hints and innuendoes. Speak out—if you dare.”

“If I dare? Well, then, I will speak out,” answers Truscott, stung to madness by her scornful look. He will bring her to her knees, he thinks. “This is what I mean,” dropping out his words deliberately. “I knew it couldn’t be true, because I knew it was impossible that Lilian Strange could be engaged to an ex-pirate, a murderer, and what, in her eyes, is probably much worse.”

“Do you know of whom you are speaking?”

“Of the man who calls himself Arthur Claverton.”

There is dead silence. The clock on the mantelpiece ticks loudly; the crack of a waggon-whip in the High Street, and the harsh, long-drawn shout of the driver, sound plainly though distant through the still afternoon, and in the little garden the bees hum drowsily.

“You must be mad?”

Every vestige of colour has fled from Lilian’s face, as she stands cold and statuesque, looking down upon her lover’s traducer. But she is perfectly calm, for she does not believe one word of this, though the bare suggestion has upset her. He shall speak more plainly, though.

“Of course you don’t believe me,” he says. “I wasn’t fool enough to expect you would—without proof. To begin, then. How much has this Claverton told you of his antecedents?”

“As much as I wish to know. But this is not proof.”

“Wait a bit. All in good time. He came to South Africa four years ago; quite so. Now has he by chance ever told you where he spent the two previous years—what he was doing?”

In spite of herself Lilian feels her heart sink somewhat. It happens that concerning that very portion of his career her lover has been conspicuously reticent. But she says carelessly:

“I dare say he has.”

“Indeed! You surprise me. Then it will be no news to you to learn that he was in Central Africa?”

“I believe he has been there. Go on.”

For Truscott pauses. He is watching her narrowly—playing with her in devilish malice. But he goes on in affected commiseration.

“Lilian, Lilian. I don’t think I’ll tell you any more. Forget what I have said. Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps my informants are mistaken as to the man. Let it pass.”

“No. You have made charges against one who is absent; you must not leave this room until you have proved them. Otherwise the gallant Captain Truscott will stand branded as a liar and a coward.”

He stares at her in amazement, quite nonplussed. He never could have given Lilian Strange credit for so much firmness, he thinks. Yet there she stands over him, calm, even judicial, as she awaits his answer.

“You would not dare to say these things if he were here,” she adds.

“If he is wise he will not give me the chance,” is the prompt reply. “To be brief, then, our friend, at that period of his history, in company with seven other spirits more wicked than himself, let us say, dealt in ebony. Slaves, you understand.”

“Go on.”

“He made a good thing of it, I’m told—a very good thing. But then, unfortunately, by British law, and, indeed, by international law, slavery is piracy; and piracy is—a hanging matter.”

“I see,” she answers in a dry, stony voice. “We have disposed of the piracy, now let us get on to the murder; after that to the other thing.”

Truscott’s astonishment knows no bounds. “Upon my word, Lilian, you have a judicial mind. Why, you ought to be a Q.C.,” he says, admiringly.

She smiles slightly—a hard, defiant smile.

“Well, then,” he continues, “you recollect the affair with the *Sea Foam*? In case you don’t, I’ll just go over the facts again. The *Sea Foam*, then, was a gunboat stationed in Zanzibar waters, where there was a good deal of dhow-running just at that time—in fact, several captures were made. But it so happened that on one occasion four dhows got clean off, beating back the boats’ crews with a loss of three men killed and several wounded. It was a secret expedition, betrayed to the captain of the man-of-war by a spy, and, but for one man, the whole concern would have been captured red-handed. That man was Arthur Lidwell—the commander of the slavers—now known as Arthur Claverton. The authorities, at that time, did not know who the leader was whose coolness and daring caused their retreat, with loss; but they suspected him to be a renegade European, and a price was set on his head; but, with his usual luck, our friend escaped. Three men were killed, I say; and recollect our friend is a good shot, and, moreover, not likely to stand by with his hands in his pockets while fighting is going on,” concludes Truscott, significantly.

Lilian remembers the circumstance perfectly. She had listened shudderingly while her stepfather read out the details from the newspaper, one evening years ago in the cosy, lighted drawing-room at Dynevard Chase, expressing a hope, as became “a fine, old English gentleman,” that the scoundrels would all be caught and hanged, and especially their rascally leader. And now this same leader—but it is incredible—her brain is dazed. Her eyes are fixed on Truscott’s face, but she does not speak.

“For the other thing,” he goes on, narrowly watching her, “the next time you see Claverton ask him what became of Anita de Castro. Ask him, at the same time, what made him suddenly give up so paying a thing as the slave trade.”

Lilian becomes a shade whiter, and Truscott, noting it, feels a fiendish delight in having at length disturbed her equanimity.

“Who is Anita de Castro?” she asks, still in a firm voice.

“The daughter of the chief of the gang. Spanish or Portuguese; but, they tell me, a lovely girl. Our friend Claverton, to do him justice, is a man of taste, and, these Spaniards are terribly revengeful when you take an undue advantage of them.”

Lilian stands in the same attitude as before. Her fingers clutch more nervously the back of the chair; but that is the only sign she shows of having even heard. She would fain not believe this; but then, how confidently this man speaks! He cannot have invented such a story, the way in which he tells it is enough to show that. And, in spite of herself, recollections crop up of more than one hint which Claverton has let fall to the effect that there is a chapter in his life’s history which he would fain forget; mere nothings at the time, and which on one or two occasions she even gently rallied him about, but now with what fell significance do they stand out! She knows his bold and daring disposition, his coolness and powers of administration or command; his cynical vein, which might under adverse circumstances render him unscrupulous and even cruel; and all this seems to lend likelihood to the other’s statements. But, ah! how she loves him! Even if every word of what she has just heard is true, she feels that, in spite of it all, she loves him if possible ten times more dearly than she did before. She remembers his neglected and uncared-for childhood and youth which might palliate, if not excuse, far worse crimes than these; and her whole soul goes out in a pitying, tender yearning to make his life so different, so happy with her love, and in time to lead him gradually and gently to what she reckoned a more lasting source of joy. She hardly sees Truscott; she is looking out through the open window beyond him with a soft, pensive expression that is wondrously lovely, and he who watches her gnaws his lip in fury, and the very fiend of mad burning jealousy shakes his soul. This prize was within *his* grasp once, but he threw it away.

“Well?” he says, impatiently.

She brings down her eyes to his, calm and serene as before. “Quite a romance. But, as yet, we are no farther than when we started. You have given me no proof.”

“Romance, eh? Well, like many romances, it may have a tragic ending. I have two witnesses. You remember the man you saw following you in the crowd at King Williamstown?”

Again Lilian grows ashy white. It was something more than instinct, then. And, like a flash, she remembers the troubled look which had come over her lover’s face when they met the man on the road during their ride, and how the two had been conversing under her window that last Sunday morning. Doubtless the fellow had been trying to trade on his knowledge. Merciful heavens! That ruffian—and Arthur in his power!

“Yes, I see you do. Now for the other. You don’t suppose Anita de Castro would spare him?”

Lilian gives an imperceptible shudder. “All this may, or may not be,” she replies. “But in the former event, it all happened years ago, and the bare word of these people would go for nothing here. The idea is absurd.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Really I shall have to retract what I said just now about your having a judicial mind,” sneers Truscott. “The bare word of these people would go for just this much here. It would make out a strong *prima facie* case for the committal of this precious scoundrel—bail refused, of course—pending the making of inquiries and the procuring of more witnesses at Zanzibar, when he would be put upon his trial for piracy—piracy in its worst phase, mind—and murder. What do you think of that, Lilian Strange? In either case a conviction is certain, and in either case with the same result—the rope. So that is the fate in store for our gallows-bird before six months are over—a dance on nothing—and I shall get a pass to go into the gaol-yard and witness the fun.”

He has risen and is standing before her, his features working with a livid rage that is absolutely devilish. Suddenly the full, awful force of the situation sweeps across Lilian’s mind, and with a low cry, like that of a stricken animal, and a shrinking motion, she drops her face into her hands.

“Ah, good God! Spare him!” she moans. “Why will you harm him? *He* never injured you!”

Heaven help her! She has let down her guard, and the enemy is prompt to rush in over it. From that moment she is completely at his mercy.

“Never injured me? What is she dreaming of? Good heavens! hasn’t he robbed me of you—of you? Isn’t that enough?” is the harsh, pitiless reply. “Ha, ha! Six months about will do it. It’ll be winter then—June or July. The mornings are cold then. Perhaps, as a last kind act, I’ll give the poor wretch a ‘nip’ out of my flask, before he’s swung off, just to keep his spirits up, you know.”

“Demon,” whispers Lilian, hoarsely, gazing at him in set, stony despair.

“I am just what you and he have made me. It is your own doing. You know I was never one of your godly lot. If a man does me an ill turn I repay it with interest, that is, if I am in a position to do so, which, in this case, fortunately I am. Five o’clock”—glancing at his watch—“I shall just have time to beat up my informant and take him round to the Public Offices before the magistrate goes away, or the Clerk of the Peace will do as well; and by making his deposition this evening we can get a warrant out and save the whole night by it. So you will soon see our friend again, Lilian, sooner than you expected, eh? Now good-bye for the present. I am sorry you have driven me to this, but—” and he moves towards the door. Before he can reach it, she throws herself in front of him. He cannot leave the room without actual violence.

“Stop! Have you no mercy? No pity—for me—for me whom you once professed to love?” and the clear accents of her voice are wrung with despair—with a sense of her utter helplessness.

“None for *him*. None. Less than none. I *hate* the man who has robbed me of you. He shall die, and I will go and witness his last struggles.”

“No. Spare him, Ralph, spare him! In killing him you will be killing me. Ah, God! Why was I ever sent into this world? I am the destruction of all whom I would gladly die for!” and she presses her hands tightly upon her temples, and a tremor of hopeless agony shakes the tall, beautiful figure.

Even the heart of that fiend in human shape smites him as he witnesses her awful grief, listens to her wild, despairing accents. But she is playing into his hands now—perfectly. At one time he almost thought the game a lost one, and was about to throw it up, when lo! one false move, and it is entirely his own.

“All whom you would gladly die for,” he repeats, echoing her words. “Would you, then, die for this fellow?”

“God knows I would—a hundred times over,” she wails.

“Well then, listen. I will not require you to do that. What I require you to do is to live for him.”

She looks up quickly—her face transformed in wonderment, which is on the point of breaking out into joy. He is relenting.

“I mean, to live for him by living without him. That is the only way in which you can save his life.”

Her head droops again, and a shudder runs through her frame at this alternative, and Truscott, watching her, gloats over her anguish, remembering how she defied him at first.

“The conditions are not so hard as they might be,” he continues. “I only stipulate that you shall never see him again, never hold another word of communication with him, either orally, on paper, or through a third person, henceforth from this moment. On those conditions I spare his life—otherwise—well, you know the alternative.”

“May I not even write him one line of farewell?” she asks, with a look in her dry, tearless eyes that would melt a stone. Her tormentor sees it, and turns his glance away, fearing for his resolution. One word of communication might undo the whole plot. At all costs he must separate them now and for ever. So again he invokes the demon of jealousy to his aid, and goads and lashes himself to his fiend-like work.

“No. I will spare his life, but nothing else. Those are my conditions. Accept them or not. In three minutes it will be too late,” and he stands holding his watch in his hand.

Lilian is beside herself. An awful numbing sense of fatalism creeps over her. Is it to be? Ah, well, she will give her life for his, for this will kill her.

“Well? In another moment it may be too late.”

“I give in,” she says, in the same dreamy, hopeless tone.

“And you promise to hold no further communication whatever with Arthur Claverton from this day forward?”

“I promise!”

The agony of that moment, as with her own lips she dooms herself and him!

“If I were inclined to be hard, Lilian, I might remind you that you are not wholly superior to the weakness of breaking your promises; but let that pass. You will find my conditions are not so hard. I only ask that one thing.” By-and-by he intended to ask one other thing—and to obtain it, too. For the present she had been tried as much as she was capable of bearing. She would get used to the idea in time, and then, with the same hold on her as he had now, he would snatch the prize for which he had risked so much and plotted so wickedly.

“Now I must go. Don’t look like that, Lilian,” he says in a kinder tone. “You have gained one great object at any rate, and in this world we must be thankful for small mercies. So keep up your spirits.”

She makes no answer to this, at best, cruel mockery. She is leaning against the wall, with her hands still clasped over her face. Not a tear falls, her grief is too great for that. He glances uneasily at her again, for he is anxious to get away. He has already been here more than two hours; and it would never do, under the circumstances, for him to be here still when the Paynes return. Besides, she might faint, and that would still further complicate the situation.

“Good-bye,” he repeats. “Remember, now—everything depends on you.” And she is left alone.

How long she stands thus she cannot tell. At length the sound of familiar voices, with many a happy laugh, approaching down the street, warns her of the return of the party, and gaining her room with staggering, uneven steps, she locks herself in, and, throwing herself on the bed, yields herself unrestrained to her terrible, hopeless agony. “Oh God!” she prays, “let me die! let me die!” And beneath, the house is filled with merry voices, laughing and talking all at once; and there in the golden eventide, while the soft flush gathers in its purpling suffusion over the western mountains where fades the sun, the riven heart quivers and throbs in its voiceless despair.

Volume Two—Chapter Fifteen.

“There is One amongst us Missing.”

Meanwhile at the seat of war, events were developing. Several weeks had now gone by, during which the rebellion had spread. With the insane fatuity which was luring these people to their destruction, it seemed that to every disaffected tribe hitherto peaceful, the news of a crushing blow sustained by its brethren was the signal for itself to take up arms. There was a lack of cohesion in the enemy’s councils and undertakings that was simply incomprehensible. And now Emigrant Tembuland had broken out into revolt, threatening Queenstown; and the Hlambi section of the Gaikas, under the chiefs Ndimba and Seyolo, were making common cause with Sandili in British Kaffraria, while within the colony, the clans under Tini Macomo, from their rugged fastnesses in the Blinkwater forest—famous battle-ground in days gone by—defied the colonial authorities. Yet as each rose in succession, tribe after tribe, it seemed as though in their very half-heartedness, they were fighting against their will.

For several weeks, then, have the colonial forces been occupied in clearing out the Gaika location from end to end by a series of well-arranged patrols—sometimes meeting the wily foe in pitched battle—or as near approaching it as Jack Kafir deems wise to venture—more often exchanging shots in desultory skirmish, with the result of dispersing the savages after a few of their number had been laid low. Much cattle has been taken, too—thousands of head—which though an effective deterrent to the enemy aforesaid, is by no means an unmixed blessing to the captors; at least, so say more than one of their leaders. For large numbers of captured cattle in the camp can be nothing less than a nuisance of the first magnitude; leading to confusion and worry, the telling off of a considerable body of men as guards or as escort who might be better employed in the field; and conducive to much friction and irritability among the various native levies, each only too anxious to suspect and accuse the other of quiet purloining from the herds under their charge.

It was only yesterday that Jim Brathwaite, with feelings of intense relief, watched the last of a large herd, as it made its way over the hill under a strong escort, en route for Komgha; and now, with an air of semi-disgust, he is pondering over a despatch which has just arrived, bidding him push forward at once, for that a body of rebels, in considerable force, are known to be on their way through at a point some fifteen miles lower down, to join Sandili in the Perie forest. Not that this is the fact which calls an expression of disgust to the brown face of the dashing and fearless commander; on the contrary. But the sting of the document—like that of the scorpion—is in its tail, and is to the effect that an immense number of cattle are with them, which, can they but be taken, by thus cutting off their resources, a heavy blow will be struck at the concealed foe, even if he is not so seriously crippled as to be compelled to surrender.

“Oh, blazes,” growled Jim. “Even the glorious fan of a good old rough-and-tumble—if the beggars stand, that is—is dashed by the certainty of the camp being turned into a cattle-market for the next week or so. Naylor—Claverton, get the men into the saddle at once. No need to take rations. We shall be back to-night or to-morrow at the latest, and, if not, we shall find plenty of beefsteaks down there. Sharp’s the word, or we shall have those lumbering Dutchmen away before us.”

The door of the tent is darkened, and one of “those lumbering Dutchmen” enters—a tall, strong, but awkward-looking man, who, in that way, seems to deserve the slightly contemptuous epithet. It is the Commandant of one of the troops of Dutch Burghers, and he is anxious to confer with Jim anent the despatch he has just received, and of which, by the way, being ignorant of English, he cannot make out one word.

“What have you got to do?” echoes Jim, somewhat impatiently—for he foresees delay. “Why, you’ve got to hang it all, Arthur—you’re good at lingo. Translate the orders to him as sharp as you can.”

Gladly the Boer relinquishes the sheet of blue foolscap which he has been turning over and over in his great hands with a pitiably puzzled expression to Claverton, who translates it for the benefit of him and his four “field-captains,” who stand round eagerly listening.

“This is what it says,” goes on Claverton, having translated the first part, which is in all particulars similar to Jim’s. “Your troop must keep on about four miles ahead of us, so as to cut them off from the pass over yonder. The Fingo levies will also work with it.”

“Ja, kaptyn.”

“We shall keep on this side and drive them into you,” and then followed a few rapid details.

“Ja, kaptyn, ja, ja!”

“Well, then, we will work round to you. And now we must be off. You understand, Mynheer Van Heerden!”

“Ja, kaptyn.”

“That’s all right,” and away goes Claverton, jumps on his horse, which is held ready by the faithful Sam, while the Boer leaders make their way back to get their men under arms; still a little hazy, perhaps, as to the plan of operations; but trusting with characteristic phlegm, that *det sal als recht kom*.

The camp is placed on an open bit of ground forming the summit of a small eminence, and commanding a good wide sweep all round. It is shut in, however, as to view, save on one side, and it is from this side that they are able to lay their plans. Far away—at least two hours’ ride—is a bold spur, where rises conspicuous a cliff of considerable altitude; its brow, crowned by a row of stiff euphorbia trees, whose straight stems and plumed heads stand out from the soft profusion of the surrounding forest. At the foot of this cliff is the defile by which the enemy is expected to pass; and, to reach it, at least three hours of rough scramble along the bushy valleys branching out in every direction, will be necessary.

In an incredibly short space of time all is ready, and the *veldt* is alive with horsemen, hastening to make their way to the scene of operations. Opposite—across the ravine—the Dutch troop, about three hundred men, is hurrying forward; while beyond them some eight hundred Fingoes, marching in four columns, advance no less rapidly, chanting their war-song in a deep bass, and the sun gleams upon the gun-barrels and assegai blades; and, now and again, the tinkle of a bit and the neigh of a horse is heard as the expedition moves on.

It is the middle of the forenoon, and not a cloud is in the heavens to break the endless blue, and the heat is to be felt. As yet there is no sign of life. The other column has long been out of sight, and now carefully Jim’s troop moves forward, expecting every moment to get touch of the enemy, while nearer and nearer rises the lofty krantz which is to be the rallying-point. No one speaks; all are on the *qui vive*; but nothing disturbs the stillness of the deep valley into which they have been constrained to dip down in order to conceal the march as much as possible.

Suddenly, from the bush in front, breaks forth a puff of smoke, followed by another and another, till a regular line of fire bars their progress. The horses start and swerve, terrified by the detonation, as the bullets come whizzing about their riders’ ears with a horribly near and suggestive “sing.” One volley in return—for as yet they can see no one—and the order is given to seek cover, for, crack! crack! crack! on every side now the jets of flame are belching forth from the thick green bush, and it is evident that the enemy is in strong force. But he has caught a Tartar. Cool and self-possessed to a man, Brathwaite’s Horse are but waiting their opportunity, and ere long they begin to catch glimpses of the Kafirs, dodging in and out among the trees. Then the game becomes two-sided, as the experienced frontiersmen, with many a deft snap-shot, begin to “drop” their concealed enemy—so quickly, indeed, that in a quarter of an hour the latter begins to draw off. Still the fire is unusually warm on their front, and the sagacious Jim strongly suspects a deliberate intention to hold him in check there while the main body gets safely off with its spoil, as intimated.

“Claverton,” he says, coming quickly to his lieutenant’s side. “Take about thirty men, and advance upon those fellows in front, while we keep them occupied here. Try and get round them and take them in the flank; knock over as many as ever you can, and drive the rest on.”

Claverton hastens to obey, and, with his contingent, makes his way swiftly and stealthily by a circuit so as, if possible, to take the enemy in the rear. Meanwhile the fusillade goes on, and the smoke hangs in a cloud above the valley as the concealed forces, each under cover, pepper away, but with a caution that, on the part of the Kafirs, is somewhat unwonted.

And now the "special service" band has reached the ridge some five hundred yards above and beyond the main body, and its leader begins to think about doubling upon the wily foe. A smothered chuckle at his elbow makes him turn. Below, not six yards off, lying on his stomach on a rock, is a huge red Kafir. His piece is cocked, and he is worming himself into a good position for a safe and sure shot; and the chuckle proceeds from Hicks, who stands with his revolver aimed well between the greasy shoulders of the recumbent barbarian. But the quick ears of the savage detect the sound. In a twinkling he wriggles round, but, before he has time to spring up, his "Youw!" of consternation is cut short in his throat as Hicks' revolver cracks, and the ball passing fair through the Kafir's ribs, the huge carcase rolls from its perch, falling with a crash into the bush below.

"Sold again?" exclaims Hicks, smothering a shout of laughter. "Not this journey, my boy. I never saw anything more comic than that bird's face when he looked round."

Three more Kafirs spring up at their very feet, but before they can lift an assegai even, or at any rate use one, they are shot dead, almost point-blank. And now several dark heads may be detected peering in the direction of this new danger, but this is just what our friends have been expecting, and, crack! crack! crack! go their trusty breech-loaders as they advance down through the scrub, driving the enemy before them.

But the said enemy is in full retreat. He has had enough, and yonder over the ridge, dark bodies are running, by twos and threes, while the fire of the victorious whites still tells as it is kept constantly playing upon the discomfited savages. Then Jim gives the order to mount and push forward. No time is to be lost after this delay, or the plan will fall through. His troop has suffered by two men wounded and the loss of three horses, the dismounted riders making their way as best they can by holding on to the stirrup of a comrade. Nothing, indeed, could have been worse than the enemy's marksmanship.

They make their way out of the hollow without any further opposition and are upon the heights overlooking the pass. Have they been misinformed, or are they too soon? Jim hardly thinks they are too late. It may be that the Kafirs in charge of the cattle, hearing the firing, have driven these off in another direction. Suddenly an exclamation breaks from his lips.

"Oh-h-h! Good Lord! Where on earth *are* those damned Dutchmen?"

For he has been descending all this time, and is standing looking up the pass. There is the great cliff, towering many hundreds of feet above, and there about two miles off the whole defile is filled with a dense mass of cattle, a cloud of dust arising before them as their drivers urge them along with many a shout which is borne to the ears of the disappointed pursuers. Even the very spoors at their feet were tantalisingly fresh.

"Perhaps they've gone round up above," suggested Naylor.

"Maybe. In the meantime we'll go down and lie in wait so as to hem the niggers in when they turn. Van Heerden's sure to have got his men round too far."

An outpost was left on the rising ground, and the rest descended. They were about to take up a position on either side of the road and wait; when, without any warning, a tremendous volley is poured into them; and all the bush is alive with dark shapes—hundreds and hundreds of them—darting from cover to cover, yelling and brandishing their assegais as they advance nearer and nearer, while a constant fire is kept up by those in front.

So sudden and unlooked-for is this attack, that Jim's men are for the moment completely taken by surprise. It is, moreover, unparalleled in its fierceness and determination, for the Kafirs press boldly forward, waving their weapons. Some of them even may be seen snapping off their assegais in preparation for a charge.

"Steady, Allen, old boy. That's a new kind of a tuning-fork," remarks Claverton, as a bit of pot-leg whistles between his ear and that of him addressed, with a vicious whirr. "No use ducking when it's past, you know. Hallo!"

His attention is drawn by two men struggling, a white man and a Kafir. The savage, pinned against the very base of the cliff described, is vainly striving to free his right wrist from his antagonist's grasp, so as to use the assegai which, held flat against the rock, is useless to him; the white man, finding it all he can do to hold on to the other's throat; and thus the two are struggling, each unable to use his weapon. Then, in response to a half-choked shout from the Kafir, several of his countrymen are seen rushing through the bush to his assistance, when lo, a quick movement, something gleams; the white man throws his adversary off, and with a couple of bounds is at Claverton's side panting, as, crouching behind a bush to dodge several shots aimed at him, he wipes the blade of his sheath-knife on the ground.

"Ripped—the beggar—up."

"Deuce you did! Well done, Gough. A smart bit of work that," rejoins his chief.

And now the great cliff thunders back in tremendous echoes the volley-firing. Two of Brathwaite's men have fallen, shot dead, another has been overwhelmed in a sudden rush of the fierce foe, who becomes more and more daring, and assegaied in a moment. Several are slightly wounded; and Jim, seeing that no time is to be lost if they are to avoid being surrounded, gives the word to fall back on higher ground, to a point where his practised eye detects better facilities for defence, and for holding out until assistance comes. Suddenly somebody exclaims:

"Any one seen Jack Armitage?" A chill of blank consternation goes through all who hear it.

"Eh, what? Where's Jack? Where's Jack?" echo several voices.

"He was close to me when first we began to retire," says Claverton. "He may be there yet. Come along, boys, we'll pick him up, wherever he is. Who'll volunteer? We can't leave poor Jack to be chopped up by these devils?" Even as he speaks there floats through his brain the echo of those soft, entreating words whispered in the hour of parting: "*You will not run any unnecessary risks, even for other people. Your life belongs to me now, love*!" And side by side with the tender thought, runs the consciousness that he cannot leave a comrade to a certain and cruel death.

"I will." "I will." "The devil's in it but we'll find Jack."

"Come on, straight at 'em," were some of the cries in answer to his appeal, and among the confusion and smoke—for the firing was pretty brisk—Claverton and a dozen others, gliding rapidly from bush to bush, revolver in hand, made their way to where the missing man was last seen. And in doing so they went further and further into the most deadly peril, and separated themselves more and more from their retreating comrades; but still they went.

A couple of hundred yards further, and it seemed as if they had even got behind the enemy's lines. Two or three Kafirs had sprung up before them, but these had been immediately shot down, and, amid the confusion and firing on all sides, they succeeded in breaking through almost unobserved.

"Here's where I saw him last," said Claverton. "Jack! Jack!" he called in a low, penetrating tone. "Where are you, man?"

No answer.

A double report, and a couple of bullets came singing over their heads.

"Half-a-dozen of you fellows keep an eye on our rear," said Claverton. "We shall have them down upon us directly. But we won't give up yet."

"Hallo?" cried a faint voice some twenty yards off.

"There he is, by all that's blue!" exclaimed several. "Hooray?"

There he was sure enough. Lying under a huge, overhanging yellow-wood tree—several of which grew along the course of the small stream flowing through the valley—half hidden away in the long grass, whither he had crawled in the hope of escaping notice, lay poor Jack Armitage, his right foot shattered by a ball, while another had penetrated his side. His only hope was to be allowed to die in peace, though more than once as he lay there, alone with the anguish of his wounds, forgotten and left behind in that wild forest, he had thought of calling out to the savages to come and put an end to him. But hope would again reassert itself, and his own natural buoyancy of spirits, combined with the thought of his young wife, whom he would yet live to return to, made him resolve to cling on at all costs, as he put it. Poor Jack!

The rescuers were none too soon, for just then a Kafir, attracted by his faint shout, glided from behind the trunk of a tree, assegai uplifted; but a couple of revolver bullets, well aimed, stretched him beside his intended victim.

"Jack, old man, are you badly hit?" asked Claverton, with a thrill of concern in his voice, bending over him and grasping his hand.

"Infernally," was the reply in a weak voice; and the poor fellow's face was bathed in moisture from the agonies he was undergoing.

"Well, cheer up, old chap; we'll get you out of this, and you'll live to have the laugh of John Kafir yet."

"Ping, ping!" A bullet embedded itself in the trunk of the tree, while a second whistled perilously close to the speaker's ear.

"The devil! There's some one among those fellows who can shoot. Lie close, every one. There's fairly good cover here, and we'll pepper them a few."

"Hallo, Allen; you there?" said the wounded man. "Shake hands, old chap. You're a good sort to come down here and look after a fellow."

Allen looked a little sheepish. He might be a duffer in some respects, but he was not deficient in pluck, and had been one of the first to volunteer in the search.

The place where they stood, or rather crouched, was a ring of bush. Above, rose the great yellow-wood tree, with long, tangled monkey ropes trailing from its boughs. Around, however, all was tolerably open, although the trunks of the large forest trees which overshadowed the spot, shutting out the sunlight, might afford some cover to the foe. And this openness of the surroundings might yet prove the salvation of the devoted group, who stood there hemmed in by relentless and eager foes.

"We'll hold our own, never fear!" cried Claverton. "We were in a worse fix that day down by the Bashi—you remember, Jack?—when a blast of your old post-horn sent the niggers flying in every direction."

The wounded man smiled faintly at the reminiscence.

"Give us a revolver, some one," he said. "I can still draw a bead lying here."

"No, you can't. Just lie quiet, old chap, and leave the fun to us this time. The Dutchmen are sure to come up soon, and then we'll turn the tables, as we did that other time."

It was their only chance. Not for ever could that brave handful hope to hold their own against such desperate odds. They could hear the firing of their comrades on the hillside far away; but these had enough to do to act on the defensive; no relief was to be looked for from them. And now the savages began to call to each other, and scores of dark shapes could be seen flitting amid the semi-gloom of the forest—now running a few yards, now sinking down, as it were, into the very earth, as the well-directed fire of the defenders began to tell, but each time springing up again, and more of them crowding on behind, and advancing nearer—nearer—nearer.

"Now, then, you six, blaze a volley into that low bush there, at the foot of the tree. At least three niggers are lying there," said Claverton.

They obeyed, and upon the detonation came a loud yell and groans from more than one throat, notifying that the move had been effective. Two bodies rolled out into the open, and two more, badly hit, staggered behind the huge trunk.

"That's it, boys! Hurrah! We'll give them pepper! They won't come to close quarters, not they!" And catching their leader's spirit, the men, all young fellows brimful of pluck, cheered wildly and gazed eagerly round in search of more targets.

There was silence for a moment, and then a crowd of Kafirs could be seen gliding like spectres among the trees.

"Here they come, by Jingo!" muttered several of the group, but the savages hardly seemed to see them. They passed on, running, as for dear life, many of them turning their heads to look back. And the reason of this soon became evident, as a strong, harsh voice was heard exclaiming: "*Nouw kerels, skiet maar! Skiet em doed, die verdomde schepsels*," ("Now, boys, shoot away! Shoot them dead, the damned rascals.") and immediately a tremendous volley was poured into the retreating foe.

Never was any sound more welcome to mortal ear than the harsh, familiar dialect to the ears of the beleaguered group to whom it brought deliverance, and a ringing cheer went up from their midst as they recognised the voice of the old Dutch commandant, who with his men had thus arrived timely to the rescue. Spread out in a long line through the bush the Boers advanced, cautiously but rapidly, shooting down the flying foe in every direction. And another wild cheer went up in reply, as Jim Brathwaite, at the head of his mounted men, charged up the path in the hope of cutting off the enemy's retreat, or at any rate of thinning his numbers while crossing the open ground some two miles beyond.

"Hallo, Claverton!" he cried as he rode past. "Better fall back, as you're dismounted. The ground's quite clear behind." And the battle, which had now become a rout, swept on, farther and farther up the pass.

Indeed our friends had as much as they could, manage in transporting their wounded comrade with all the comfort—rough at best—that they could muster under the circumstances; but it had to be done, and the poor fellow went through agonies. His pluck and cheerfulness never failed him. "I say, Claverton," he remarked, with an attempt at a smile, "that old humbug McShane will have the laugh of me now. How the old beggar will crow!" But the speaker knew full well that not a soul among the forces now in the field would be more concerned and grieved on his account than the fiery but soft-hearted Irish doctor.

The camp was reached at last; but long before it was reached, the whole force had overtaken them, returning from the pursuit. The bodies of those who had fallen were found, horribly mutilated, and were hastily buried where they fell. But the undertaking had been a failure. The Boer commando had been unable to arrive at the rendezvous in time, owing to the same reason which had delayed Brathwaite's Horse. It had been engaged by a large body of the enemy evidently thrown out for the purpose, and as soon as it had beaten these off it hastened to the relief of our friends, as we have seen. And the upshot of the whole affair was that nearly two thousand rebels, with an immense number of cattle, had succeeded in breaking through, and had gone to join their countrymen in the fastnesses of the Amatola Mountains.

All through that night the wounded man lay, watched in turns by his old comrades, those among whom he had spent his life. A stupor had succeeded the agony which he had first undergone, and now he lay comparatively free from pain and breathing heavily. It happened that there was no surgeon in the camp, McShane being with the larger column some twenty-five miles off; and though three men were galloping across country to fetch him, it had long since become evident to all, even the sufferer himself, that the whole Faculty of Medicine could not save his life. He was doomed from the very first; that ball in the side had decided his fate. So they watched beside him there, and many times in the course of the night would his companions-in-arms steal to the door of the tent to whisper for news, for poor Jack was a favourite with the whole corps. So still and beautiful was the night that it required some extent of imagination to realise the stirring drama which had been enacted the day before, and an hour after midnight the camp was wrapped in slumber and darkness, save for that one faint light burning in the dying man's tent, a meet symbol of the life that was flickering within, fainter, and fainter, and fainter. Away on the slopes of the far Amatola the red signal fires of the savages twinkled and glowed, and above rose the eternal peaks in dark outline.

It was towards dawn. Jim Brathwaite and Claverton alone were in the tent when Armitage seemed suddenly to awake from his death-like stupor.

"Who's there?" he whispered. "That you, Jim?"

In a moment Jim was at his side.

“Well, look here, old chap, I’m off the hooks this time, and no mistake. It wouldn’t much matter—only—” and he paused.

“It wouldn’t much matter,” he continued, as if with an effort; “but—Jim—hang it, it’s Gertie I’m thinking of. Poor little girl, she’ll be left all alone—,” again he seemed to hesitate, and by the light of the dim lantern, it could be seen that the dying man’s eyes were very moist. “You’ll look after her a little, now and then, won’t you, Jim, for the sake of old times? There’ll be enough to keep her comfortably—when everything’s realised—that’s one consolation. And tell the little girl not to fret. It can’t be helped.”

Solemnly Jim promised to carry out his wishes. He was a man of few words, but they were from his heart.

“Claverton—it was downright good of you to bring a fellow up here to die among his old friends,” went on Armitage, suddenly catching sight of the other. “Better fun than pegging out with only the sooty-faced niggers prodding away at you,” he added, with an attempt at his old light-heartedness. “After all, what does it matter? I say, though, you fellows, don’t go bothering to drag me off to ‘King.’ Just slip me in somewhere here. I’d rather, you see. Best sort of grave for a fellow campaigning—and it’s all God’s earth.”

His voice grew somewhat fainter as he ceased. There was silence for a few minutes, and he lay with closed eyes. The watchers stole a look at each other, and just then three more figures slipped softly into the tent. They were Hicks, and Allen, and Naylor. The dying man’s lips began to move, but Claverton, bending over him, could not catch his words, though he thought he could just detect the name of his wife.

“Where’s Hicks?” he suddenly exclaimed, opening his eyes. “And Naylor, and all of them? I should just like to say good-bye to them. Oh, hang it all—it’s too soon to give way. One more shot and the beggars’ll run. Ah-h-h! That chap’s down.” His mind was wandering, and he fancied himself in the conflict again, “N-no. Where am I? It’s awfully dark. Open those shutters, somebody. A fellow can’t see.”

Again the watchers look at each other. This was the beginning of the end. Hicks had knelt down beside his dying comrade, and, grasping his hand, something very like a sob is heard to proceed from his broad chest. The candle in the lantern burns low, flickers, and goes out. They put back the flaps of the tent door, and just then the first red flush of dawn glows in the east. Then they bend down to look at their comrade; but it is all over. The spirit has fled, only the clay remains—cold and tenantless.

Thus died, in his full manhood, the joyous, mischief-loving, sunny-tempered Jack Armitage—light-hearted to the very last; fearless, for he had never done anything to be ashamed of, or contrary to his simple, straightforward code. Never a dishonest or malicious action could he blame himself with, and now he was at peace with all mankind. And if any one is tempted to ask: “Was the man a Pagan? Was he utterly Godless?” I reply, not necessarily. He died as he had lived, among his old comrades, careless and unthinking, perhaps, and with his thoughts apparently all for those he left behind; but genuinely regretted by all, and without an enemy in the world. And, O pious reader, when your time comes and the grim monarch lays his icy grasp upon you, will they be able to say of you even thus much?

Volume Two—Chapter Sixteen.

Face to Face.

They buried poor Jack Armitage in the afternoon, and all turned out to render the last honours to their departed comrade. Brathwaite’s Horse, with arms reversed, formed the principal guard of honour, the improvised bier being borne by the dead man’s most intimate friends. All the Dutch burghers followed in the *cortège*, and, hovering around in dark groups, the men of the Fingo Levies gazed curiously but respectfully upon the white man’s burial. No surpliced priest stood to hallow this newly-made grave in the wilderness, or speak the commendatory words; but all the solemnity which real feeling could impart was supplied in the demeanour of these rough bands of armed horsemen, pacing along so silent, and orderly, and mournful.

The grave had been dug beneath a couple of euphorbia trees, upon a green knoll commanding a lovely view of hill and dale, and sweeping grassland and distant mountain, all blending into one soft picture in the golden lustre of the afternoon sun. The steady tramp of hoof-strokes ceased as the horsemen ranged themselves in a semicircle around the grave, and there was dead silence. All uncovered as Jim Brathwaite, who, as senior commander and the dead man’s intimate friend, had been unanimously voted to the duty, began to read—in the subdued and serious voice of one wholly unaccustomed to the performance of such offices—the Anglican burial service. At its close a firing party stepped forward, and a threefold volley sounded forth upon the hushened air, rolling its echoes afar, till the Amaxosa warriors, listening from their tangled fastnesses to its distant thunder, told each other, with grim satisfaction, that the English must be burying one of their principal captains.

So poor Jack Armitage was laid to rest there in his lonely grave amid the sunny wilds of Kaffraria, and a gloom hung over the camp because of the cheerful spirit taken from its midst.

That evening they were joined by the other column, forming part of which was Claverton’s old corps. It happened that Lumley, who had been given the provisional command on the transfer of his chief, was in hot water. An excellent subordinate, he was quite unfit for a wholly responsible position, and, as was disgustedly said by those on whom his mistakes had nearly entailed serious disaster, he had made an utter mess of it. Consequently he had been superseded, and was daily expecting the arrival of the man appointed to take his place. “Quite a new hand,” as he said, in an injured tone; “a fellow only just out from England.” All this he told Claverton, seated that evening in the latter’s tent, where he had come to pour out his grievances. He would clear out, he vowed, and let the beastly war go to the deuce. Naylor was also present.

“Don’t do anything rash, Lumley. Wait and see who the new fellow is,” was Claverton’s advice. “You and I had very good fun together, and so may you and he. It isn’t all walnuts and Madeira being in command, I can tell you. Anyhow, I found it quite within my conscience to throw over mine in favour of subordinacy—and am not sorry. No, believe me, responsibility’s a mistake except for the gifted few; and you and I can have a much better time of it playing second fiddle.”

With such arguments he soothed the other’s wounded spirit, and at length persuaded him that so far from feeling ill-used he ought to rejoice.

“’Pon my soul, I believe you’re right,” was poor Lumley’s parting remark, made in a tone of intense relief, partly owing to his former chief’s friendliness and encouragement, partly—it may be—the result of a couple of glasses of grog warming the cockles of his heart. “But I wish it was you they were going to put back again, Claverton. It would be all right then. Good-night—good-night,” and he went out.

“Poor Lumley,” remarked Claverton, after he had left. “I’m sorry for him; but he’s no more fit to be at the head of a body of men than I am to command the Channel Fleet.”

“H’m, isn’t he?” said Naylor. “At any rate you have sent him away in quite a contented frame of mind. I was watching the process leading up to it, somewhat narrowly.”

Claverton laughed. “Oh, I can always talk over a fool, that is, an ordinary one, when it’s worth while taking the trouble, which in this case it is, for Lumley’s a good fellow in most ways. But I can’t talk over the fool blatant, for he is too overwhelmed with a sense of his own infallibility to give the slightest attention to any one else’s suggestions. By the way, I must go across and see Jim Brathwaite. Will you come, or would you rather stay here? Our ‘business’ won’t take a minute.”

“I may as well walk across,” and they went out. On arrival at Jim’s tent, however, that redoubted warrior was not there.

“Probably making a night of it with some of the fellows who have just come,” was Claverton’s remark. “Ah, here’s what I want,” pouncing upon a bit of blue paper which lay ostentatiously upon an old packing-case, and was directed to himself. “Now we’ll go back.”

The night was moonless and rather dark, for a curtain of cloud had drifted across the sky; here and there one or two stars twinkled through its rifts, and the outline of the sombre ridge beyond was scarcely visible. All was quiet in the camp, the voices of the men made a kind of monotonous hum, and now and then a laugh arose from some centre of jollity for the time being.

A light burned in Claverton’s tent as they were about to enter, and, pausing for a moment, the figures of the two men were thrown out into full relief.

Crack!

A bright jet shoots out of the gloom just beneath the shadowy outline of the ridge overlooking the camp, and the sharp report rolls away in dull echo upon the night. Then another flash, and, amid the roar that follows, Claverton and his companion both experience a strange, jarring sensation, for a bullet has passed, with a shrill whiz, between them, narrowly missing the head of either.

“Good shot that, whoever it is,” remarked Naylor, coolly, while his companion, who had quickly extinguished the light, was by his side again. “There’ll be tall cannonading for the next half-hour, and tolerably wild shooting, too.”

And there was. The effect of the double shot upon that camp—which fancied itself so secure—was marvellous. In a moment every man had seized his piece, and was standing eagerly peering into the gloom in the direction of the shot—and not merely that, for many discharged their weapons haphazard—and presently, as Naylor had said, the cannonading waxed alarming. The frontier corps, beyond a few shots fired on the impulse of the moment, had remained cool; they knew the futility of blazing at random into the darkness, and had too much respect for themselves and their reputation to be made the subject of a practical joke played by one or two skulking Kafirs. But the camps of the Fingo and Hottentot levies were like a disturbed ants’ nest; and heeding the voices of their officers no more than the wind, those startled and panic-stricken auxiliaries poured a terrific fire into the darkness, and the air was aflame with the flash of their wild, reckless volleys as they blazed away—round after round—as fast as ever they could reload. It was in vain that their officers strove to restrain them—their voices were lost in the constant bellow of musketry. Now and then they would knock down a refractory nigger or two within reach, but it had no effect upon the others, and confusion reigned supreme.

“Well, Lumley, here’s a lively kettle of fish.”

He addressed, turned, perspiring and despairing in his frantic attempts to restore order.

“Good God! Claverton, is that you? Now just look at these damned fools. Drop that, will you?” he roared, bestowing a violent kick on one of his men who was blazing away without even bringing his piece to his shoulder. The fellow gave a yell of pain and made off.

At length the confusion began to abate. Seeing no further sign of an attack upon the camp, and their ammunition having decreased alarmingly, the native auxiliaries ceased firing by degrees, each man, as he did so, sneaking off looking very much ashamed of himself.

“Damned fools, in sooth,” assented Claverton, when the uproar had calmed down. “But, Lumley, I wish you’d just turn up that fellow Smith—Vargas Smith. There's something I want to see him about at once."

"Certainly. Here, pass the word there for Corporal Smith," he called out.

"Oh, he's promoted, then?"

"Well, yes. A sharp fellow, you know; helps me no end."

But Corporal Smith was not forthcoming. He was nowhere to be found, in fact. He was not on guard, for he had been in the camp not long before the alarm, they said, but now there was no trace of him.

"How long before?"

Well, it might have been half an hour since he was seen, certainly not much more.

"Not less?"

No, not less. On that point they were all ready to swear.

"Even as I suspected," thought Claverton to himself. And he waited some time longer talking to Lumley, and ironically bantering some of his former men for their contribution to the recent chaos.

"A set of smart fellows you are, eh, old Cobus?" he said, addressing one of the sergeants. "Blazing away all night at the stars and bushes."

"Nay what, kaptyn," rejoined the old Hottentot, shamefacedly. "You see a lot of us shooting like that must hit somebody. We shall find many of the *schelms* lying there in the morning."

"Many of the *schelms*? Devil a bit. One or two of your own sentries, perhaps."

"No—Kafirs, kaptyn."

"Bah. There won't be a leaf or a twig left on the bushes within a circle of two miles, perhaps, but if you find a single Kafir lying within it, I'll engage to eat him."

There was a roar of laughter, half deprecatory, half of intense amusement, from the group of listeners who had drawn near, at this sarcastic hit. But just then a diversion occurred in the shape of the reappearance of the missing Corporal Smith.

"Hallo, Smith; where the devil have you been?" cried Lumley.

"Been on guard, sir," was the reply, in a tone which seemed to add, "and now shut up."

"You weren't told off."

"I went because they said Gert Flinders was ill, and I took his place," he said, with a touch of defiance.

Claverton, meanwhile, eyed him narrowly. Two impressions were present to his mind—one, the extremely loose state of discipline into which Lumley had let the corps drift; the other, which more nearly concerned himself, the evident anxiety of the Cuban mulatto to avoid further questioning. He noticed also, with one keen, swift glance, that that worthy wore a pair of new veldtschoens.

"By the way, on second thoughts it doesn't matter to-night," he said, carelessly. "To-morrow will do just as well, Smith. It's late now, and it's best to get things ship-shape after the row. Good-night, Lumley," he added. "Come round and feed to-morrow night if we are still here," and he went away.

By the time Claverton reached his tent all was quiet again. His companion had turned in, and was sleeping as unconcernedly as if beneath the roof of an English dwelling instead of having narrowly escaped being shot through the head by a nocturnal foe in the wilds of Kafirland. He hastened to turn in likewise, but not to sleep. Instinct led him to connect this last attempt upon his life with some evil hovering over himself and Lilian. For that he was the intended mark of the assassin's bullet he had known the moment it was fired.

While it was yet dark Claverton left the camp quietly, and the first glimmer of dawn saw him narrowly searching for the spot whence the shot had been fired. It took him nearly an hour, but he found it at last. And he found something more: he found three distinct footmarks—the print of a pair of new veldtschoens—in the damp soil, for a heavy dew had fallen in the night; and furthermore, sticking among the thorns, the tiny fragment of a flannel shirt of peculiar pattern. And a vindictive light came into the blue-grey eyes as he walked straight back to camp, murmuring to himself complacently:

"Just so—just as I suspected! Mr Corporal Vargas Smith—*alias* Sharkey—you have chosen to throw away your life again, and now, if you are above ground in six weeks at the outside from to-day, may I be beneath it!"

For a moment the resolve seized him to have the ruffian arrested. There was abundant evidence to convict him before a drum-head court-martial, but then the heads of the field forces would inevitably shrink from administering the extreme penalty; and besides, the question of motive must arise, which would be an inconvenient thing to be ventilated in public just then. No; the safest and best plan would be to pay the assassin in his own coin; and, strong-headed and unscrupulous in such a case as this, Claverton doubted not his ability to discharge the debt with interest.

He reached his tent in time to find a trooper dismounting there. The man looked hot, dusty, and tired, having ridden express from Cathcart with letters and despatches for the camp. Saluting, he handed a telegram to Claverton and withdrew. The latter held the ominous missive for a moment, regarding it with a blank stare, then, with a jerk, tore it open, and, at the first glimpse of its purport, his face became ashy. This is what he saw:

> From *Payne, Grahamstown*.
>
> To *Claverton, Brathwaite's Horse, Colonial Forces in Gaika Location, via Cathcart*.
>
> *Come at once, and at all risks. No cause for alarm, but come*.

He looked at the date. The message had been handed in two days before, and had been lying at Cathcart for lack of an opportunity of transport. The words swam before his eyes, and his blood ran cold with a chill fear. This brooding presentiment, then, had not come upon him for nothing. Handing his companion the telegram, he strode to the door and called for Sam.

"'Nkos?" and the native came running up with alacrity.

"Saddle-up Fleck and the young horse, Sam, and be ready to start in half an hour at the outside."

"Yeh bo, 'Nkos," replied Sam, too well accustomed to his master's ways to be astonished at anything; and he retired to carry out his orders.

Quickly Claverton went over to arrange with Jim Brathwaite for his absence, and long before the appointed time he was ready to start. He fidgeted about, looking at his watch every moment; and lo, just three minutes short of the half-hour his retainer appeared with the two horses.

"My dear fellow, don't give a thought to me," said Naylor, warmly, in response to his explanations of this sudden departure. "I shall make myself comfortable while you are away, never fear. Now, don't delay any longer. Your duty shall be looked after all right," he added, and with a close hand grip he bade his friend farewell.

Claverton, with his trusty follower, sped on across the hostile ground, every yard of which might conceal a foe; but of this he took less than no heed. All his thoughts were ahead of him by the hundred and odd miles or so which he had to traverse. His plan was to change horses half-way, leaving Sam to follow at leisure, once they were well out of the localities where they might fall in with roving bands of the enemy; and to push on, even if he killed his steed in the undertaking. Away in the blue heavens clouds of vultures, the ubiquitous scavengers of Southern Africa, were visible, poised above the scene of the late conflict; and these grew fainter and fainter, till they were lost to view in the far distance, and the sun began to decline in the west as the travellers kept steadily on over hill and dale, carefully eschewing short cuts and keeping to the beaten track. Once they were descried by a group of Kafir scouts, who, from their position on a hill-top, opened fire at long range, and of course ineffectually.

"Sam," exclaimed Claverton, as they were saddling up to continue their road, after a short halt, "there's a devil of a storm coming up. Look there."

The native glanced upwards. "There is, Inkos," he replied; "but we may just ride through it and escape."

Great inky clouds were gathering with alarming rapidity, and hastening to unite themselves to the dense black pall which drew on, silent, spectral, and gigantic, over the mountain-tops, and a dull, muffled roar boomed nearer and nearer between the fitful puffs of hot wind which fanned the travellers' faces. And now the scene was a weird one indeed. They were just entering a long defile—for they had reached the mountains—and along the rugged crags of the lonely heights towering above on either side, the red flashes were playing. Higher and higher piled the solid cloud-masses, and a few large drops of rain began to patter upon the stones. The gloom deepened, and all Nature was hushed as if in preparation for the coming battle of the elements.

Hark! Was that the ring of a horse's hoof far down the pass? No. Not a human creature is abroad in this awesome place to-night, with the black, brooding storm overhead, and the clans of the savage enemy besetting every step of the road with peril. A huge bird of prey soars away from one of the desolate crags, uttering a hoarse, long-drawn cry like the wailing of a lost soul. It is pitch dark. Then a flash lights up the road, and Claverton, profiting by it, peers anxiously ahead.

"Come along, Sam. There's a smooth bit here, anyhow, and we can get over a good stride of ground," and, spurring up his horse, away he goes at a long, even canter, with the Natal boy close behind him striving to keep up; and the sparks fly from beneath the horses' hoofs as they dash on through the night. A roll of thunder—long, heavy, and appalling—peals through the pass, a vivid flash of plum-coloured flame, and Claverton suddenly reins in his steed—who, with a snort of terror, rears and shies—just in time to avoid charging headlong into another horseman advancing at an equally rapid pace from the contrary direction, and who also reins in with a jerk. A powerfully-built, dark-featured man who stifles a half-spoken ejaculation; but beyond that neither speak.

What is the spell thrown over these two as they sit their horses gazing at each other in the lightning's horrible, scathing gleam in that gloomy pass? Is it an instinct? It is more. In that one vivid flash occupying not a second of time, Claverton has recognised in this sudden apparition the man whom he had seen and heard in the deserted hut, deliberately instigating his assassination. He recognises something more. As, with a muttered "good-night," the other passes on into the gloom, the lightning flashes again, revealing upon his bridle-hand a curious ring. It is an exact facsimile of the lost ring which glittered in the moonbeams beneath the old pear-tree on that last night at Seringa Vale.

Volume Two—Chapter Seventeen.

“Give us Long Rest... Dare Death or Dreamful Ease.”

We left Lilian crushed beneath the weight of this fresh blow dealt her by the man who had been the curse of her life.

To a night of anguish—anguish so poignant that she sometimes feared for her very reason—succeeded days of dull and hopeless apathy. Her whole being, body and soul alike, seemed to be numb and dead. She could not talk, she dared not think, nor could she pray. Even that last resource was denied her; for there came upon her a miserable feeling of fatality, that her God had forsaken her, leaving her to be the sport of some cruel demon. And, amid her apathy, her thoughts would, in spite of herself, float dreamily back in a mechanical kind of way to all that had gone before. She had been sad-hearted then in the temporary separation from her lover; but now! that time was ecstasy itself in comparison with this. Somehow, it never occurred to her to doubt one word of Truscott’s statement. He had been so positive, so resolute, that it must be true. And then she remembered the hundred and one little incidents—hints that her lover had let fall—uneasiness manifested on an occasion—the veiled compunction with which he had touched upon his former life—all stood out now in startling conspicuousness. Even that day had opened so propitiously, and lo, within one single hour, life was ended for her.

Sorely anxious were the Paynes over this fell change which had come upon her on that sunny afternoon. They could elicit nothing from her. She was not well, she admitted, but would be all right in a day or two, no doubt. And this, with such a ghost of a smile upon her white face, that Payne, suddenly struck with an idea, snatched up his hat and rushed down into the town to inquire if any fresh news had been received from the seat of war. Had she, unknown to them, heard that harm had befallen her lover? If so, that would amply account for the depression. So he went diligently to work to hunt up news; but no telegrams of a dispiriting nature had been received, quite the contrary—the enemy had had another thrashing, and there was no mention of loss on the colonial side. All this was a relief to Payne. But sorely puzzled; indeed, completely baffled; he returned to his wife and reported accordingly.

“I tell you what, George,” she began, and her face wore a troubled and concerned expression. “I’ve heard something—something that makes me think this Captain Truscott’s at the bottom of it.”

“Eh?”

“Well, he was here yesterday afternoon for more than two hours, and Lilian hasn’t been herself since. She didn’t tell me, but I heard it while you were out.”

Payne stared at her blankly, but made no reply.

“You know I never did like that man,” continued she. “I told you so at first. And I’m perfectly certain that he and Lilian are something more than merely old acquaintances.” And then she told him of the latter’s dismayed look on first recognising Truscott in the crowd, and one or two other things that had not escaped her observation. “He has been persecuting her in some way, I’m sure, and I won’t have her persecuted,” concluded the warm-hearted little woman.

Payne was whistling meditatively. He had a high opinion of his wife’s intelligence in all matters relating to the idiosyncrasies of her sex, so he would just let her go on.

“Well, what’s to be done?” he said. “We can’t ask the fellow what the devil he’s been up to, and Lilian won’t tell us.”

“Can’t we? I think we can, and ought.”

Payne shook his head, and looked gloomy. The affair was beginning to assume a serious phase. It was a delicate business, and the honest frontiersman felt thoroughly perplexed. He did not want to make a fool of himself, or of any one else, through officiousness or meddling.

“I know a trick worth two of that, Annie,” he said at last.

“What is it?”

“Wire to Claverton. Eh?”

She paused. “Well, perhaps that would be the best plan.”

“Good. I’ll cut down and do it now.” And, sliding from the table whereon he had been seated swinging his legs, he reached down a jar of tobacco from a shelf, and hastily cramming his pipe, started off. “What shall I tell him, though?” he asked, suddenly stopping in the doorway. “Won’t do to pitch it too strong, eh?”

“N-no. Wait a bit,” and then she concocted the message which we have seen Claverton receive; and Payne being on his way to despatch it, she turned away with a look of relief over the prospect of decreasing responsibility.

Lilian, meanwhile, had become a mere shadow of her old self, and the one spark of comfort left to her was that her persecutor had kept himself out of her sight. For he had left the city, bound for the seat of war, and, for reasons of his own, he had refrained from bidding farewell to the Paynes in person, but had sent a note explaining that he was ordered off at a minute’s warning. He had got a command at last, he said; only some levies, at present, but still that was something to go on with, and he must leave for the front immediately. Which missive was read by its recipients with feelings of decided relief.

The fact was, the gallant Truscott began to suspect that it might be advisable for him to take himself out of the way for a time, and he had no desire to meet his rival in person. Let the two settle it as best they might, was his cynical reflection; settle it they must, and to his, Truscott’s, satisfaction—on that point he felt perfectly safe. He had played a bold game and had won, and, now that he had won, it would never do to spoil it by any chance blundering. So with a few lines of renewed warning, merciless, pithy, and to the point, posted to Lilian—the wily scoundrel departed for the seat of war, and unless a well-aimed bullet should pierce the black, scheming heart, and of that there was but small chance, there would be no more happiness for her on earth. There were times when she would almost make up her mind to throw off the hateful thrall, to defy him to do his worst, whatever that worst might be; but then would rise up the frightful facts, as he had laid them before her in all their nakedness, and she would fall asleep, only to be haunted by a series of terrible dreams; visions of a crowded court hushened to a deathly silence in expectation of the dread sentence; of a small group in a grim gaol-yard, in the chill morning—one face among them lit up with fiendish exaltation—a noose, a gallows, and a black, hideous beam.

“My love—my sweet lost love!” she would moan, waking from one of these frightful fantasies in a flood of streaming tears. “Was it for this you were restored to me again? Ah, why did we ever meet?” And the black, silent hours melted away into dawn, but brought with them no comfort. More than once had her affectionate hostess tried to get at the secret of her grief—but Lilian was firm. Meanwhile, the Paynes began to grow seriously alarmed. A very little more of this, and the results would be disastrous. Nothing had been heard of the telegram, and they became more and more anxious every day.

“Miss Strange, do let’s go for a walk when I come back; it’ll be such a lovely evening.” The speaker was Rose Payne, who was hurriedly gathering up her books, and cramming them into a bag, preparatory to starting for afternoon school.

“So we will, dear. Only you must come back in good time.”

“Won’t I?” gleefully cried the little girl, flinging her arms round Lilian’s neck. She was rapturously fond of her former preceptress, all the more so, perhaps, now that she was subjected to the sterner discipline of school; and a long, quiet evening walk with Lilian, all to herself, was a treat indeed. “Won’t I just come straight back! It’ll be nice and cool then, and we can go ever so far over the hill, above Fern Kloof. So long, till four.”

“Good-bye, Rosie dear,” replied Lilian, kissing the child affectionately, and, with a sigh, watching her bound light-heartedly away. Then she turned from the doorway, and, with a drooping gesture of abandonment, threw herself into a low chair. The Paynes were out somewhere, and, as on that former afternoon, she had the house entirely to herself. The soft air came in through the open windows, warm but not oppressive, from the tree-fringed shade. A great striped butterfly floated in, and, scarcely aware of its mistake, fluttered around a large vase of flowers upon the table. And still she sat, heedless of everything, with her hands pressed to her face, thinking, thinking—ever thinking.

“Only four days ago,” she said to herself, “four short days—and now! Ah, God, it is too cruel!” and the tears welled forth and slowly began to force their way through the closed fingers.

The hum of the voices of a couple of passers-by sound drowsily upon the calm; then, the ring of hoofs coming up the street at a rapid canter. It stops, as if some one had reined in before the door—but she heeds it not. Some one dismounting at the next house, she thinks. Then a quick, firm tread in the passage, and a man is standing inside the room. With a low, startled cry, Lilian looks up and falls back in her chair in a deathly faint. It is Claverton.

In a moment he is beside her, and has her in his arms. “Oh, Lilian, my darling! What *is* this? They did right to send for me—Good God, Lilian! Why, what have you been doing with yourself to get like this?” he adds, in a tone of undisguised alarm, startled by her white and dejected looks.

But no reply can she make. Fairly taken by storm, she is clinging tightly to him, her face buried in his breast. Only a convulsive sob shakes her frame from head to foot.

“What have you been doing with yourself, child?” he continues, vehemently. “Why, you are as white and pale as the mere ghost of your former self. Lilian!” but still she cannot answer. “Lilian; look at me, I say. I have ridden straight here, day and night as hard as I could ride, to come to you and never to leave you again.”

He paused; but the expected words of joy and of love came not. Suddenly she drew herself away from him, and the look on her face was as the look of death. Already she had failed to keep her side of the compact—that compact written in tears, and sealed with the throes of a breaking heart—and she had doomed him. No, but she would not.

“Arthur, you must leave me. Now, at once, before it is too late,” she exclaimed, in a quick, alarmed tone.

“Lilian. Are you mad?”

Not a shade of anger or reproach is there in his voice. Amazement and indulgent tenderness alone are to be traced.

And she? Frantic with apprehension, she knew not what to say. To warn him of danger would be but to drive him right into its jaws. What should she do? Ah! That was it. The old promise.

“Lilian, what has come between us, now? Only tell me, darling, and it will all be cleared away.”

It was terrible. Her brain reeled as, with wild, dilated eyes, she stood gazing at him. His presence was so unexpected—it had burst upon her like a thunderbolt. He had, as he said, travelled night and day to reach her side—and now she must bid him leave her for ever though it broke her heart, as it certainly would. They two must never look upon each other again in life. Then her brain grew cold and steady. She must not flinch, she must save him from this ruthless enemy at all and whatever cost to herself. To herself! Ah, but—and to him? The answer to this question flashed across her determination—the consciousness of how valueless would be the life she was about to save. Yet—O God! the recollection of those terrible, menacing words! She sank her head into her clasped hands and shuddered. Again, so softly, so tenderly, he repeated his question:

"Lilian; what has come between us? Tell me, darling!"

She threw back her head with a quick movement, as if quivering beneath the torture.

"My former promise, Arthur. You remember," and averting her face, again she shuddered from head to foot. "He is not—dead—as I thought."

"And then—?"

"I cannot break it. I thought him dead—but now—I cannot break it. God help me!—help us both!"

A devil took possession of Claverton's heart, and the fixed, vengeful look in his face was awful to behold as he murmured to himself: "God help *him*. If he is not dead he soon will be—or I." Then aloud: "Lilian, you vowed once that nothing ever should part us. You remember, darling."

The voice was even more gentle than before. Had it been otherwise she could almost better have borne it—and yet not. A fraction of a second and she had yielded, had thrown herself into his arms; but again the savage threats of Truscott and the diabolical malice of his tones and looks rose up before her, and she felt strong again. In a paroxysm of that love, which was at once her strength and her weakness, she cried:

"I cannot—I cannot, Arthur. I am too weak, and that you must see. I cannot break that promise. You must go—go and curse my name and memory—if it be worth cursing, to the end of your days. And I—O God! let me die!"

The forced, unnatural hardness which she had thrown into her voice, struck upon his ear, filling him with amazement and dismay. It was all like a bad dream. He could hardly realise that she was actually trying to cast him off. From any other living soul guilty of such vacillating treachery, he would have turned away in scarcely surprised scorn. To this woman, rather than speak one word of anger, reproach, or blame—and what is harder—rather than think it, he would have died a thousand deaths. How he loved her! Her very weakness was sacred to him. It was thrown upon his tenderness, now; it was for him to handle it tenderly, not to crush it—and her. And a curious thrill of ghastly comfort shot through him in the thought that even at this fearful moment, when his heart was sick with bitter despair, he was really proving the strength of his love by something more than words. Three times now had she repulsed him, each under circumstances more cruel than the previous one—but the loyal love of the man never flinched—never swerved by a single hair's breadth. And he must be very gentle and indulgent with her now.

"Lilian, my sweet, you hardly know what you are saying," he answered, imprinting a shower of passionate kisses on the trembling, ashy lips. "I'm not going to take what you tell me, in earnest at all."

"Spare me—spare me," she moaned, shuddering in his embrace. "I meant it—all, and—"

"Hi—Halloa! Here's some fellow's horse got into the garden!" cried a man's voice outside. "Yek—yek! Hi! Jafta. Turn the infernal brute out. He's broken down the fence in two places—confound it—which means a claim for five pounds from old Cooke next door. Out, you brute!" and a sound was heard of a stone, launched by an incensed hand, striking violently against the paling, while the offending quadruped, tearing his way through and carrying with him two yards of fence, bolted off, snorting and kicking, down the road.

"What'll the owner do, George?" said another voice approaching the front door. "Goodness knows where that horse'll bolt to, now."

"Blazes, I hope—and his owner after him," replied Payne, surveying resentfully the receding form of the trespasser. "Why the deuce can't fellows tie their horses up when they leave 'em in the streets? O Lord!"

This last ejaculation was caused by the sight of Claverton, who had come quickly to the door to meet them and to give Lilian time to recover herself, and at whom the speaker stood staring open-mouthed and somewhat dismayed.

"Was that *your* horse, old chap?" he asked, dubiously, shaking hands with the new arrival and experiencing a sensation of huge relief because of his presence.

"It was; but it may be the possession of some one else by now. Bother the horse, though. I say, Payne, I want to talk to you."

"One minute, old chap. Here, Jafta—Jafta," he called out to his boy. "Go and catch that horse again. Look sharp—run like the devil. If you bring him back within a quarter of an hour I'll give you a shilling."

Away went Jafta, and Payne, glad of the momentary delay, returned to Claverton sorely perplexed. He had sent for him, indeed, but didn't know what the deuce to say to him now that he had come. It was more within a woman's province, he thought; and there and then his spouse came to the rescue, taking the affair into her own hands.

"Come inside, Mr Claverton," she said. "I'm so glad you're here." And then, when they were alone, she told him everything that had happened, from the day they had first seen Truscott until the moment of their going out that afternoon just before his arrival.

He listened quietly. A deadly resolve was shaping itself within his heart.

"What sort of a man is this Truscott—I mean what sort of a looking man?" he asked.

She described him, and the listener immediately recognised the portrait. The whole scheme was clear to him now. There was no question of money at the bottom of this man's hostility towards him. Either the mulatto was lying when he had told him this, or, more probably, the other had given such a reason in order to conceal the real one. No. It was to rob him of Lilian that his would-be assassin was plotting. He was wise, indeed, to hire the bravo's steel in the shape of Sharkey—for he might have been sure that only death would part him from Lilian. Ralph Truscott, look to yourself now. It is no woman, weak in the very helplessness of her love, with whom you have to deal this time. You have, indeed, cause to meditate.

"He's gone to the front, has he?" continued Claverton. "Whereabouts? Do you know?"

Annie Payne looked at him with a troubled air. She knew well her interlocutor's determination and daring, and she saw breakers ahead.

"But it will be all right now that you are back again," she ventured. She greatly feared otherwise; still, one must hope for the best.

The dark look deepened over his features. He hardly seemed to hear her, but stood gazing through the open window.

"I must go," he exclaimed, suddenly. "Where is Lilian?" and with three strides he gained the other room. It was empty. "Ah, better so, perhaps," he muttered to himself. "Mrs Payne, tell her, with my love, that a very few days will see me back here again, and everything will come right then. Now I must not lose another moment. Good-bye, for a few days."

"What are you going to do?" was the reply, spoken in a tone of alarm. "Wait. Don't be in such a hurry. You can't rush off at once. You must off-saddle if only for an hour. Anyhow, wait until George comes back. Ah, there he is."

For at that moment George appeared, leading the runaway by the bridle. The joint exertions of himself and his stable-boy had availed to catch the trespasser just in time to prevent his doing further damage.

Claverton was firm in his refusal. He had his own reasons for wishing to leave that house. Not even the smallest risk would he run of being tempted to forego the purpose he had in hand, for a single instant.

"Here's your critter, old chap," cried Payne, panting from the effects of his ran. "Je—rusalem! What a chevvy we had after the beggar—Eh? What? Going away! Not to be thought of."

"But I am!" replied the other in a tone of settled resolve, as he prepared to fling the bridle over the animal's neck. "Shall be back again in four or five days. Hold on. Just walk a little way down the street with me."

They walked on. Payne's brow growing more and more serious as he listened. He had a great regard for this man, who had stepped in to his rescue twice at a very critical moment.

"My dear Claverton, be careful what you are about," he said, gravely. "It's a devilish awkward business, and at any other time than during the war it would be impossible."

"Oh, I've served my apprenticeship in a good school for caution, never fear. But, you'll see me again in a few days or—you'll never see me at all."

Payne made no reply. Suddenly he looked up at a house they were passing. It was a small house standing back from the street.

"By the way. We were awfully sorry to hear about that poor fellow Armitage," he said. "His wife is staying there."

"Staying there? In that house? Why, I thought she was in 'King.'"

"No. She came down here about a week ago—she only heard about the poor fellow the day before yesterday."

"Is she very much cut up?"

"Dreadfully, I'm told. She is staying with another friend of yours—Mrs Hicks."

"Then she's in good hands. Look here, Payne. I'll go in for a moment and ask after her—poor little thing. And if I'm not out in five minutes, just take my horse round to Wood's and make them off-saddle him and give him a feed. It's all on my way and it'll save time. I'll join you there, if you don't mind waiting."

Quickly walking up the little gravel path bordered with orange-trees, and shaded with trellised vines, Claverton knocked gently at the door. A subdued footstep in the silent passage, and it was opened—by Laura. She stared at him in amazement.

"Why, when did you come? I thought you were away at the front. Do come in." A superfluous request, seeing that she had already shut the door behind him. "Poor Gertie will like to see you."

"How does she bear it?"

"She is dreadfully down-hearted. At first I was quite alarmed for her, but I think the worst is over now. She was very fond of poor Jack."

"So were we all. Even such a leather-hearted curmudgeon as your humble servant."

"It is no fault of yours that the poor fellow is not alive at this moment," rejoined Laura, with warmth. "We heard all about it." All this time she had been furtively watching him, and noting, with some astonishment, his listless and dejected air. It was owing to no regret for his deceased comrade, she was certain of that. What could be going wrong with him?

“My dear Laura, I give you my word for it there was nothing to hear,” he replied; and seeing that the subject was distasteful to him, she left him, to go and prepare poor Gertie for his visit.

Claverton wished he could have forgotten his own trouble as he stood in the presence of the young widow—this mere girl—sorrowing for the loss of him with whom she had begun to tread life’s path. Very happy and bright had that path been to her—to them both—during those short two years. Very happy and peaceful would it have continued to be; but now he was gone—snatched away from her suddenly by the merciless bullet of the savage foe—shot down in the dark forest. He lay, cold in his grave, far away in the wilds of Kafirland; and his gleeful laugh, and sunny glance, would gladden her heart and her eyes no more. No wonder a rush of tears came to her eyes, as she remembered under what circumstances she had last seen her visitor. And now she was desolate and alone.

Claverton held her hand in his strong, friendly grasp, and, when the first paroxysm of her reopened grief was spent, gently he narrated the circumstances of poor Armitage’s last moments; how his last thoughts and care had been for her; how her name had been almost the last words upon his lips. Then he dwelt upon the dead man’s popularity, and the blank his loss would leave in the ranks of his comrades, not one of whom but would have risked life to save him had they known before it was too late. And there was that in the gentle, sympathetic voice, which soothed and comforted the girl-widow, sorrowing there as one who had no hope.

“My bright-hearted Jack! I shall never see you again. Would that I had been more loving to you while you were here,” she murmured, and, bowing her head into her hands, again she wept.

“That I am sure you could not have been,” answered Claverton, gently, placing his hand upon her shoulder, and looking down on her with infinite pity. “Child, believe me, there are losses more bitter even than those inflicted upon as by death. Now, I must go. Good-bye—I am returning to camp now; but I shall come and see you again soon, and you must try and keep up your spirits.”

She seized his hand. “You risked your life to save his. No—it’s of no use denying it—you did. God bless you for it, and those who were with you. Tell them from me, when you go back, that I thank them. Good-bye. God bless you—and Lilian.”

This was too much. The chord of his own grief thus suddenly touched, vibrated loudly. With a silent pressure of the hand, he left her.

“Any message for Hicks?” he asked, as Laura met him in the passage.

“What! Why, you are never going back to the front already?” answered she, gazing at him in astonishment.

“I am—straight. In an hour’s time I shall be at least eight or nine miles on the road.”

She saw that he meant it, and her woman’s wit saw at once that something was wrong.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “Do wait ten minutes while I write a line to Alfred. He will like to get it direct, and the post is such a chance.”

A superstitious foreboding took hold of Claverton’s mind as he watched her bending over her writing-case at the other side of the room. This miserable war had made one widow immediately within their own circle, Heaven grant that it might not make two. It seemed that nothing but ill-luck had befallen that once happy circle since he had joined it—as if his presence had something baleful about it, and was destined to work harm to all with whom he came in contact. Ah, well, he had one more mission to fulfil, and then what became of him did not much matter. So Laura having finished her letter he bade her farewell, promising to deliver it as soon as he reached the camp.

“I tell you what it is, Claverton. You’ll have to ride that animal rather carefully, or he’ll never carry you all the way,” remarked Payne, eyeing the horse critically as his rider, having hastily buckled the last strap, swung himself into the saddle.

“No, I’ve ridden his tail nearly off as it is. But I shall meet Sam on the road, and shall change. Good-bye, or rather, so long. You’ll see me again in about a week—barring accidents.”

Payne’s heart sank within him. There wae a reckless, determined ring in the other’s tone that meant volumes; and he shook his head sadly as he watched him ride away down the street. Then he walked slowly home, lost in thought.

Volume Two—Chapter Eighteen.

Trapped.

“When did he begin to go lame, Sam?”

“About two hours the other side of this, Inkos. I had to lead him all the way here.”

Claverton bends down again to examine the horse’s leg, and the light of the stable-lantern reveals an expression of the most intense and hopeless disgust upon his face. The stable is that belonging to the inn half-way along the King Williamstown road, the hour is shortly after midnight, and he has only just arrived. He has ridden untiringly, not sparing his mount, which indeed can hardly go a pace further; and now his other horse, which he has been counting on as a relay, is dead lame. It will be remembered that he had left Sam on the road, with orders to rest his horse and follow him at leisure. Shortly after Sam had seen his master’s back disappear over the rising ground, the animal began to go lame. Carefully the Natal boy examined his feet. There was no shoe loose, no stone in the frog—no. Poor

Fleck had strained a sinew, and, by dint of much toil and considerable pain, the horse managed to reach the inn with his fetlock swelled to a ball.

“Sam, I must get on; and at once. Is there no one here who could sell me a horse?” The native thought a moment. “There are two men who came down from the camp to-day, Inkos, but their horses are used up. There’s a Dutchman going up there, he has an extra horse. That’s it; this one over here,” and, taking the lantern, Sam led the way to the other end of the stable. Claverton ran his eye over the animal designated. It was a large, young horse, well put together and in tolerable condition, but it rolled the whites of its eyes and laid its ears back in suggestive fashion.

“Looks skittish,” mused Claverton, as with a wild snort the animal backed and began “rucking” at its tether, then bounding suddenly forward, came with a fracas against the rickety crib, and stood snorting and trembling and rolling its eyes. “Half-broken evidently. What’s the fellow’s name, Sam?”

“Oppermann. Cornelius Oppermann, Inkos.”

“H’m. Getting light,” he mused, opening the door and looking skywards. “Sam, I’m going to buy that brute anyhow, and go straight on at once. Now you must wait till the young horse is rested, and take him back to Payne’s. Fleck can stay here. And, Sam,” he went on in a graver tone, “you are to wait there till I come back. Do everything they tell you; and if they send you to me, come at once and as quickly as you can. You see?”

Sam looked crestfallen. He had reckoned upon accompanying his master back to the war. But with the unswerving loyalty of his race towards those whom they hold in veneration he made no demur, and promised faithfully to carry out his master’s wishes to the best of his ability.

Ten minutes later Claverton was standing on the *stoep* of the inn, bargaining with an unkempt, sandy-bearded Dutchman, who, hastily arrayed in his shirt and trousers, stood rubbing his eyes with the air of a man just aroused from a sound sleep; as, indeed, was the case.

“You can take him for forty-five pounds,” the latter was saying, having finished a cavernous yawn.

“Ha—ha—ha! Forty-five? Now look here, Oppermann,” answered Claverton in a chaffing, good-natured tone. “You’re not awake yet, man, or you’d remember the brute wasn’t worth a dollar more than twenty. He isn’t half-broken, to begin with.”

“Twenty. Nay, what? You shall have him for forty.”

“I rather want him, but I’m in no hurry,” was the reply. “Here’s thirty, down on the nail. Look.”

He pulled out some notes, and the Dutchman’s eyes glittered.

“Thirty-five?” he began.

“No. Thirty. Take it or—leave it.”

“Well, well. Give me the money,” and he held out his hand. But Claverton was not quite so “green” as all that.

“Here, Sam,” he called out. “Look. The Baas has sold me the horse we were looking at for thirty pounds,” and he handed over the money to the expectant Boer, thus making Sam a witness to the transaction. “Now go and saddle him up,” he continued.

“Are you starting so soon?” said Oppermann, with surprise. “I’m going up to the camp—we might ride together. Wait a little quarter of an hour.”

“Can’t wait a moment longer. Look sharp.”

The other disappeared with alacrity. He had been looking forward with some apprehension to his lonely journey across the hostile ground, and the escort and companionship of this cool, clear-headed Englishman would be a perfect godsend to him. So he soon hurried through his scant preparations, and by the time Claverton had settled with the host, and had saddled up, the Boer was nearly ready.

Two rough-looking fellows were talking to the landlord in front of the door as Claverton was about to start. They were the two referred to by Sam as having just come from the war.

“I say, Mister,” called out one of them. “You’re not going all the way alone, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now—if I might be so bold as to advise—you be a bit careful. A lot more of them Kafirs have broken out, and there are gangs of ’em out all over this side of the Buffalo range, and that’s where you’ll have to cut through to reach the main camp—unless you go all the way round by ‘King,’ which’ll take you a day longer.”

“Well, I shan’t do that, anyhow. Thanks for the hint, all the same. Here, Sam.”

“Inkos?”

“Don’t forget what I told you, and—here—give this to Miss Lilian.”

“This” was a note, and the speaker’s tone trembled ever so slightly over the name.

“Yeh bo, Inkos,” replied Sam, earnestly. Then a sudden impulse seized him, and, bending down, he kissed his master’s foot as it rested in the stirrup. A vague superstitious thrill shot through Claverton’s heart. These natives were sometimes gifted with marvellous presage. Did this touching act of homage on the part of his humble follower portend that they would never see each other again. Claverton put out his hand.

“Good-bye, Sam. Mind what I told you.”

The native took it shyly. Then he turned away, his eyes sparkling as he held up his head proudly. His master had shaken hands with him—a black man. Death itself would be nothing to what he would willingly undergo for that master. Meanwhile the white spectators smiled indulgently among themselves. They did not sneer; a little of Claverton’s reputation had been noised abroad, and they respected him too much. But some of these Englishmen were such queer fellows. Shaking hands with a nigger, for instance—etcetera, etcetera!

The temporary diversion afforded by these preparations and precautions over, Claverton’s thoughts again ran in the old channel. He gazed on the mountain range in front of him, peak after peak rising up to the eternal blue, and remembered how they two had looked on them together from that very spot when all seemed so secure and propitious not much more than a couple of months before; and it was like the mocking smile of a demon, this same landscape smiling on him now in the bright fresh morning. Something or other made his mind recur to poor Herbert Spalding plunging overboard in the dead of night deliberately intending to take his own life, and the thought stung him like a spur. *He* would take not his own life, but that of the man who had taken what was far dearer to him than his own life. Every stride of his horse was bringing him nearer and nearer to his sure vengeance.

The sound of hoofs behind interrupted his meditations, and the Boer, whom true to his word he had not waited for a minute beyond the stipulated time, overtook him, riding at a gallop. He frowned. In no mood for conversation, he would be obliged to listen to and answer the commonplaces of this lout, and there was no getting rid of him. But the Dutchman was of the taciturn order. In half an hour his topics of conversation were used up, and he was content to jog along in silence by the side of his companion, who certainly gave him no encouragement to break it. Thus the day wore on, and by the middle of the afternoon they were in among the mountains. Hitherto there had been little sign of disturbance. They had passed a few farmsteads and a native kraal or two—the latter still inhabited by so-called “loyals,” in other words, natives who did not fight against the Goverment themselves, but assisted with supplies and information those who did. But even these habitations had ceased now, and they wound their way through the great gloomy gorges covered with dense bush, where the sentinel baboons eat and looked down upon them from many an overhanging cliff, which echoed their loud resounding bark.

Suddenly their steeds pricked up their ears, with an inquiring snort. Promptly Claverton’s revolver was in his hand, while his companion held his rifle—an excellent Martini-Henry—ready on his hip. Something was heard approaching.

“Kafirs!” exclaimed the Dutchman, excitedly.

“Tsh! No; it’s a horseman.”

It was—and a strange figure he cut as at that moment he appeared round a bend in the track. A middle-sized, plebeian-looking man, mounted on a sorry nag. His hair, and the wispy scraps of beard stuck about his parchment-coloured visage, were of a neutral tint; and a snub nose, and projecting lower jaw, in no wise prepossessed one towards the individual. He was arrayed in a rusty suit of black, and a dirty white tie was stuck half in half out of the throat of his clerical waistcoat, and he sat his horse “like a tailor;” but the most grotesque article of this out-of-keeping costume was his hat—a reduced “chimney-pot,” with a huge puggaree wound turban-wise about the crown, the ends falling down over the wearer’s back.

“Bah!” exclaimed Claverton. “Why, it’s a parson. What the deuce can he be doing here?”

The stranger’s countenance lighted up with satisfaction at sight of the pair.

“This is a relief,” he said. “I thought I should never get out of this dreadful bush alive.”

“Where were you going to?” asked Claverton. “I was going to take a short cut through to Cathcart. They told me the way was safe, and now I find it isn’t. The whole bush is full of Kafirs. I could hear them calling to each other in every direction.”

“Quite sure it wasn’t baboons?”

“Oh, yes; I saw them—hundreds of them. Luckily they didn’t see me. It was in trying to avoid them that I lost myself.”

“Where did you say they were?” went on Claverton. He had formed no very high opinion of his new acquaintance, who informed him that his name was Swaysland, and that he was a missionary.

“Over in that next kloof. But you are not going on, surely? The way is not safe, indeed it is not.”

“We are, though—straight. But I—”

The words were cut short, for the young horse, all unbroken as it was, gave a violent shy, which, taking its rider unawares, nearly unseated him, so unexpected was it. And, simultaneously, several red forms rose up amid the bushes three hundred yards in their rear and poured in a rattling volley, but, as usual, firing well over the heads of their destined victims.

“By Jove! there they are,” cried Claverton. “Come along; there’s no turning back now. We must ride like the devil,” and he spurred along the path followed closely by the other two. At least two hundred Kafirs sprang up and started in pursuit, discharging their pieces as they leaped from cover with a fierce shout, and the bullets whistled around the fugitives with a sharp, shrill hiss.

“Come on, Mr Swaysland. Spur up that nag of yours; we shall get a good start here,” cried Claverton, as they reached a comparatively open plateau of about a mile in extent. But it was uphill ground and rough withal, and the pursuers were only too evidently gaining on them.

Pphit! Pphit! A bullet ploughs up the ground almost between the very hoofs of Claverton’s horse, while another splinters itself against a stone just in front.

“The devil! It’s getting lively,” he ejaculated as, without slackening speed, he looked round for a target for his revolver. The missionary was deathly white, and cut a grotesque figure, spurring up his seedy animal, almost holding on round its neck, while the flaps of his long-tailed coat and the ends of his puggaree streamed out behind him. For the life of him Claverton could not repress a laugh.

Suddenly the Dutchman lurches in his saddle and falls headlong to the ground—shot dead by one of the pursuers, whose bullet has entered between the shoulders—probably to the great surprise of the marksman. His horse, terrified, starts off, dragging him in the stirrup for a few paces, then his foot disentangles itself and he lies an inanimate heap. With a wild-beast howl the savages bound forward, and Claverton, glancing over his shoulder, can see a score of assegais flash and gleam blood-red in the sunshine, as the fierce warriors crowd round the ill-fated Boer, literally cutting him to pieces.

Like wolves delayed in the pursuit of a sledge by a forestalment of the prey which must eventually be theirs, the Kafirs halt for a moment, each eager to bury his spear-head in the body of the fallen man; but it is only for a moment. With a wild yell of triumph they press on—thirsting for more blood. A sudden groan from his companion causes Claverton to turn his head. Is he hit, too? The missionary’s face is livid with terror, and following the glance of the staring, dilated eyeballs—dilated with a fear that has almost mania in it—all hope dies within him. A dense swarm of Kafirs is issuing from the bush immediately in front, and the two white men are thus securely caught, as in a trap. For on the only side left open falls a huge precipice, down which nothing breathing can go—and live.

“God help us?” exclaimed the missionary. “We are lost,” and he fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Claverton reins in his horse, and confronts the savages, with a calm brow and revolver in hand. Death has overtaken him at last. He has stared the grim Monarch in the face full oft, but now his time has come. He feels that his lucky star has set; his meeting with Lilian yesterday—only yesterday—was the beginning of the end. What can a man do when his star has set? All this runs through his mind like a lightning-flash.

It is a marvellous picture, that last scene in the awful drama on this lonely mountain top. The sweet golden sunshine falls upon a crowd of bounding shapes, sweeping forward in a fast diminishing semicircle, and the still air is rent with fiendish howls. Eyeballs roll with a merciless gleam, white teeth are bared in grinning triumph, and the pointed blades of the assegais bristle like a forest among the leaping, naked red bodies. And turning to confront this hideous array—calmly awaiting the approach of his destroyers, this one man—cool, fearless, and noble-looking—sits his horse, whose terrified restiveness he can scarcely curb with one hand, while in the other he holds his revolver in a firm, steady grasp. Before him, the spears of the savage host; behind, the awful brow of the cliff. A ghastly choice.

The Kafirs have ceased firing and are advancing eagerly to secure their prey. They will take him alive.

“Ha, ha, ha!” A mocking laugh goes up from their midst. “You are in a trap, white man. Better yield!” cry some; while others, eager for such a rare spectacle as a man taking a flying leap into four hundred feet of space, wave their weapons and shout madly in the hope of terrifying the horse and driving it over.

“Does even a wolf yield without biting?” is the cold, scornful answer. Not a dozen paces lie between him and the brink of the precipice, towards which he is backing his horse, step by step.

Fifty yards—forty—thirty. They approach more leisurely now, sure of their capture.

He raises his revolver and fires. One of the foremost falls headlong upon the ground, clutching it with his hands, as his body quivers in the throes of death. But the young horse, maddened by the sudden flash and report and the onward rush of the advancing crowd, plunges and rears, uttering a frenzied squeal. Three steps more. No power short of a miracle can save him now. The frantic hoof-strokes rip up the sward in long furrows—and then a plunge—a slide and a struggle—they are gone! Horse and man have disappeared. A moment of dead silence—a crash and a dull thud is heard far beneath. And then a wild shout—in which awe, and admiration, and baffled rage are all mingled—arises from the savages, one and all of whom press forward to peer over the giddy height.

Nothing can they see, however. A few leaves and broken twigs, scattered by the fall of a heavy body through the tangled bushes sprouting here and there from a crevice or ledge in the face of the cliff, float upon the air; beneath, the great sweep of dense bush lies silent and unbroken; a few vultures glide lazily off from the rugged cliffs opposite, looking in the distance like great white feathers as they soar over the broad valley; but nothing is to be seen lying below, neither horse nor man. At length their keen eyes detected a spot where the bush was slightly displaced.

“Ha—there he is! Good. His bones will be like the stamped mealies in the mortar, after that jump. Aow!”

A low laugh greeted this speech, and the Kafirs were about to turn away in quest of fresh excitement, when one of their number—a tall, evil-looking barbarian—who had been lying flat on his stomach narrowly scanning the bush beneath, exclaimed:

“Wait. Are you going to leave him on the *chance* of his being dead? He may not be dead, I tell you. He may not be even hurt.”

A mighty shout of laughter greeted this utterance.

“Ha, ha! Not dead—not even hurt! Whaaow! What madness! Is the white man a bird, that he can fly down there? Did any one see his wings?” Such were the derisive comments on the proposal of the first speaker, who waited with a sneer upon his face until they had done, and then went on:

“He is not a bird, but he is something else. He is a wizard—a devil. I tell you I know this white man. He is no ordinary man. I have seen him escape where no one but a wizard could have done it; not once, but twice, three times. Now, are you sure he is dead? Will you leave it to chance?”

A murmur of mingled assent and incredulity rose from the listeners. Some shook their heads and smiled scornfully, but the majority evidently thought there was “something in it.”

“And even if he is dead,” continued the first speaker. “Even if he is dead, what a war-potion could be made out of the heart of such a man! Haow!”

This decided them, and, with a ferocious hum of anticipation, they started off to descend into the valley round the end of the cliff, and make sure of their prey; leaving a few behind to secure the missionary.

The unfortunate preacher was still lying where he had fallen in a faint, and the Kafirs had been too fully occupied with their principal foe to pay any attention to him. Now, however, they clustered round him, examining him curiously.

“Get up, white man!” cried one of the party, roughly, adding force to the injunction by a sharp prick with his assegai. The victim gave a groan and opened his eyes, but shut them again with a gasp of terror, and a prayer for mercy escaped his lips at the sight of the scowling dark faces and gleaming assegai points, some of them red with blood.

A muttered consultation took place. The captive must be taken to the chief, Sandili. He was the first white man captured alive during the war.

“Whaow! It is not a warrior, it is a miserable *Umfundisi*,” (Preacher) said the most important man of the group, with a contemptuous scowl on his fierce, wrinkled countenance. “We shall frighten him to death if we are not careful. Here, *Umfundisi*!” he continued in a persuasive tone. “Get up. We are not going to hurt you. Don’t be frightened.”

The poor missionary could hardly believe his ears.

“No, no. I am not frightened,” he replied, in a quavering voice, sitting up and looking around; while several of the younger Kafirs spluttered with laughter at his abject appearance. “No, no—you will not hurt me; I am your friend. I like the Kafirs. You know me—I am a man of peace—not a fighting man—a man of peace.”

The savage leader contemplated him with a sneer upon his face, then with a muttered injunction to the rest, he turned away with a grunt of contempt, whisking the tops off the grass-stalks with his knobkerrie as he strode off in the direction taken by the bulk of the party. A scream of terror arose from the unfortunate missionary. His hands had already been tied behind him; and just then one of the young Kafirs, in sheer devilment, jerked his head back and held the cold edge of an assegai against his throat. The unhappy prisoner thought his hour had come, and closed his eyes, shuddering. A roar of laughter arose from the spectators, and his tormentor let go of him, uttering a disdainful “click.”

“Take care,” warned one of the older men. “You’ll kill him with fear, among you. That won’t do. He must be taken to the Great Chief.”

Meanwhile the searching party had reached the base of the cliff and were working their way along with some difficulty through the bush, while two men remained above to designate the exact spot where the fugitive had fallen. So dense and tangled was the profuse vegetation that it was some time before they could find it, and the rock above, half veiled by largish trees growing up against its surface, afforded no clue. Suddenly a shout announced that the object of their search was found. There, in a hollow formed by its own weight, lay the unfortunate horse. Its legs were doubled under its body, the bones in many places had started through the skin, and it was horribly mangled. The girths had given way and the saddle lay, bent and scratched, partly detached from the carcase. It was a horrid sight.

By twos and threes the Kafirs straggling up, clustered around with exclamations of astonishment. Then a shout arose:

“Where is the white man?”

They looked at one another in blank amazement. There was the horse, sure enough—but—where was the rider?

Where, indeed? The ground all round had been carefully searched, and, unless he was gifted with wings as some of them had derisively suggested, he could not have escaped, for at that point the cliff was sheer. Involuntarily they glanced upwards as if they half expected to see him soaring in the air, laughing at them. They turned over the carcase of the horse, with a kind of forlorn hope that he might be lying crushed beneath—but no—he was not there, nor had they even expected he would be. Fairly puzzled they shook their heads, and a volley of ejaculations expressing astonishment, dismay, even alarm, gave vent to their unbounded surprise.

“There is no trace. He has disappeared into air?” they said.

From all this discussion the tall barbarian who had first suggested the search, had stood aloof. Now he struck in with a kind of “I told you so” expression in his look and voice:

“Did I not say that the white man was a wizard? Who laughs now? Where is he? Where is the man who jumped from yon height?”

He might well ask. For of the fugitive, alive or dead, there was absolutely no trace. Had his body stuck in one of the trees, or rested on a ledge? No. Those above could see every projection in the rock, and the trees were free from any such burden. And around the spot where the horse lay and on to which it had fallen straight, there was no sign or shadow of a footmark to show whither the human performer of that fearful leap had betaken himself, even if he had reached the ground alive—which was impossible. He had melted into air, and it was nearly evening; to continue the search would be useless.

Volume Two—Chapter Nineteen.

The Darkest Hour.

When Lilian saw Payne return to the house alone, unaccompanied by her lover, it seemed that her cup of bitterness was full to the brim.

He had taken her at her word, then, even as she had besought him to do, and had left her, wearied of her weakness and vacillation; had left her in bitter anger that she should have made a plaything of his love, taking it up and casting it from her again as the humour seized her. Yes; it must be so, she told herself; and yet, if he only knew! But he never would know. Her martyrdom was complete. Not even would she have the consolation of knowing that if they parted in sorrow, at any rate they parted in love, as was the case that former time. No; this time anger and contempt for a weak creature who did not know her own mind would soon take the place of his former love—and then? Ah, what did it matter? She had sacrificed herself, and the sacrifice was complete; what mattered a mere triviality of detail? He was gone, and she would see his face no more, and she—she had saved him and ought to be only too glad that the opportunity of doing so had been allowed her—at least, so she told herself.

So she told herself, but ah! she could not feel glad. Her plan had succeeded, as she had been hoping, yet not daring to pray, that it would; but now that it had, she discovered that side by side with her heroic resolution had lurked a subtle hope that even yet she might look upon him again. That hope was now fulfilled, and lo! all was darker than it had been hitherto—so dark that it could never be light again.

Could it not? Even then, breaking in upon the outer gloom of her terrible despair, came her lover's last message—"*A very few days will see me back here again. Everything will come right then*"—bringing a gleam of hope to her crushed heart. He would come back—at any rate he would come back—and then, those confident words: "*Everything will come right then*." For the first time a strong doubt came over her as to the truth of Truscott's allegations. It might be that he was lying, according to his wont—lying in order to gain some private end, to revenge himself upon her—for she now no longer believed that he really loved her. Yet he had spoken so confidently, with such an exhaustive reliance in his facts. Still there might be some mystery about it, which her lover was able to solve. Ah! why had she not asked him when he was here just now? Why had she not begged him to clear up this horrid doubt; to tell her openly about his past life? She had been unnerved: had lost her head for the time being. Still it is probable that she would have asked him, but for the inopportune return of the Paynes. Well, it was too late now; she must wait patiently for his return, and then—if only the opportunity was allowed her—a lifetime of tenderness and devotion could hardly atone for this dreadful doubt.

"Why, Lilian," exclaimed her hostess, affectionately, "you are looking quite your old self again. Cheer up, darling. All will come right, I'm sure of that; and so are you, I can see it in your eyes."

And, indeed, the revulsion of hope, setting in upon that black tide of despair, had brought a glow into Lilian's cheek and a light into her eyes such as had not been seen there for many a day. Yet it would not do to be too elated yet.

"God grant it may," she replied, with an attempt at a smile, and there was a good deal of hugging and kissing between the two women, and a few tears; and then Lilian went down to delight Rose's heart by telling her she would go for a walk with her, after all; that part of the afternoon's programme having fallen through in subservience to the more important events which had supervened, to the little girl's intense disappointment.

And the walk did her good. Everything would come right, she kept telling herself, and, as they strolled homeward when the afterglow in the west was purpling into twilight gloom and the peaks of the Winterberg range stood out—cold, distant, and steely—Lilian's heart was full of a prayerful hope that their future might, after all, be bright and cloudless as yon clear sky, when doubts and torturing fears had all been swept away; and though her little companion found her somewhat grave and disinclined to talk, yet the calm, sweet light of returning peace in her eyes, which the child stole many a wondering look at, more than made up for her silence.

If the Paynes were somewhat apprehensive as to the future—or rather as to the events of the next few days—they kept it to themselves, and that evening was quite a cheerful one. Hope had taken root and thriven in Lilian's heart, and, as she kept on repeating to herself her lover's message, she seemed to hear the confident ring of his own words: "*Everything will come right then*," and wae comforted; at least, comparatively so. But whatever happened she would ask him to tell her all his past life, and somehow she did not look forward to the revelation with dread.

Payne, however, was by no means easy in his mind about the somewhat desperate plan which his friend had unfolded to him. To honest George's straightforward reasoning it thoroughly recommended itself. The best way to settle an affair of this kind was by a downright "rough-and-tumble," as he put it, but then there was the law, an uncommonly ticklish customer to deal with, once it took it into its head to vindicate its outraged dignity. As regarded that, however, the business might be managed away on the quiet somewhere, at the seat of hostilities, where law was very much in abeyance just then; though at any other time, as he had told his friend, it would be impossible. But for all that, he heartily wished him safe through the business. Claverton was a splendid pistol-shot, of that he had, on more than one occasion, had ocular evidence, and if he winged his man, or even killed him, it was all in the fortune of war; for Payne had seen rough times himself at the Gold Fields and even on the Kaffrarian border, and did not hold human life as so momentous a thing as did, for instance, the clergyman of the parish wherein he at present resided. To the wife of his bosom, however, he did not impart any of these reflections; on the contrary, he made rather light of the affair.

“A row?” he said, in answer to her misgivings. “Oh, yes, there’s sure to be a row—the very devil of a row, in fact; but then Claverton’s thoroughly well able to take care of himself.”

“But they will be shooting each other,” she said, with a troubled shake of the head.

He turned quickly. “Eh? What? Not they! They’ll only get to punching each other’s heads—that’s all, take my word for it.” And honest George laughed light-heartedly at his wife’s fears, though he knew that there was ample justification for them.

The following day brought even further comfort to poor Lilian, for towards evening Sam arrived. With a start and a flush she saw the native rein up at the gate, and then she grew deathly pale. He was riding his master’s horse; she recognised the animal at a glance. Oh, what had happened? But then she noticed that Sam looked in no wise perturbed, as would have been the case were he the bearer of ill tidings. She noticed, further, that he was carefully extracting something from his pocket as he came up the garden path—something done up in paper. She flew to the door with a bright flush upon the sweet, sad face.

“Good evenin’, Missie Lilian. Master said I was give you dis,” exclaimed Sam, placing the note in her hand. It was a hastily-pencilled scrap—only a few words, but words expressing such a wealth of undying love, ever and in spite of anything which had occurred or which might occur, that she retired into the room, and, sinking into a chair, pressed the bit of crumpled paper to her lips, and her tears fell like rain upon it.

“Oh, Arthur, my own darling love! you do not think the worse of me! Ah, I can bear anything now?” she murmured.

Could she? Nevertheless, it was well that the merciful veil of distance was drawn between her eyes and the tragedy which at that very moment was being enacted on the brow of a certain cliff, that calm, fair, cloudless evening.

Meanwhile, Sam was busy putting up the horse. It had not needed the haggard features and harsh, strained tones to bring home to his quick perception the certainty that something had gone decidedly wrong with his beloved master, hence the more than ordinary display of loyalty he had exhibited when they parted; and now, with the ready tact of his race, he turned away directly he had delivered the note to Lilian, awaiting her own time to call him and question him about its writer. So, with his jacket off, and armed with a curry-comb and brush, Sam was making great play upon the matted and soiled coat of the tired horse when a sweet voice from the back-door called his name.

“Coming, Missie Lilian—coming,” cried the faithful fellow, as he flung down his stable implements and hurried across the intervening bit of garden, shuffling on his jacket as he went.

“Sam, you must be very hot and tired after your journey. Drink this, and then I want to talk to you.”

“This” being a large tumbler of cool, sparkling lemonade, which she held in her hand. Sam took it with a grateful, pleasing ejaculation of thanks. A dusky savage, born in a remote kraal beneath the towering cones of the Kwahlamba range, he appreciated her thoughtful kindness far more than many a white “Christian” would have done—the action more than the result.

“Dat good,” he said, after a long pull at the refreshing liquid, “but not so good as see Missie Lilian again.”

She smiled at the genuine though inaccurately-worded compliment, and began questioning him, a little shyly at first, but soon so fast that she found herself asking the same questions over again, and hardly giving time for answers. Sam, who, like all natives, dearly loved to hear himself talk, once on the congenial topic of his master and the war, lectured away *ad libitum*.

“Missie Lilian—master he say, I stop here till he come back. I do everyting you tell me. If you want tell master anyting, you send Sam, straight—so!” and, extending his arm, he cracked his fingers in the direction of Kafirland with an expressive gesture. “Sam he go in no time. Dat what Inkos say.”

“And, Sam—didn’t your master tell you how long he would be away?”

“No, Missie Lilian—yes, he did. He say, be away not long—come back very soon—in few days. Yes, he come back in very few days—dat what Inkos say, de last ting.”

“A very few days!” Just what he had told Mrs Payne. Things looked promising.

“Was he looking—looking well, Sam? He has to travel alone, too,” she added, half to herself.

“No, Missie Lilian, he not ride ’lone. One Dutchman going back to laager. Inkos and dat Dutchman ride together. Inkos he buy horse from dat Dutchman—big young horse—’cos Fleck go lame. Dey see Amaxosa nigger, dey shoot—shoot. Amaxosa not hurt. Inkos—Amaxosa nigga no good. Ha?”

“Why, Sam; you don’t mean they met any Kafirs?” exclaimed Lilian in alarm.

“No. Dey not see any nigga, Missie Lilian. Sam mean *if* dey see Amaxosa dey shoot—shoot ’em dead. Bang!”

He did not tell her of the warning as to the dangers of the road, which the two troopers had given his master the last thing before he started. It would only make her uneasy, and, besides, Sam had the most rooted faith in his chief’s invulnerability.

Then Sam, being once under weigh, launched out into much reminiscence, all tending towards one point, the glorification of his master and his master’s exploits; for which his said master would have been sorely tempted to kick him, could he have overheard; but which, to his present listener, was of all topics the most welcome.

“Hallo, Sam, you rascal! Where have you dropped from?”

“Evenin’, Baas Payne!” said Sam, jumping to his feet, for he had been squatting, tailor-fashion, while Lilian had been talking to him. “Sam, he come from Inkos. Inkos he say, Sam stay here till he come. Sam do all he told. Dat what Inkos say.”

“You’ve got fat, Sam, since we saw you last. Campaigning seems to agree with you,” said Payne.

The boy grinned, and, seeing that they had done with him, he returned to his work.

“I rather think I shall go to the front for a spell myself when Claverton comes back,” remarked Payne, as they went in.

“Oh, do you?” put in his wife, of whose presence he was unaware. “And since when have you come to that conclusion, Mr George?”

He started. “Hallo! I didn’t know you there. But, seriously, it wouldn’t do a fellow any harm. Needn’t stay away long, you know. Shoot a few niggers and come back again.”

“Yes, pa,” cried Harry, delightedly. “Do go and shoot the Kafirs, and you’ll be able to tell us such lots of stunning stories.”

“Oh, ah! Anything else in a small way, Master Harry?” said his father, ironically.

The urchin laughed.

“I want an assegai,” he replied. “A real Kafir assegai; like the one Johnny Timms has got. It’s a beauty. He throws it at the fowls in the garden.”

“And you want to do likewise, eh? Only as there are no fowls to practise at here, you’d be hurling it at old Cooke’s next door. No, sonny; little boys mustn’t play with edged tools, as the copy-books say.”

It is the third day after Claverton’s departure—a bright, beautiful morning, with the already tangible promise of great heat. Slowly Lilian strolls along the street, hardly heeding the throng of busy life on all sides; the rolling waggons, with their long, jaded spans, moving to the crack of the driver’s whip, accompanied by a shrill, harsh yell; the sun-tanned horsemen ambling about; or the three or four pedestrians, who, booted and spurred, are striding among the crowd in all the glory of their spiked helmets, where an open-air sale is taking place, flattering themselves they present an intensely martial aspect, and putting on “side” accordingly. Here and there a storekeeper stands before his shop-door exchanging gossip with the passers-by; and black fellows of every nationality, clothed in ragged trousers and greasy shirts, with, it may be, a battered hat stuck on top of their dusty wool, stand in knots chattering in their deep bass, or trundle great packages in and out of the stores. All this Lilian hardly sees as she strolls along, a world of tender thought in the sweet eyes; and the beautiful figure in the cool summer dress forms a very bright and pleasing contrast in that busy workaday throng.

She has been to the library and changed her books, has done one or two little commissions, and now it is getting very hot, as she pauses for a moment to rest and look in at a shop-window. Three days have gone, three days out of the time she has to wait. Ah! how she longs for that time to come to an end! And the hum of traffic increases in the busy street, and from the cathedral spire the hour of ten chimes out. Suddenly the hand which has been gently twirling the sunshade on her shoulder, closes in rigid grasp round the knob; and lo! the beautiful, pensive face is white and bloodless—pale as the snowy ostrich feather adorning her hat—a peerless “prime white,” which her lover had ransacked the country to procure in order to devote it to its present purpose. For as she stands there Lilian catches that lover’s name, and, before she has overheard many words of the conversation of a knot of men chattering behind her, she feels as if she must fall to the ground.

“How do they know he’s killed?” one of them was saying, evidently in response to a preceding query. “They know it as well as they can know it short of finding the body, and the niggers don’t leave much of that—butchering brutes. But, look here. If Claverton started on the line of country Jos Sanders said he did, and didn’t turn up at the main camp yesterday by twelve o’clock at latest, he’s a dead man. The whole of those locations that side o’ the mountains have risen, and a flea couldn’t have got through without their spottin’ him.”

“He may have gone round t’other way, though.”

“Not likely. Jos said he was in a mighty cast-iron hurry, and laughed in his face when he just cautioned him to look out. There was a Dutchman with him, too.”

“In a hurry? Claverton in a hurry? That’d be a sight worth seeing,” struck in another. “Why, if all the niggers in Kafirland were on his spoor, he’d stop to fill his pipe before he’d move.”

“Ah, he’s a mighty cool hand,” rejoined the first speaker, admiringly. “We want a few more like him. You should jes’ have seen him that time when we were out under old Hughes. There was only eighteen of us all told, and the niggers were on us by hundreds. If it hadn’t been for Brathwaite’s fellers we should all have been cut up. We fought the whole afternoon; and Claverton, he seemed to care no more about the niggers than if there hadn’t been one of ’em there.”

“Yes, and the way he brought out poor Jack Armitage that time! It was a doosid plucky thing.”

“I say, what’s this about Claverton being killed?” exclaimed another voice, whose owner had evidently just joined the group. “I see the telegram says he may have been taken prisoner.”

The first speaker shook his head ominously.

“Kafirs don’t take prisoners,” he said. “If they do, so much the worse for the prisoners. No, sir. Claverton would fight like the devil, but he’d never let those brutes take him alive, you may safely bet your bottom dollar on that. Poor chap! Hot, isn’t it? Let’s go and liquor.”

They moved off, and Lilian stood there feeling as if the whole world had suddenly given way beneath her feet. Then she remembered that the newspaper office was but a few yards off. With swaying and uneven steps she made her way there. A boy was standing at the counter, rapidly folding copy after copy of the morning’s edition.

“I want a paper, please. One with the very latest telegrams.”

Lilian was surprised at her own calmness; but her ashy face and quivering lips might have told their own tale.

“Yes, mum,” said the boy, handing her one of those lying on the counter, and with it a small, printed slip. “Latest from the front—an officer killed.”

The words beat like a sledge-hammer in her brain, but she managed to stagger out of the shop. The whole street—vehicles, passengers, trees, everything—seemed to go round before her as she strained her eyes upon the printed words of that fatal slip.

An Officer Missing.

“Field-Captain Claverton, of Brathwaite’s Horse, left Breakfast Vley two days ago for the main camp, and has not since been heard of. He was accompanied by a Dutchman named Oppermann. There is every reason to fear that they have been out off and killed, as the bushy defiles through which lay their road, are swarming with rebel Gaikas.”

Later.

“A rumour is afloat in camp that the missing officer is alive, but a prisoner; and that a missionary, supposed to be Rev. Swaysland, of Mount Ararat Station, is also in the hands of the rebels. This seems probable, as the body of the Dutchman has been found, headless and terribly mutilated, near the brow of a high krantz; but there was no sign of the others. The rumour originated with a native, who has since disappeared. He says that the missing men will be taken to Sandili.”

Hardly had Lilian left the shop when a young man, with a pen stuck behind his ear, emerged from an inner office. With three strides he gained the front door, and stood staring after her for a moment down the street. Then he turned back.

“Jones, what did that lady want?” he asked, in a tone of concern.

“S’mornin’s paper, and latest telegram,” replied the boy, laconically, and somewhat defiantly, as he went on folding his papers.

“And you gave it her?”

“Yes,” still more defiantly. “She asked for it.”

“You egregious jackass?”

“What for?” said the boy, indignantly. “If a party asks for the paper, ain’t I to sell it?” He evidently thought his superior was drunk.

“Look at that, Jones,” said the latter, tapping the telegraphic slip impressively with his pen. “What’s that about—eh?”

“I see it. It’s about an officer killed at the front. Why, that’s just the very thing the lady wanted to see,” replied the boy, brightening up.

“Yes. Quite so, you infernal young fool. She’s his sweetheart.”

“O Lord!” And the boy, dropping the paper he was folding, stood gazing at his superior the very picture of open-mouthed horror.

“Yes, it is ‘Lord,’” said the latter, with a gloomy shake of the head. “Well, the mischief’s done now, anyway;” and he retired into his den with a feeling of intense and real pity for the beautiful, sad-looking girl who had so often called at the office for telegrams from the seat of war. The boy was a new hand, and had not known who she was.

How Lilian got home was a mystery. She just remembered staggering in at the doorway, and then nothing more until she awoke to find herself upon her bed with Annie Payne bathing her forehead. No need had there been to ask what the matter was—the printed slip which she held clutched in her hand spoke for itself.

A shudder of returning consciousness, an inquiring look around, and then the dread remembrance burst upon her.

“Oh, Arthur!” she wailed forth, in a despairing, bitter moan, “you are dead, love, and I—why do I still live?” and the tears rushed forth as her frame shook beneath its weight of sobbing woe.

“Hush, dear!” whispered Annie. “It does not say that, you know; it says he is a prisoner, and he may have escaped by now, or been rescued. While there is life there is hope.”

Something in the idea seemed suddenly to strike her. Starting up, she pressed her hand against her brows.

“So there is! Hope, hope! He is not dead. We must rescue him;” and with a new-born determination, Lilian rose and walked towards the door. Her hostess stared at her with a vague misgiving. Had this shock turned her brain?

“Mr Payne,” said Lilian, quite calmly, as she entered the sitting-room, “what can we do?”

Payne, who was busy buckling on a pair of stout riding gaiters, looked up, no less astonished than his wife had been. A cartridge-belt, well stocked, lay on a chair, and just then Sam entered with a gun which he had been wiping out.

“Do? Well, I’m going to start off at once for Brathwaite’s camp and see what can be done. But cheer up, Miss Lilian. We may bring our friend out of his troubles all right enough. While there’s life there’s hope, you know.”

Just what his wife had said, and the twofold reiteration struck Lilian vaguely as a good omen.

“Mr Payne,” she said, suddenly, “I want to go with you.”

Payne stared, as well he might. “Go with me? Where? To Brathwaite’s camp?”

“No; as far as the front. After that to the chief, Sandili.”

If she had said “To his Satanic majesty,” Payne could not have been more thunderstruck. He began to think, as his wife had thought, that the shock had turned her brain.

“To the chief, Sandili!” he echoed. “Why, you would never get there; and if you did, what on earth would be the use of it?”

“I want to beg him to spare Arthur’s life. I have heard that these Kafirs respect women, even in time of war, and the chief might listen to me. I am not afraid of him. He was very friendly, and spoke quite kindly to us that day we saw him up in Kaffraria, and he will remember me. And I might succeed where nothing or nobody else would—if it is not too late,” she concluded, choking down a rising sob. She must keep firm now, and crush all mere womanly weakness, for she would need all her strength.

Payne stared at her, speechless with astonishment and admiration. The notion of this delicate, beautiful creature calmly stating her wish to go alone into the midst of these merciless savages; to beard the Gaika chief, at bay in his stronghold, far in the gloomy recesses of the Amatola forest; reached a height of sublimity bordering closely upon the ridiculous. But she wae thoroughly in earnest—he could see that—and meant every word of it.

“Why, Lilian, it is not to be thought of,” he replied, seriously; “the thing is simply impossible to carry out, even if it were. Why, you would never reach the chief, to begin with; you would—hang it all—you would come to grief long before.”

“Nothing is impossible. Are you going to sacrifice his life because you will not use a means of saving it?” she asked.

“Now, do be reasonable,” replied Payne. “Listen. We have a better plan than that. Sam is going straight to the front; with a daub of red clay and a blanket he will pass perfectly for a Gaika. He will find out where Arthur is, and, depend upon it Sam will get him out if any one can; and you may be perfectly sure that I shall leave no stone unturned.”

“Ah, yes. He will. That is a good idea.”

“Yes,” went on Payne, who, meanwhile, was busy getting his things together. “And, another thing, Arthur understands the Kafirs thoroughly and can talk to them fluently. He isn’t the fellow to lose his head in any kind of fix, and he may manage to talk them over, or bribe them to let him go. So just keep your spirits up and don’t begin thinking the worst. Now, good-bye, we’ll do the best we can. Good-bye, Annie!” and with a grasp of the hand to Lilian, and a hurried embrace to his wife, Payne mounted his horse, which was being held for him at the gate, and rode off.

“Missie Lilian!” exclaimed Sam, “I go look for Inkos, now—straight—at once. Amaxosa not hurt him; I find him and bring him back. If Inkos alive, Sam bring him back or die by him. Dat what Sam do.”

“Wait. You are not armed. Go, quick, and buy a revolver before you start,” and with trembling hands Lilian began searching hurriedly for her purse.

“He won’t be able to get it without a permit from the magistrate,” said Annie Payne, “and if he could, it would be of no use to him. No, leave him alone for doing the best thing.”

“I not want revolva, Missie Lilian, I not want anyting. Better jes as I am. Now I go quick. I bring back Inkos, or never come back. I bring him back, or I die by him,” and, without another word, away started the faithful fellow; and so serious did he consider the position that he forgot his usual formula, “Amaxosa nigga no good.”

Throughout that afternoon whatever hopes Lilian had allowed herself to cherish sank slowly and by degrees till they had almost totally disappeared. Suspense, terrible at any time, but doubly so during forced inactivity, weighed down her soul till it seemed that it must crush her to the very dust, and she could do nothing. Payne—even Sam—had the satisfaction of joining in search of her missing lover, while she, a weak, helpless woman, could only sit at home and wait, and weep, and pray. Ah, why did she not insist upon her plan of going straight to the Gaika chief to beg for her lover's life? What to her were the terrors of so desperate an undertaking; the gloomy forest; the loneliness; the crowd of grim barbarians, their weapons, it might be, red with recently shed blood? And she was by nature timid, as we have already seen; yet her great overwhelming love had made this frail, delicate creature brave with a fearlessness taking no account of lesser horrors, all of which were swallowed up in this one dread issue. But it was too late now. Payne had gone, and the faithful native with him; and the two women were left alone, to wait, and weep, and pray.

Then as the afternoon wore on, and the messenger whom Annie Payne had stationed at the telegraph office to hasten up to them with every detail of news that might arrive, returned with the intelligence that a great storm was gathering in Kaffraria, and the electricity had interfered with the working of the wires, Lilian could bear no more. AH the direful stories which she had heard of the cruelties practised by the savages towards their helpless prisoners crowded upon her mind. He—her heart's love! He—a captive in their ruthless hands! And it was by *her* act that this had come about. *Her* lips had doomed him. She had sent him to his death.

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty.

Through the Heart of the Earth.

When he felt his horse's feet slipping from beneath him over the brink, Claverton expected nothing less than instant death. Yet in that terrible moment the whole picture was imprinted on his brain—the fierce foes rushing on, assegai uplifted; the terrified, rolling eye of his trembling steed; the sunlit sward; the green, monotonous sweep of bush in the valley far below, into which he was being hurled; even a thin line of blue smoke, which might be from a friendly camp miles and miles away in the bush, did not escape him. And side by side with the picture spread before and around him, in every minutest detail, came the thought of Lilian—what she would say when she came to hear of his end, and whether, from the spirit-world, he would be allowed to look once more on that tenderly-loved face, and, above all, whether he would ever be able to carry out his vengeance upon the man who had brought him to this. All passed like a lightning gleam across his brain, and then he felt himself falling—falling—down into space. The air roared and shrieked in his ears, his breath failed him, then his hands seized something. The whole world was hanging in his grasp, rocking and swaying; he could not leave go; it was dragging him downward—downward—downward—it was tearing his arms out by the sockets. He must throw it off; and yet he could not. Then a crash, and—oblivion.

How long he lay he could not tell. Slowly and confusedly consciousness began to reassert itself. He half opened his eyes, and quickly closed them again. It was dark; there was a cold, earthy smell. Stars floated before his vision, and indefinite shapes, with dull, far-away echoes. He was dead, and they had buried him. He could hear the spadefuls of earth being thrown upon his coffin. The sound was growing fainter and fainter; they had nearly finished. And Lilian—she was standing weeping over his grave. Ah, Lilian, it is too late to weep now! Yes, she was weeping as if her heart would break, and the horrible weight of the earth, with its cold, damp, mouldy smell, kept him down; he could not reach her. Only seven feet of earth—oh, God! and it might as well be seven hundred! Then he heard Truscott's voice—as the voice of a smooth, insidious demon—whispering words of love to her, and claiming the fulfilment of her promise. Fiend, traitor, murderer! He would burst his grave now, and rend him limb from limb! Not the weight of a thousand worlds could hold him down! And, with a mighty effort he raised himself into a sitting posture and looked around.

A puff of cool air fanned his brow. It was dark—no, not quite. A beam of light, shooting through from the outer world like a dart of flame, dazzled his eyes; then another and another, losing themselves in the further gloom. Is he not dead after all? How can that be? Yes, he is dead, and this is the world of spirits.

Again he closes his eyes. A few moments more, and the suspended faculties become clearer. He looks forth again. He is alive, and in a cave, and the shafts of light are as much of that indispensable element as can penetrate a thick mass of creepers which falls over its entrance. But how came he there?

Instinctively, as he felt himself falling, Claverton had kicked his feet free of the stirrups; and instinctively again, and without being aware of it, he had clutched at the first substance which had come in his way—a trailing ladder of creepers hanging from the rock—and this it was which had made him feel as if he was supporting the whole weight of the globe in his hands. But the jerk had been too great. For a fraction of a second he thus hung, then fell—fell clean through a dense network of creepers which closed over him with a spring, thus shutting him into the cave, or rather hole, in which he awoke to find himself.

And now the spark of hope rekindled darts through his frame with an electric thrill. He is still alive and unhurt, in the more serious sense of the word, that is, for no bones are broken, though he is stiff and sore and shaken by his fall. He will yet live—live to destroy his enemy, and to possess himself once more of Lilian's love, free from the possibility of any further disturbing influence. He looks round his present quarters—truly an ark of refuge—but can make out nothing save the shadowy rock overhead. Then, cautiously approaching the entrance, he listens.

No; it will not do to look out just yet. The Kafirs are still beneath, and he can hear distinctly the deep bass hum of their voices, can even catch their exclamations of surprise at his unaccountable disappearance. He is unaware of the exact position of his hiding-place, and the faintest movement on his part might lead to his instant detection. So he restrains his anxiety to peep forth, and, as he lies *perdu*, even chuckles over the supernatural theories set forth by the Kafirs to account for his disappearance.

For upwards of an hour he remains perfectly still; long after he has heard the voices of his enemies grow fainter and fainter, and ultimately cease to be audible as they give up the search. Then, thrusting his head through the network of trailers, he peers cautiously out. The sun has set, and a peaceful evening stillness lies upon the forest beneath, and there is no sign of the enemy. Then Claverton begins seriously to take account of his position. He cannot see the brink of the precipice overhead, but he judges from its height further along, that he has fallen about forty feet, and that the network of creepers, yielding to his weight, alone had saved him from certain death. But, meanwhile, how is he to get down, or up? One way is about as practicable as the other. Beneath, the rock falls, with here and there a rugged pinnacle projecting from its face, but sheer; while above, its surface for long intervals is perfectly smooth. A terrible fear chills his heart. He has only escaped from a sudden and swift death, to meet with a lingering one by starvation; here, in this hideous, lonely cave, beyond the possibility of human aid. A rope from the summit might reach him, but was it in the least likely that any friendly patrol would visit this wild fastness, haunted, as it was, by hostile bands? And even if it did, how improbable that its members would have a rope, or be able to improvise one long enough and strong enough to reach him; even were he not too weak from the effects of starvation to use it if they did. No. He must look for no succour that way.

Then his thoughts recur to the day that he and Lilian climbed up to that other cave during the fishing picnic four years ago. But for the inaccessibility of the place, some holiday party, in years to come, might make their way up here and find his crumbling bones, and recoil with loathing horror from his whitened skull, even as she had done from the grisly remains in that other cavern. And the grey rocks stand forth beneath and around, waxing greyer in the fading light; bright-eyed conies peep forth from their holes, and scamper along the ledges; a night-jar darts noiselessly on soft wing in pursuit of its prey; bats flit and circle in the gloaming; beneath, the green bush has changed to a sombre blackness; while floating upon the stillness of desolation, the weird voices of the forest begin their mysterious concert. And there, upon that narrow ledge, poised in mid-air, beyond the reach of all human aid—lost, forgotten and alone—stands this man, with death before him at last.

Carefully he looks over the ledge, narrowly scrutinising the rock beneath and around; but the first glance convinces him that it is useless. No creepers grow on the face of the cliff; even the tops of the highest trees are at a dizzy distance below. There is no foothold, even for a baboon. Ah! The cave itself! He has not explored that. Re-entering, he strikes a match—a knife, a box of matches, and a bit of *reimpje* being the proverbial contents of a frontiersman's pockets, even though they contain nothing else—and begins his exploration. There is no outlet that way. Overhead the rock slopes down to the back of the cave, and here and there it is wet with ooze. He can but dimly make out the outlines in the gloom by the flicker of his wax vesta. Suddenly the flame goes out, extinguished by a puff of cold air which blows up into the explorer's face. He lights another. Yawning at his very feet is a hole—a long, jagged hole, just wide enough to admit his body; one step more and he would have fallen in. Tearing a bit of paper from his pocket he lights it and throws it in. At first it will not fall: quite a strong current of air holds it up. This, in itself is a good sign, and Claverton begins to feel hopeful as he watches it sink, down, down, lighting up the chasm, and throwing a wet gleam on the slippery sides eloping down into unknown depths.

He sits down and begins to ponder over the situation. A strong current such as comes up this hole betokens an outlet somewhere, and the only way of finding that outlet is *to go down the hole*. He can get down, for the sides are near enough together for a man to descend by using his hands and knees freely. But once down, can he get up again? A natural thrill of horror runs through him at the idea of burying himself away down in the very bowels of the earth. To remain where he is means death, but it is to die in the full, open light of day, with the air of heaven breathing around him. To descend into that dark, slimy pit, and perhaps find no outlet after all, and not even be able to retrace his steps; to die in that frightful *oubliette*, amid who can tell what noisome horrors! It is an alternative enough to appal the stoutest heart, and no wonder Claverton's brain sickens at the thought. But it is his only chance. He rises, goes out on the ledge once more, and stands for a few moments drinking in the fresh cool breaths of the fast-gathering night; then, returning to the chasm, begins his descent.

A lighted match in his hand, and with pieces of paper torn up in his pocket ready to kindle at intervals, he lets himself down, working his way cautiously with his knees against the opposite rock, but the task is a far more difficult one than it appears. Once or twice he slips several feet, and the skin is worn from his hands and knees in several places. At length he stops; panting violently and nearly exhausted; and as he holds himself wedged against the sides of the crevice to rest, it strikes him that those sides are getting wider. By the light of another match he looks down. Oh, horror! Two yards deeper—he has already descended ten—and the chasm widens out to a breadth of at least twenty feet. A cold perspiration breaks from every pore. Great beads stand upon his forehead and his brain is on the whirl. It is frightful; there, in the pitchy darkness. His blood curdles in every vein. His strength can hold out no longer; in a moment he will yield, and disappear for ever from the sight of humankind, immured, self-entombed in the rocky heart of the earth. Rushing noises are in his ears, hands touch him, wings sweep over him; then he slips, slides with the rapidity of lightning; he is being torn in pieces, flayed alive. Then, with a shock, his descent ceases. He is on his feet. But where?

During the fall he has retained consciousness, and now, as he opens his eyes in the pitchy darkness, it seems that he can hear the sound of running water. Is it, too, a delusion? No, there it is distinctly, a mere runnel, but echoing with a cavernous boom through that grim silence. And the sound is as the music of hope. The water must have an outlet somewhere. Again Claverton lights a match. He is on comparatively level ground, sloping away in the form of a conduit, down which the water is trickling, while above, the rocks lose themselves in gloomy distance. With a new-born joy at his heart, he follows the course of this subterranean stream, guided by the sound of the water, now falling headlong over a boulder, now knocking his head against the roof, for he must husband his matches, as they are drawing near the end. Oh, God! Will this awful, rayless night never cease—this thick blackness, this horrible silence? His heart dies again within him as the atmosphere becomes more and more heavy and oppressive.

Header, have you ever stood within a disused mine, or any other cavern, artificial or natural, far beneath the surface of the earth? Have you then extinguished your light and caused your companions to do the same, keeping perfect silence for a few minutes? If you have you will remember the intense longing that came over you for one spark of light, the sound of a voice to break the frightful stillness, for one breath of the upper air, so shut out do you seem from the rest of humankind even as in the nethermost shades. What must be the feelings, then, of one to whom it is probable that the light of day will never again be vouchsafed?

Claverton puts out his hand. It encounters something cold and writhing. With a thrill of shuddering horror he recoils, and his fingers shake—he can hardly strike a match. At length he does so, and lo, by the red, flickering light he can see two or three great, dark, hideous shapes, whose multitudinous legs cling to the rock as the shining, creeping things wind their lengths along. Oh, God—what is to be the end of this? Will he go mad? Entombed in that pitchy darkness, with these frightful creatures crawling around him—upon him. It happened that Claverton had an exaggerated horror of anything creeping, and now in this hell-pit, alone with those loathsome creatures, the man who has just faced death with perfect calmness in two of its most appalling forms—the spears of five hundred merciless foes in front, a giddy height behind—trembles and shudders like a woman. For a dozen yards he dashes forward as fast as his legs can carry him, and, coming violently against the wall of the cavern, sinks down panting and breathless upon a rock. Something falls into the water at his feet with a splash. Light! Air! This den of darkness seems swarming with noisome reptiles. The legs of some creeping thing pass swiftly across his cheek, and again he shudders, and his heart throbs as if it would burst.

A faint rustle just above his ear. He looks up with a start, prepared for fresh horrors. What does he see that causes the blood to course and bound through his veins with such a wild thrill? It is a star. Yes, a star—bright, beautiful, and twinkling—only one solitary star, piercing the blackness of this frightful hell-cave, telling of light and air—the free air of heaven—and—he dare not add—possible deliverance. A cool breeze fans his brow, wafted through a crevice in the rock, and through the crevice he can just see that one solitary star. Even if he must die now he can still keep his gaze fixed upon that one shining eye of heaven, looking in upon him from the outer air—the sweet, blessed outer air. But no. That star is there to cheer him, to encourage him—not to doom him. With hope rekindled he advances a few steps and lights a match. It will hardly burn, so strong is the draught which blows in. He continues his way. Every now and again he can see more stars through the holes which become more frequent and larger, and he can see that he is in a fissure which runs along beneath the face of the rock, and which now begins to slant rapidly downwards. Everything is forgotten now; deliverance is at hand; for a rush of wind, which can come through no smaller an aperture than one wide enough to admit the body of a man, blows up into the tunnel. Patience! Care! He can hear the rustle of trees against the cliff on a level with his ear, and he guesses that he must be near the base of the precipice. A slide of a few feet—a dozen yards along a rocky ledge crawling on his hands and knees, the cavern widens, and, with such a feeling of relief as he has seldom, if ever, experienced before in the course of his life, Claverton steps forth from his subterranean prison-house and stands looking out into the moonlit valley, drinking in the fresh, cool night air in grateful draughts.

How delicious is that refreshing breeze after his terrible immurement! How beautiful the silvery hue of the sprays of the unending bush, sleeping beneath the stars, how soft their rustle as they quiver in the night wind! A pointed moon hangs in the sky nearly at half, and the Southern Cross rivals in its flashing brilliance the whole complement of the rolling planets. Then comes a reaction, and Claverton begins to feel stiff and battered, for he has been badly bruised in both his falls, and his nerves have been sorely shaken by the events of the last few hours; moreover, he has eaten next to nothing that day, and a faintness begins to creep over him. The prostration of body extends to his mind. What does it matter if he dies here alone in the wilderness? he thinks. Lilian has cast him off; she could never really have loved him. Better die and save all further trouble. In health such thoughts would never have occurred to him; now—bruised, shaken, and prostrate—a languorous feeling of fatality takes hold of his mind, and, shutting his eyes, he sits down at the foot of the great cliff, and the cool air plays upon his brow.

Ha! what is that? Cautiously he raises his head and listens. Is it a patrol? Aid—succour? No; the tread is of light feet—naked feet. It draws near, and Claverton has just time to step back within the gloom of his late prison-house as a large band of warriors glides swiftly past, and the moonlight gleams on the red, naked shoulders and on the gun-barrels and assegai blades, as the savages flit silently like spectres through the bush. They have not seen him, it is true, but can it be that they are still hunting for him? In the morning they will find his spoor, and then it will be the work of an hour or two to run him down—enfeebled, nearly exhausted, and quite unarmed as he is; for in his fall his belt broke and got lost, and with it his revolver and sheath-knife. An unarmed and half-starved man, alone in an unknown country, with bands of fierce savages quartering the forest like hounds in his pursuit. What chance had he?

But whatever chance he has must not be thrown away. He will start at once; yet not at once, for sound travels an enormous distance in the bush at night, and it is indispensable that the party which has just gone by shall be allowed sufficient time to get out of hearing. So he waits and waits, till at last he can wait no longer. Emerging from his shelter he glances at the stars, and, guided by those friendly lamps of heaven, steps boldly forth into the bush.

“Never say die,” he ejaculates, half aloud. “I shall live to talk over this fix yet.”

A low mocking laugh at his very elbow breaks the silence of the night. Starting, as if he had been shot, he turns, and, as he does so, he is violently seized from behind. With a spring he shakes himself free. A dozen Kafirs are upon him, and their uplifted assegais flash in the moonlight. A straight, neat hit from the shoulder, and the foremost goes down like a ninepin; but they see that he is unarmed, and fearlessly throw themselves upon him. A rapid struggle, a fall—and in a moment Claverton is lying on the ground, securely bound and helpless as a log.

“Ha—ha—ha!” laughed the tall barbarian who had set his face against the abandonment of the search. “The white man is a wizard. He can melt into air, and then rise up again out of the earth, but we have been too knowing for him this time. Ha—ha—ha!”

“Oh, damn you, do your worst, and the sooner the better,” retorted the prisoner, in a tone of weary, hopeless disgust.

“Ha!” jeered the savage. “Lenzimbi is a skilled wizard. He can disappear into the solid rock. He can light his magic candle and walk through the heart of the earth; but his God has quarrelled with him, and has deserted him at last. Yes, Lenzimbi is a great wizard, a valiant fighting man; but now *the black goat lives and the white goat dies*. Ha!”

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty One.

”...In Ever Climbing up the Climbing Wave.”

Claverton looked sharply at the speaker. The voice seemed familiar to him, but the features less so. And then, the other had addressed him by the name given him by the natives at the time he was living at Seringa Vale. Not only that. He had uttered words which sounded familiar. In a moment the floodgates of memory were opened; Claverton remembered the midnight meeting at Spoek Krantz, and the oracle with which its proceedings closed. Now his captor had repeated the words of that augury, but had reversed them with grim significance. Still, he thought he saw a glimmer of light.

“Stand up?” said the savage, peremptorily.

“Needs must where literally the devil drives,” was the prisoner’s reply, given with all his wonted coolness, as he obeyed. Resistance would be worse than useless, for it would only subject him to further indignity. He was absolutely in their power.

“Now walk,” was the next order.

“Which way?”

“*Hamba-ké*!” (“Walk, then,” or “Go on.”) repeated the tall Kafir—who seemed to be the chief of the gang—and the command, uttered in a fierce and threatening tone, was emphasised by a prod with his assegai.

Not by word or sign did the prisoner show that he even felt the sharp dig of the weapon, though the blood was running freely down his leg. Then they started in single file, with the prisoner in the middle, a *reim* fastened to his bound hands being held by the man immediately behind him. Thus they made their way out of that moonlit valley, and the strange procession wended on through the still, beautiful night. The Kafirs, for the most part, kept perfect silence as they walked, and now even Claverton was surprised by the readiness with which they got through the dense bush, picking out the most unlikely paths, and threading them with an ease and rapidity that savoured of the marvellous; but although they hit upon the smoothest paths, the prisoner’s powers were sorely tried, for he had undergone no slight strain within the last twenty-four hours, and his footsteps began to drag in spite of himself. The first sign of this, however, met with encouragement in the shape of a dig from the assegai of the man behind him, accompanied by a brutal laugh. There was no help for it—he was entirely in their hands.

“The white man is a very great warrior,” remarked the Kafir whom he had knocked down. “He can turn his hand into a club when he has no other weapon. He is made of iron; but even iron will bend and melt in the fire—in the fire. Whaow!” repeated the savage, with a dark, meaning look; and Claverton knew that the reference was to his probable fate. His probable?—nay, his certain fate.

“Look here, you fellows,” said the prisoner coolly. “You’re rather a skulking lot, when all’s said and done. Here you’ve got me in your power—me whom you’ve fought fairly and openly in the field—and you think it immense fun to give me a quiet dig now and then with your assegais, like a lot of old women’s spiteful pinches. That’s not the way in which warriors of the Amaxosa should behave, even to a prisoner.”

A laugh, not wholly an ill-natured one, greeted this remonstrance.

“If you intend to cut my throat, as no doubt you do, cut it and have done with it; but, hang it, until you do you might give a fellow a little peace,” he went on.

“Peace, peace? No, it’s war now, white man—war,” they replied. “Why should we give you any peace until the time comes to roast you? That’s what we are going to do with you.”

“Are you? Well, that’s for the Great Chief to decide. Meanwhile, if you were decent fellows, you’d fill me up a pipe and let me have a smoke as we go along.”

His coolness staggered them. But it stood him in good stead, for among these people a bold and fearless mien always commands respect. The tall chief stepped back to the prisoner’s side, and filling up a pipe from Claverton’s own tobacco pouch, lighted it and gave it to him, or rather stuck it into his mouth, with a grim laugh.

“There. You won’t smoke many more pipes in this world, Lenzimbi,” he said.

The Kafirs became quite good-humoured and began to sing, or rather hum, snatches of their war-songs as they stepped briskly out. They ceased to ill-treat their prisoner, and even showed a disposition to talk. They told him about the different engagements that had been fought between them and the colonists, and how they intended to go on fighting until every tribe had risen and joined them, and that then they would eat up the Fingo “dogs,” and ultimately, when they had fought enough, make peace with the whites. It was of no use for him to try and persuade them that in six months’ time they would be thoroughly beaten and broken up, and their chiefs either hanged or undergoing penal servitude as common convicts. They laughed him to scorn. The open air, the unending bush and impenetrable fastnesses of the rocks and caves were around them now, the white man’s warnings they treated as mere fables.

Suddenly Claverton was dragged to the earth, all the Kafirs sinking silently and like shadows. A blanket was thrown over his head, enveloping him in darkness and nearly suffocating him. It was impossible for him to utter so much as a sound. A few minutes of this silent darkness and the impromptu gag was removed. Something had alarmed the savages, and they had taken these precautions. They now resumed their way, and glad indeed was the prisoner to get rid of the horrible extinguisher that had been put upon him, and breathe the fresh air again; for a Kafir blanket, all nauseous with red ochre and grease and something more, diffuseth not a balmy perfume.

Towards dawn they halted for a short rest, and now the air became piercingly cold, for they were at a considerable elevation. Great clouds worked up from seaward, and the wind arose in dull, moaning gusts, driving the grey scud along the slopes beneath, and wrapping in a misty veil the brow of a lofty cliff which every now and then frowned down upon their way. Then, as it grew lighter, Claverton could just make out a town lying far away upon the plain, glimpsed between the slopes of the hills. It was King Williamstown, and at the sight he thought how happily he and Lilian had driven out of it and along that bit of road, the continuation of which he could see like a white thread winding along over the flat. He wae roused by a voice at his elbow.

“Now, white man, we are going to start again.”

Turning, he beheld the tall chief, and now, by the light of day, he recognised this man’s features. It was the man whom, with two others, he had turned away from Umgiswe’s out-station, on the morning of that never-to-be-forgotten ride over to Thirlestane, and whom Lilian had so much wished to see as a specimen of a real Kafir chief. He wondered if the other recognised him.

“Do you know me now, Lenzimbi?” was the quiet, but somewhat sneering question.

“Are you a rich man, Nxabahlana?” said Claverton, answering the query by another, in true native fashion.

The Kafir eyed him suspiciously. “It is war-time now,” he replied, with a shrug of the shoulders; “no one can be said to be rich in war-time.”

“True; but war does not last for ever. Some day there will be peace, and then, when the whites have taken all their cattle and the Gaikas are starving, and begging for food, supposing that Nxabahlana found he had plenty of cattle in his kraals. He would be a rich man when all his people were poor; and a rich man is always the most powerful chief.”

A gleam in the other’s eyes, and the least movement of a glance in the direction of the rest, convinced the prisoner that he was understood, and he began to hope.

“Supposing, then,” he went on, “that when all of Nxabahlana’s wives had been captured and distributed among the Fingoes, or were half-starved and too weak to work, and worn out, and thin, and useless, Nxabahlana had plenty of cattle, he could buy more wives—young, and fresh, and healthy. And then, when all the chiefs of the Gaikas were deposed and in disgrace, supposing the Government were to say: ‘During the war a white man, an officer in the colonial forces, was captured by the Gaikas, and his life was saved by a chief who set him free, and provided him with a horse and a guide to lead him into the colonial camp. This, then, is the chief whom we must put in Sandili’s place, although he is of the house of the Great Chief, for he is our friend—and his name is Nxabahlana.’”

The eyes of the savage glistened at the prospect thus opened out before him. All Kafirs are by nature covetous, and this man’s greediest instincts were powerfully appealed to. Plenty amid scarcity—wives, cattle, power—for that last consideration thrown out by the prisoner had carried more weight than he thought. He, Nxabahlana, was now disliked and distrusted by Sandili. Here, then, would be a good opportunity of securing the favour of the Colonial Government, and benefiting himself at the expense of his kinsman and chief.

“How many cattle will Nxabahlana find in his kraal, after the war, if Lenzimbi goes free?” he asked.

“One hundred fat beasts,” replied Claverton. He knew his man, and that the other would take advantage of his necessity to the utmost, so he purposely began at a low figure.

“Aow! A chief cannot buy many wives with that,” was the reply, given with a dissatisfied head-shake.

“Say one hundred and fifty, then.”

But this, too, proved too little. At length, after much haggling, which evoked many a smile from the prisoner—so strongly was his sense of humour tickled by the notion of haggling over the price of his own life, as if he was merely buying a waggon or a farm—a bargain was struck. Two hundred head of cattle should be handed over to Nxabahlana at any time and place that worthy chose to name, and if at the close of the war Claverton’s good offices should not avail to obtain for the chief a position of considerable wealth and influence, then he was to receive another hundred. In consideration whereof the Gaika agreed to release his prisoner, and, if not to conduct him within the colonial lines, at any rate to leave him in a place of safety. Not that all this was set forth in so many words—both of them knew better than that—the others might be listening. No, the negotiations were carried on in that dark undercurrent of half hints, half veiled references, which the Kafirs employ when anxious not to be readily understood by outsiders; and it will be remembered that Claverton spoke the native languages with ease and fluency, and, what in this instance stood him in almost better stead, thoroughly understood the native character.

“What if Lenzimbi should *forget* his word, when he found himself safe among his own people?” said the savage, suspiciously. “What if when Nxabahlana went to ask for his reward he received a bullet instead of the cattle, or was seized and thrown into the *tronk* as a rebel? Look. Here is a better plan. Lenzimbi shall give the money value of half the cattle now. He can turn paper into money by writing upon it.”

“Lenzimbi isn’t such a fool as he looks,” was the prompt reply. “No, my friend, you know perfectly well that you can trust me far better than I can trust you, and as for writing you a cheque now, which I suppose is what you mean, I couldn’t if I would, because I’ve no paper or ink or anything; and I wouldn’t if I could, because you know, as well as I do, that I shall keep to my side of the bargain. Besides, even if I did what you want me to, and gave you a cheque now, how the devil could you read it so as to make sure it was all right? Eh?”

This was conclusive.

“It will be difficult,” mused the Kafir, referring to the escape. “Very difficult. Look. Yonder is the camp of your people. We shall pass very near it presently. Then, if you should find yourself free, make for it as hard as you can. There is no other chance. But until after the war is over you must keep silent about the way in which you escaped. That is one of the conditions.”

Claverton agreed to this, and now hope ran very strong within him. He had every reason to believe that the Gaika would fulfil his word; indeed, two powerful considerations would ensure his doing so, cupidity and fear. For if he were denounced to Sandili as having even contemplated such an act of treason as the release of a prisoner, his life would not be worth a moment’s purchase. After some discussion as to the best way the order was given to start, and, with their prisoner in their midst as before, the Kafirs resumed their march. Once Claverton stole a side look at the chief’s face, but Nxabahlana was moody and taciturn, and when he did speak to the prisoner it was with the rough brutality he had employed at first; but this might be only a blind. Which was it to be—life or doom? Every chance now was in favour of the former, and hope ran high.

Doubtless the reader will wonder at Claverton’s marvellous ill-luck in three times escaping a terrible death only to fall straight into the hands of his enemies. When the Kafirs had abandoned their search as useless, thinking that the white man was a wizard indeed, as Nxabahlana had tauntingly said, that worthy, with a dozen followers, had remained behind. Of a cynical disposition, and a very sceptic as regarded the superstitions of his countrymen, that astute savage, although he had been the first to start the miraculous theory as accounting for the fugitive’s disappearance, believed in it himself not one whit. He was puzzled, he admitted, but by natural causes. He would fathom the mystery yet; so he sneeringly watched the bulk of his countrymen move off, while, with a few chosen followers, he remained on the watch. Carefully they examined the ground, but, of course, found no trace of a footmark. They searched the cave whence the fugitive had emerged, but did not venture far into it, being influenced by two considerations. One was that not a shadow of spoor was seen to lead into it; another, a very natural repugnance to penetrating deep into that gloomy hole. It was nearly dark, and if the fugitive moved at all, it would be at night. So Nxabahlana and his warriors took up their position on the cliff a little way above the mouth of the cavern, in a spot commanding a considerable view of the moonlit valley, wherein nothing could move without at once attracting their attention, and waited and watched with the steady patience of their kind. This was at length rewarded when they saw the object of their quest emerge, weary and exhausted, from the cavern, walking, so to say, straight into their very jaws. The sequel we have seen.

During the march Claverton noticed with some uneasiness, that the man who had felt the weight of his fist was watching him very narrowly. Whichever way he looked, this man’s shrewd, suspicious glance was upon him, and more than once it seemed to wander to the chief. Could he have overheard? If so, it would add seriously to the difficulties in the way of escape. But he consoled himself with the knowledge that if it was to be effected Nxabahlana would manage it somehow.

And now, as they drew nearer to the critical spot, the sound of voices was heard close by, causing, however, no alarm to the party, and a large body of Kafirs, emerging from the bush, joined them. Of course a halt was called while they exchanged news, and great was the exultation of the new arrivals over the capture of so formidable an enemy as this white man had proved—for his fame had spread among them. They crowded round to look at him as he sat on the ground, some jeering, some threatening, but all, in their heart of hearts, rather respecting the man who sat there absolutely in their power, and yet taking no more notice of them than if they were stones.

“Whaaow!” exclaimed a great mocking voice at his side. “Whaaow, Lenzimbi! I told you we should meet again. You knocked me down once—twice. It was your turn then—now it is mine,” and, looking up, he recognised at a glance his old enemy—Mopela.

“Ha—ha! I told you so, didn’t I? How do you like that, Lenzimbi—how do you like that?” continued the savage, striking him twice on the head with the shaft of his assegai. “Yesterday, you—to-day, I. Haow!”

“What has come over the warriors of the Amaxosa that they keep such a cur in their midst?” said Claverton, looking straight before him, and steadily ignoring his persecutor. “Only a cur bites and worries a helpless man, but if one even looks at a stone he runs away with his tail between his legs, as this cur called Mopela would do if my hands were for a moment free—even as he has done twice already.”

With a yell of rage, and foaming at the mouth, Mopela flourished his assegai within an inch of Claverton’s face, but the prisoner never flinched. It seemed that the savage was working himself up to such a pitch that in a moment he would plunge the weapon into the body of his helpless enemy, when his arm was seized in a firm grasp, and Nxabahlana said, coldly:

“Stop, Mopela. You must not kill the prisoner. He belongs to the Great Chief, Sandili.”

“Yes, yes,” chimed in the others, “he belongs to Sandili; he is not ours!” And favouring Claverton with a frightful glare of disappointed hate, Mopela fell back sullenly among the rest.

“Yes, the white man belongs to Sandili. He is not ours—he is not ours!” repeated the Kafir whose suspicions had been awakened, with a significant glance at his leader’s face.

The latter, who, by the way, was Mopela’s half-brother, ignored the hint, and gave orders to resume the march.

“Aow!” exclaimed one of the Kafirs, suddenly stopping. “This is not the way to Sandili.”

“No, no. It isn’t?” agreed several of the others.

“It takes us dangerously near the white man’s camp,” said the suspicious one, stopping short with a determined air.

“And we might be attacked by a strong patrol,” urged Mopela. “Senhlu is right.”

A great hubbub now arose. The Kafirs, to a man, objected to pursuing that road any further. It was not safe, they said; they might lose the prisoner, and perhaps all be shot themselves. No. The best plan would be to go straight to head-quarters, and as soon as possible.

Nxabahlana saw that they were determined to have their way. He was only a petty chief, and the great bulk of these men were not his own clansmen; moreover, he was greatly out of favour with Sandili and Matanzima, who would be glad of a pretext to get rid of him. He dared not persevere in his plan; to incur further suspicion would be to court death. So he gave way.

“I intended to have reconnoitred and carried back some news to the Great Chief,” he replied, coldly, and with a sneer. “But since you are all so afraid of the white men that you dare not venture within three hours’ run of their camp, you can have your way. I shall carry out my scheme alone, while you go back with the prisoner.”

To this plan they one and all objected. It might be that they detected defection in the tone of their leader’s voice. He, however, deemed it safer to fall in with their wishes.

“So be it, then,” he said. “We will all go straight to Sandili.” And the whole party, turning, struck off into the deep wooded fastnesses of the mountains; and the captive’s heart sank within him, for he knew that the plan for his deliverance had failed on the verge of its fulfilment, and now every step carried him nearer and nearer to his death. Half an hour ago the flame of life and hope glowed brightly; now the last spark was extinguished in the darkness of a certain and terrible doom.

On they went—on through the dark forest, where the crimson-winged louris flashed across the path, sounding their shrill, cheery whistle, and monkeys skipped away with a chattering noise among the long, tangled trailers and lichens which festooned the boughs of the massive yellow-wood trees. Now and then an ominous, stealthy rustle betokened the presence of some great reptile, quietly gliding away among the safe recesses of the thicket; and high above, the harsh, resounding cry of a huge bird of prey floated from a mighty cliff overhanging the line of march. All these things the prisoner noted as a dying man looks at the trivial sights and sounds of earth; for he knew he should never leave this place alive. The clouds had cleared off, and now the sun’s rays poured down upon his head like molten fire; fortunately for them the Kafirs had left him his hat, or their captive would have been snatched out of their merciless grasp by a sunstroke, long before he reached the place of torture and death.

At about noon they halted; and one of the Kafirs, advancing a little way ahead, uttered a loud, strange call. It was answered, and, being beckoned to come on, the whole party moved forward and joined him. Then they formed up in a column, and, striking up a war-song, they stepped out, beating time with the handles of their sticks and assegais; those nearest to him, turning every now and then to brandish their weapons in the prisoner’s face.

And now they entered an open space covered with huts—these, however, being of a very temporary order—and a swarm of human beings crowded out to meet them. A few starved-looking dogs rushed forward, yelping, but were promptly driven back with stones; and men, women, and children, stood eagerly watching the return of the warriors, and speculating loudly on the identity and probable fate of the captive.

Grasping instinctively the capabilities of the place, Claverton saw that he was on a kind of plateau, shut in on three sides by high, wooded slopes and rugged krantzes, while on the fourth, which was open, he could just make out a wide stretch of country far away beneath. The cunning old Gaika chieftain had well chosen his eyrie of a hiding-place. On every side, however, the bush grew thickly right up to the huts, which were built in a circle. Claverton noted, moreover, that, save for a few very indifferent cows, there was no cattle anywhere about, and that the people themselves were looking lean and starved, and drew his own conclusions accordingly.

With many a shrill laugh, and chattering like magpies, the women crowded round to look at the prisoner as he sat in the midst of his captors and guards, stoically indifferent to his fate. Hideous, toothless crones, whose wrinkled hides hung about them in a succession of disgusting flaps; crushed-looking middle-aged women and plump, well-made girls, all in different stages of undress. One of the latter slily put out her hand and gave Claverton a sharp pinch on the arm, amid screams of laughter from her fellows as they watched its effect upon the countenance of the captive.

“Yaow!” they cried. “The white man cannot feel. See, he does not move!”

Then a frightful hag stepped in front of the prisoner, and, amid a torrent of invective, began brandishing a butcher-knife within an inch of his nose.

“Ah—wolf—white snake—vulture’s spawn!” she yelled. “We will spoil your handsome face for you. Our young men are lying about the land in thousands, and the jackals are devouring their carcases, and it is your work. For every one of their lives you shall undergo a pang that will make you pray for death. Do you hear, tiger-cat; do you hear?” screamed the hag in a frenzy of rage.

Again a grim smile was upon Claverton’s face. The idea of him, who had made himself felt in sober earnest, who had escaped peril and death so narrowly and so often, coming to this—that it was in the power of such a thing as this to cut his throat like a fowl.

“He dares to laugh!” yelled the she-devil, brandishing her knife and clawing him by the hair. Just then one of the warriors took her by the shoulders and sent her spinning a dozen yards off, where she lay on the ground foaming with rage.

“*Hamba-ké*! Leave the prisoner alone. He belongs to the chief!”

At a sign from the speaker a girl came forward rather timidly and held a bowl to the captive’s lips. It contained curdled milk, with some mealie-paste thrown in. It was cool and refreshing, and Claverton drank deeply.

“Thanks,” he said, with a nod and a pleasant smile. “That’s good.”

The rest of the contents of the bowl were drained by his guards; and the girl, retiring amongst her companions with many a sidelong glance at the prisoner, remarked, in a half whisper, what a handsome fellow the white man was, and she was sure he must be a very great chief, and it was a shame to kill such a man as this.

And now a commotion arose on the other side of the kraal. All eyes were turned, and so grotesque was the sight that met his glance that Claverton could hardly keep from laughing outright. In the centre of a group of women and children, who were hustling him along, was a man—a white man. On his head was a tall black hat, the puggaree had been impounded by one of his captors. His arms were bound to his sides, while his long-tailed coat, now in a woeful and tattered condition, hung about his legs. Some brat, more mischievous than the rest, would every now and then swing on to its tails, or bestow a severe pinch underneath, while buffets of every description seemed the sufferer’s momentary portion. His eyes were starting out of his head with fear, and his countenance was more abject than ever. In this miserable-looking specimen of British humanity Claverton recognised his companion in adversity—the missionary, Swaysland.

“Yaow—man of peace—get on!” yelled the rabble, hustling the poor wretch forward. One urchin leaped upon his back, and nearly made his teeth meet in the tip of his ear, while another playfully flicked him on the cheek with the lash of a toy-whip. Altogether the unfortunate missionary seemed to be having a bad time of it.

“Is there too much light, *Umfundisi*?” mocked a young woman, as he blinked his eyes, partly to dodge an expected blow, partly because the sudden glare of the sun tried them. “There, now it is dark. Is that better?” and she banged the tall hat down over the luckless man’s eyes, head and face, thereby performing the operation known to the uncivilised Briton as “bonneting.” A scream of laughter from the barbarous mob greeted this performance, which increased as, with the “chimney-pot” sticking over his head and face, their victim stumbled forward, completely blinded. Scattering the women, two of the warriors roughly removed this visual obstruction, and marched him up to where Claverton was sitting.

“Hallo, Mr Swaysland, I never expected to see you again in this terrestrial orb!”

There was something almost cheerful in this greeting, and the poor missionary felt hopeful.

“How did you escape? I am so glad!” he began in a tone of breathless relief. “Now you will be able to interpret for me. I am sure they would not have ill-treated me if I could have made them understand who I am. And they have ill-treated me shockingly—shockingly.”

“Why! Can’t you talk their lingo?”

“No. I have only been in this country a few months. Ah, why did I leave Islington! I was President of the Young Men’s Christian Association there, and I must needs come to convert the heathen in this benighted country. I was afternoon preacher at—”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted his companion in adversity. “But I’m afraid that won’t inspire John Kafir with either respect or compunction. What do you want me to tell them?”

“Tell them that I am the Rev. Josiah Swaysland, and that I belong to the Mount Ararat Mission Station. Tell them that I am the Kafir’s friend, and that I gave up a comfortable place in a high-class drapery establi—er—ah—er—I mean in a —er—in easy circumstances at home, in order to come and be their friend. Tell them to let me go. I am not a fighting man. I am a man of peace, and never did them any harm. Tell them—”

“That’s enough for one sitting,” said Claverton, with a sneer of profound contempt for the other’s egotism and cowardice. It was all “I—I,” “Let *me* go.” A brutal laugh was the only answer which the savages vouchsafed.

“Ha!” they mocked. “A man of peace! What are men of peace doing here in war-time? This is not the land for a man of peace!”

Nevertheless, Claverton did his best to obtain the other’s release, and disinterestedly, too, for he knew that long before his own position could be made known he himself would be a dead man. He represented to the Kafirs—very contemptuously, it must be admitted—that the missionary was a pitiful devil, not worth the trouble of killing; that they could gain no good by it; but might by releasing him, as he would be only too ready to trumpet their generosity far and wide. They only shook their heads in response to all his arguments. They had no voice in the matter; it was a question for the chief to decide.

“What do they say?” anxiously inquired Swaysland.

“They can do nothing. It all depends upon Sandili. He will be back this evening, and then our fate will be settled.”

The other shuddered.

“You seem to take things very calmly, Mr Claverton,” said he, at length.

“Well, yes. What on earth’s the good of kicking up a row? It won’t mend matters.”

“Oh! God help us!” wailed the missionary, in mortal fear.

“That’s about our only chance. But you don’t seem to calculate over much on the contingency,” rejoined his companion, with a very visible sneer.

“Don’t talk like that—don’t, I beg you. Remember our awful position.”

“‘The devil was ill, the devil a monk would be,’” quoted the other, with a bitter laugh. “I’ve been in ‘awful positions’ before now, on more than one occasion, but this time I verily believe it’s all UP. My God has quarrelled with me, as that long devil over yonder graciously informed me last night.”

Swaysland stared at him in amazement. Here was a man with torture and death before him in a few hours, talking as calmly and as cynically as if he was having his evening pipe. He had never even heard of anything like this before, and, if he had, would not have believed it.

“Now, look here,” continued Claverton. “I don’t want to raise any false hopes, mind that; but I think it’s just possible that they may let you go. You see, the chiefs always like to stand well with the missionaries, not because they believe in them, but because Exeter Hall is a power in the land, worse luck. Now, you represent that you’re no end of a swell in that connection, and that you’ll do great things for them if they let you go. But, whatever you do, don’t promise to leave the country by way of an inducement.”

“But if they ask me?”

“They won’t. On the contrary. If you leave the country, you can be of no further service to them, and they know it. It is only by remaining here and saying what fine, generous fellows they are, that you can do them any good. In fact, I think you stand a very fair chance; but, as I say, I don’t want to raise any false hopes.”

“Really, I declare I am quite hopeful already. If I get away, never again will I set foot in these frightful wilds,” vehemently replied this preacher of the Gospel. “But, about yourself?” he added, ashamed of his egotism, a consciousness of which had just begun to dawn upon him.

“Oh, I? Well, I’m a gone coon. There isn’t a chance for me. They know me too well.” Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, he added: “If you escape you might do me a service. It isn’t a very big thing.”

“I pledge you my word that I will. What is it?”

“Find out a man named Payne—George Payne. He’s from Kaffraria, but at present he’s living in Grahamstown, and—tell him—tell them—all—that you saw the last of me.”

“I will—I will. But—”

“Do you know this, Lenzimbi?” and Mopela stood confronting him, with a diabolical grin upon his face. As he spoke he removed an old rag from over something he carried, disclosing to view a hideous object. It was a human head, and in the swollen, distorted lineaments, the glazed eyes, and the sandy beard all matted with gore, Claverton recognised the features of the unhappy Boer, Cornelius Oppermann. At this ghastly sight Swaysland started back, his face livid with terror, and trembling in every limb.

“Look at it, Lenzimbi. Look at it. One of your countrymen,” went on the savage, thrusting the frightful object within an inch of the prisoner’s nose. It had begun to decompose, for the weather was hot, and it was all that Claverton could do to restrain his repugnance.

“I see it,” he replied, self-possessedly. “Any one but a fool would know that that article of furniture had belonged to a Dutchman, whom every one but a fool would know was *not* ‘one of my countrymen.’”

“Hey, Mopela, take it away!” cried the bystanders, disgustedly. “We don’t want to be killed by the carcase of a stinking Boer,” and, with a grin of malice, the barbarian chucked the hideous trophy at a small boy who was passing, and who bolted with a panic-stricken yell.

“Here, *Umfundisi*, you have talked long enough; you must go back to your hut,” said Nxabahlana. The poor missionary’s heart sank within him. Claverton’s conversation, though sadly profane, had cheered him up, and now he was to be alone again.

“Good-bye, in case we do not meet again,” he said, with more feeling than he had hitherto displayed—on other account than his own, that is.

“Good-bye. Keep your spirits up, and don’t forget to make the most of yourself,” replied Claverton. “And remember Payne—George Payne.”

“Now then, *Umfundisi*,” impatiently exclaimed one of the Kafirs, dragging him by the shoulder. Swaysland walked dejectedly away, glad of the Kafir’s escort to protect him from the ill-treatment of the women and children; and Claverton, leaning back, wondered, dreamily, what the deuce would be his own fate. So the hours dragged their slow length; and it was with but scant hope that the captives awaited the arrival of the Gaika chief.

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty Two.

The “Word” of the Great Chief.

Tired of gazing at the prisoner, and realising, moreover, that there was not much fun to be got out of one who took matters so coolly, the women and children ceased to crowd round him, and he was left very much, to himself. It was broiling hot, and every now and then upon the sultry hushened air came the discharge of firearms in the far distance. Evidently the rival forces were making targets of each other; but it was probably only a slight skirmish with some patrol, and Claverton did not allow himself to hope anything from the circumstance. The Kafirs, too, seemed in no way to trouble themselves about it.

"Time passes slowly, doesn't it, Lenzimbi?" said Mopela, mockingly. "It passed quicker sitting by the pool at midnight, you and the tall dark lily at Seringa Vale. How well you looked together! Why didn't you bring her here with you, eh? It would have been much more comfortable for you, and for us, ha, ha!"

At that moment Claverton would have bartered his life to be free to spring upon the jibing savage and tear him in pieces with his bare hands. But it is safe to worry a chained mastiff, if only the chain is strong enough.

"Ha! ha! What will the dark lily say when you do not return to her?" went on Mopela. "When she hears how you were cut in pieces like a sheep, or roasted. Once we killed a man by putting red-hot stones upon him. At last they slid off, but we held them on again with sticks. He was two days dying. That was for witchcraft. Another was smeared over with honey, and a nest of black ants was broken over him. They stung him, they got into his ears, and nose, and eyes, and stung him everywhere. He died raving mad. Another was skinned alive, and then his skin was sewn round him again. Another was hung by the heels over a slow fire, and his eyes were put out with red-hot fire-sticks. Which of these things would you rather have happen to you, Lenzimbi?" concluded the Kafir with a hideous laugh.

"Nothing of the kind will happen to me," was the imperturbable reply.

A low boom of thunder smote upon the air—long, very distant, but distinctly audible. On the farthest horizon a little cloud was just visible. The slightest suspicion of a superstitious misgiving was in the breasts of the bystanders. How could this man preserve such perfect imperturbability unless he were sure of some miraculous deliverance?

"Will it not?" jeered Mopela. "What will happen then?"

"Wait and see. If you have been telling me those interesting stories to try and frighten me—well, then, Mopela, you're a bigger fool than even I took you for, and have been taking a vast deal of trouble about nothing. But now, if it's all the same to you, I think I'll go to sleep."

They stared at him. Here was a marvellous thing. These white men, too, were so afraid of pain; and this one, whom in a few hours they intended to burn alive, announced his intention of going to sleep. But they offered no objection. He was in their eyes a natural curiosity, and to be studied as such.

And he actually did sleep, and slept soundly, too, so that two hours later when the whole kraal was astir and in a commotion, he awoke quite refreshed. The arbiters of his fate had arrived.

The chief, Sandili, a refugee with the remnant of his tribe in the fastnesses of the Amatola forest, was a very different personage to the sleek, well-fed, benevolent-looking old "sponge" who had asked for sixpences when sitting against the wall of the Kaffrarian trading-store. To begin with, he was sober, a state he could rarely plead guilty to during the piping times of peace. But there were no canteens in these rugged strongholds, and the very limited supply of liquor that could be smuggled in was but as a drop in the bucket to this habitual old toper. His temper, too, was peevish and uncertain, whether owing to the supplies of grog being cut off, or the reverses sustained by his arms, was open to debate. So when this prisoner stood before him as he sat in front of his hut surrounded by his *amapakati* (councillors) and attendants, the old chief's countenance wore none of its former friendliness and geniality.

One swift glance at the rows of dark, impassive faces, whose eyes were fixed upon him, keenly noting every point of his demeanour, and Claverton saluted the chief—easily, naturally, and as between equals. A murmur ran through the group in acknowledgment, and every eye was bent upon the prisoner. For some moments they regarded each other in silence, and then Sandili spoke.

"Who are you, white man, and what are you doing here?"

"Who am I? The chief will recollect that we have met before. Does he not remember Thompson's store and the man who talked with him there? That was myself."

Again a hum of assent ran through the group, and the chief sat gazing at his prisoner as if in deep thought. And what an unaccountable turn of fate it seemed to Claverton! The last time he had talked with this man he had felt for him a good-humoured, contemptuous kind of pity as he gave him the trifling gifts which the other had asked for; and Lilian's sweet eyes had looked upon the old savage with a delicious air of half-frightened interest, much as she might have regarded a tame old lion, and then they had ridden so light-heartedly away, without much thought of the evil to come. How vividly that day came back to him now—now, as he once more stood before the old chief, whose lightest word was sufficient to decide his fate! Verily, the turns in the wheel of Fortune are capricious.

Seeing that no one was in a hurry to break the silence, Claverton continued:

"As to what I am doing here, I was brought here, very much against my will, I admit. Our friends here drove me over a cliff higher than that one yonder," pointing to one that overhung the hollow; "but I stopped half-way down and got inside. Then I walked down through the heart of the earth, and came out at the foot of the cliff, where your people found me."

"What childishness is this?" said the chief, sternly. "Are we children and fools that you tell us such tales, white man?"

"Ask those who brought me here if it is not as I say," was the cool reply.

A rapid conversation took place among the Kafirs, many of whom confirmed the prisoner's statement. It was an unaccountable thing, they said; but the white man seemed to be something of a sorcerer. Anyhow, all that he said about the cliff was true.

And now a fresh excitement took place in the shape of some new arrivals, some mounted, some on foot. Claverton noticed a stoutly-built man in European clothing, who seemed rather to shrink back as if anxious to avoid observation.

"Who is that?" he asked of his guards during the slight confusion that followed.

"Gonya—Sandili's son," was the reply.

This Gonya, or Edmund Sandili, as he was known to the colonists, had received a civilised education, and, at the time of the outbreak, held a post as clerk and interpreter in the Civil Service of the colony. This post he had thrown up in order to cast in his lot with his own people—a course which, whether that of a traitorous rebel or self-sacrificing patriot, is a matter of opinion.

"And who is the *Umfundisi*?" he went on, in an ironical tone, glancing in the direction of a thoroughbred Kafir who was arrayed in a clerical suit of black, with which, and with the white choker adorning his throat, the rifle he carried in his hand seemed startlingly out of keeping.

"Ha! that's Dukwana. He's a real *Umfundisi* at Emgwali. He can pray well, but he can shoot better," replied the barbarian, with a sneering laugh. "Ha! there's Matanzima—Sandili's other son. He *is* a warrior?"

"Yes, I know him," said Claverton, as he watched his former enemy join the group and seat himself near his father. The old chief looked not best pleased at the interruption as he turned frowningly towards his impetuous son.

"Where is the prisoner?" the latter was saying. "Aha! white man, we have caught you at last!" he went on, as Claverton again stood before the group.

"Why did you not 'catch' me that day in the thorns, when we met in real battle, Matanzima?" he retorted. "That was a good rough-and-tumble, wasn't it?"

The other showed all his white teeth and laughed. He had a pleasing face—bold, daring, and reckless. Then they began questioning the prisoner about the colonial movements. To each query he replied with a readiness that astonished them.

"You are not misleading us?" said one of the *amapakati*, threateningly. "Why do you tell us all your countrymen's moves so readily?"

"I am not misleading you, because not the slightest advantage would be gained by it; the result will be the same, anyhow. I tell you, Sandili, and all you *amapakati*, that you are going straight to destruction. You had much better make terms before it is too late. You can get better terms now than a month hence."

A murmur of amazement ran round the assembly. Here was a prisoner—a bound, helpless prisoner—talking to them, the chiefs and councillors of the Gaika nation, like a victorious general dictating terms! It was a thing unheard of.

Suddenly a strange interruption occurred. A figure bounded into the midst—a frightful figure, with long, gaunt limbs and gleaming eyes. From neck, and shoulder, and wrist, and ankle, dangled beads, and cows' tails, and feathers, and magic strings of birds' beaks and claws, while the creature's body wae hideously tattooed from head to foot. Of tall stature, a coif, consisting of a huge snake's skin all entwined with the claws of scorpions, made him look even taller. With a long, wild beast-like howl, this hideous object stood poised on one foot before the group.

"Treason! Treason!" he mouthed.

All started; each man, by an involuntary movement, looking uneasily at his neighbour. In one glance Claverton recognised this diabolical-looking creature. It was the wizard, Nomadudwana.

"Treason! Treason?" he repeated, foaming at the mouth and gnashing his teeth.

"What does the sorcerer mean?" asked Sandili. "Who is the traitor?"

"There is a white prisoner here," bellowed the wizard. "He belongs to us. He belongs to the nation—to the Great Chief—to me—to us all—for we shall all take of the war-medicine which I will make out of his heart. He is a brave man; his heart will make strong war-medicine. The Great Chief, Sandili, is our father; but there is treason in his house—in his own house!" And again the hideous wizard broke into a series of prolonged and diabolical howls. "There is one here who would have deprived us of our spoil," he went on; "who would have released our prisoner and enriched himself; who would have gone over to the white men and betrayed us, his brethren—betrayed the Great Chief, his father, and the head of his father's house!"

The councillors were visibly agitated. Though their consciences were clear, it might be in the purpose of Nomadudwana to denounce any one of them. A shout of wrath went up from the crowd beyond.

"Who is the traitor? What is his name? He must be killed!" exclaimed the Kafirs, gripping their sticks and assegais. "Name him! Name him!"

The wizard glared around, and many a bold spirit quailed before the glance of those dreaded eyes.

"The traitor is of the house of the Great Chief—of his own house. Where is Nxabahlana?"

A loud murmur of mingled amazement and relief arose, succeeded by ominous mutterings.

"Here!" roared the warrior named, springing into the circle and confronting his denouncer. "Here! What have you to say against Nxabahlana? Liar, fool, juggler! Out with it, before I cut out your lying tongue!"

"Stop!" cried Matanzima. "Stop! We must hear what all have to say. If Nxabahlana is true, he need fear nothing. Where is Senhlu?"

Then stepped forward the suspicious one, and narrated how his leader had been in close confabulation with the captive, whom he—Senhlu—had heard him agree to release, on condition of receiving five hundred head of cattle (exaggeration Number 1); further stipulating that, when the whites were victorious, Sandili and Matanzima should be slain, and he, Nxabahlana, put into their place (exaggeration Number 2). He told how anxious his leader had been to go dangerously near the white men's camp, and how he and Mopela had stirred up the others to resist this plan, feeling sure that their said leader intended to desert and betray them.

As he concluded, the ominous murmur had risen to angry shouts, and every eye was bent upon the accused with a glare of vengeful wrath. But the object of it never quailed. He stood cold, erect, and disdainful—his tall, herculean frame looking quite majestic, as with a sneer on his face he listened unmoved to the shouts of execration around him. And Claverton, for the time, forgot his own position in the vivid interest which this unlooked-for turn of affairs afforded him. He could see that the whole thing was a plot, and he felt quite sympathetic towards his captor and would-be deliverer, who he saw was doomed, otherwise no common fellow like Senhlu would dare raise his voice against a kinsman of the Great Chief.

"It is a lie!" shouted the accused, waving his hand in the air. "It is a lie. Give this lying sorcerer a weapon and let us meet hand to hand. I will kill him and then whip Senhlu like a dog—my dog that turns to bite me. Listen, Ama Nqgika. Who has been in the front rank whenever we fought the whites? Nxabahlana. Who has shot three of them with his own hand, and seven dogs of Fingoes besides? Nxabahlana. Who has lost the whole of his possessions—cattle, wives, even his very dogs—in the cause of his people? Nxabahlana. Even now," he went on, working himself up into a pitch of fervid eloquence, "even now, look at me. Am I afraid? Am I afraid of any man living? Who remained on the watch all night and captured this white man, when all the rest were afraid of him and had given up the search? Nxabahlana. Well, then—is it likely I should wish to let him escape? Is it, I say? Surely none but a fool would do this. None but a child like Senhlu. None but a covetous, jackal-faced impostor like Nomadudwana. None but a wolf who devours his own flesh and blood, like Mopela. None but these. Certainly not a warrior. Certainly not Nxabahlana—a warrior, a man of the house of Nqgika. Is the Great Chief, Sandili, a child? Are the *amapakati* children that they should have their ears filled with such childish tales? It is absurd, I say—absurd."

He ceased, and a hum of mingled doubt and anger greeted his words.

"Nxabahlana talks well," said Matanzima, with a gleam of malice in his eyes. "But we know that the whites are very liberal towards traitors. We know that if we are conquered the man who stood the white man's friend will be well rewarded. When a prisoner is in our hands we do not go and look in at the enemy's camp on our way home for nothing. Nxabahlana talks of children. Who but a child would do such a thing as this?" concluded he, in a tone of significant cunning.

"A traitor! A traitor!" howled the wizard. "How shall we hold our own with a traitor in our midst?"

And the crowd answered with yells of execration, even the women in the background screaming and brandishing sticks.

"Ha! Matanzima is a boy," replied the accused in scornful accents. "Let him be silent when he is by his father's side. Now listen. Here is the white prisoner himself. Let the Great Chief—let the *amapakati* ask him. Ask him whether I agreed to release him."

It was a bold stroke. A brief glance at Claverton's face had inspired the Gaika warrior that here might lie his chance of safety. It was, indeed, a bold stroke, thus throwing himself upon the mercy of the captive. As for Claverton, the unbounded courage of the man filled him with admiration, and on that account alone he would willingly have saved his life, apart from any other consideration.

"Ask him, I say," repeated Nxabahlana. "Ask the prisoner whether anything passed between us."

"Ewa! Ewa!" (Yes—yes) echoed the crowd, "ask him?"

"Is this true, white man?" asked Sandili. "Are the words of Nxabahlana true?"

All eyes were bent upon Claverton, and there was a hush that might have been felt. Every ear was strained to catch his answer. It came in a bold, clear voice.

"Yes. They are. The words of Nxabahlana are true."

"But what of the wizard and Senhlu? You heard what they said."

"They are liars."

The whole assembly was taken aback. Not a man present but expected the answer would be unfavourable to the accused, and it may be added, that not a man present believed it now that it was the reverse. Wherefore Claverton went up a hundredfold in their estimation, for had he not just excelled in one of their most cherished virtues—the art of lying well when convenient; and he, himself, felt a glow of satisfaction over having saved this brave man's life; but even he forgot that among the Kafirs it is not necessary to convict a subject obnoxious to his chief, to ensure that subject's condemnation.

"There!" exclaimed Nxabahlana, triumphantly, drawing his gigantic figure up to its full height. "You hear what the prisoner has said! Now let my accusers stand forth. Where are they?" and he looked searchingly around. There was dead silence. No one moved; but the eyes of the councillors were bent upon him with an ominous glance, and, meeting that glance, Nxabahlana knew that he was a doomed man. Yet he was game to the very last.

"Where are they?" he repeated. "Ah, they have hidden themselves, and well they may. But I appeal to the Great Chief. Let him order my traducers to stand before my face. I claim my rights. The Great Chief cannot refuse," and in his eagerness he made two steps towards where Sandili was sitting.

Now it happened that Nxabahlana held in his hand a kerrie—just such an ordinary stick as the Kafirs always carry. He had better have dropped it before approaching his chief; but at the moment he forgot everything in his excitement. Not that the difference would have been great either way, for they were determined to get rid of him.

"I claim my rights! The Great Chief cannot refuse!" he repeated, standing with outstretched arm, and looking Sandili straight in the eyes.

The old chief started slightly. A dark expression came into his countenance as he gazed upon his audacious subject for a few moments in silence.

"What!" he exclaimed, in tones of indignation, "What is this? Who is this that dares to command his chief? Who is this that approaches me with threats? Who is this that dares to threaten his chief? *Have I no men*?" and he looked around with a volume of meaning in his fierce eyes.

Like a spark applied to an explosive the glance told. There was a rash forward on the part of the crowd, a swift flash or two, and a gleam as of the sunlight upon steel. The throng separated, and upon the ground lay the huge frame of Nxabahlana, the hot life-blood welling from half-a-dozen assegai wounds in his chest and sides.

It was a dastardly act, and, although he knew that the victim had richly deserved his fate, yet Claverton felt that the weight of evidence was in his favour, and he should, at any rate, have been allowed to meet his accusers face to face. But little time had he to indulge in regrets on another's behalf, for now all eyes were turned upon him with a bloodthirsty glare, and voices began to clamour that the white prisoner should be given over to them.

And as he looked upon the wild scene it seemed hardly credible to Claverton that scarcely forty-eight hours had gone since he had left Lilian and set his face eastward to carry out his plan of revenge. He glanced down the line of stern, relentless countenances, where sat the chief and his councillors, the late victim of their tyrannous vengeance bleeding at their very feet; but in the shrewd, rugged features he could detect no hope of mercy. Around, hemming him in, crowded the clamouring savages, their fierce eyes burning with a lust for blood. Behind them he caught a glimpse of a large fire, wherein a group of women and boys were heating bits of iron red-hot, and he had small doubt as to the use to which that fire would be put. The only man who might have befriended him was lying dead at his feet, and the weapons that had done the deed had slain his own hopes. His time had come.

"Give me a drink of water," said the prisoner.

They brought him some in a bowl. His arms were bound to his sides at the elbows, but his hands were free, and he took a long, deep drink. This attention conveyed to him no false hopes; he had no doubt as to his ultimate fate. He looked around. The sun, which was nearing its western bed, had sunk behind a heavy bank of cloud which loomed upon the horizon, and a roll of thunder stirred the still, hot afternoon. The storm which had been threatening all day was drawing near.

And now the wizard, decked in all his hideous paraphernalia, bounded into the midst.

"Hear, now, Sandili, Great Chief, of the house of Gaika! Hear, ye *amapakati*! Hear, all ye warriors of the race of Gaika!" he cried. "For two moons we have been fighting the English. For two moons we have shed our blood and given our best lives in the endeavour to drive the English into the sea. Have we been successful? We and our brethren, the Ama Gcaleka, who can show twenty warriors for every one of the English, have spent our strength in vain. Whenever we met them the English have driven us back. Even when we met them—a mere handful that we ought to have eaten up—we have been driven back before their charmed bullets. They have charmed bullets and charmed guns which they keep on firing without loading. Why can we do nothing against these English? Listen, and I will tell you. You see the man before you? *He* is their sorcerer. *He* it is who causes our bullets to fly off them without harming them. He is in every fight. Who can mention a battle that this man was not present in? Now we have this sorcerer in our midst. What shall we do with him, I say? Shall we let him go? My magic is stronger than his; I have delivered him into your hands. Will you, then, suffer him to escape again? Cut his bonds and let him free, and you will all be destroyed."

A roar of execration was the answer to this appeal. Weapons were brandished, and the crowd pressed closer around.

"Give him to us!" they yelled. "See, there is a fire; we will burn him, one limb at a time."

"Old men, where are your sons?" went on the wizard. "Young men, where are your brothers? Where are they? Ask the vulture of the rocks, the wolf and the wild dog of the forest, even the skulking jackal who burrows in the earth. Ask the breezes of the air, which blow over their whitening bones where they lie by thousands, slain by the charmed bullets of the English. Hark; I hear their voices in the wind—the voices of their spirits crying for vengeance. I hear it in the trees, in the rocks, in yon thundercloud which is drawing nearer and nearer,” and at his words a heavy boom was heard, followed by a spasmodic rustling gust violently agitating the surrounding bush, and stirring up the air around. With awe-stricken looks, his superstitious listeners bent their heads. “Yes,” roared the ferocious demon, working himself into a state of frenzy. “Do you not hear them? They are crying—‘Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!’ And we, who are left—are we not hunted like wild beasts? Are we not driven from bush to bush by these white men—who have not a tenth of our number—by them and our dogs the Fingoes? Soon shall we follow our brethren, and the name of Gaika will exist no more. Here is a white man! Here is the destroyer of our race. Shall we not make him weep out in tears of blood the woe which has come upon us? Shall we not make him writhe in torment for many days, to appease the spirits of our slaughtered sons? We await the word of the Great Chief!”

Every eye was fixed upon the semicircle of grey-bearded councillors seated round the chief—dark, stern, and immovable. With bodies bent forward, and a wolfish, bloodthirsty grin, the warriors stood scanning the expression of the impassive countenances before them, eagerly awaiting the word, which they doubted not would be given. Again reverberated that thunder-roll—nearer still—as half the sky was hidden beneath an inky shroud, and the dull red flash gleamed from its depths. One of those storms which, in the hot weather, break with such fearful violence over the wilds of Southern Africa, would shortly be upon them.

But “the word” remained still unspoken. Sandili—whose pliant, vacillating nature ever ready to yield to the pressure of circumstances or to the advice of whoever had his ear last, was so powerfully appealed to—would have spoken it, and ended the difficulty; but it was evident that the councillors were not unanimous on the point. On the one hand, the nation was clamouring for the captive’s life; on the other, some of the councillors were clearly opposed to the expediency of sacrificing it, and even the Great Chief dared not fly dead in the teeth of their advice without some show of debate. So he gave orders that the prisoner should be removed out of hearing while they talked, but that he should not be harmed.

“We have heard what Nomadudwana, the seer, has told us,” said the chief, looking inquiringly around. “Shall we then allow the prisoner to go free?”

Now the wizard was hated and despised by the older men of the tribe, though among the younger he was in the zenith of his popularity as a fierce and unswerving preacher of a crusade among the whites. Consequently the mention of his name struck a chord calculated to tune the whole instrument in Claverton’s favour. The mutterings of Matanzima and a few of the younger men, to the effect that a prisoner ought to be treated in the accustomed way —*i.e.* handed over to the people without all this *indaba*—were stifled by the decided and dissenting head-shakes of many of their seniors.

Then one of the *amapakati* spoke. He was a very old man; and an expectant murmur greeted his appearance.

“It is Tyala!” murmured the group. “Hear Tyala—he is wise!”

“My chief, Sandili,” began the old man, in a low, earnest voice; “my brethren, the wise men and councillors of the house of Gaika; my children, its warriors—listen to my words, which have always been spoken for your welfare. Have they not?”

An emphatic hum of assent having testified to the veneration in which the speaker was held, he proceeded:

“I am an old man now, far older than most of you here, and, as I look back upon the past of the Gaika nation I look forward all the more gladly to the grave. There was a time when we possessed the land; a time when our chiefs were feared almost from sea to sea; a time when our people dwelt at ease, and their cattle lowed upon a thousand hills; when the hearts of our young men were glad, and the songs of our young women resounded among the rustling corn. All was then well with us. The fountains gushed from yon cool forests, and the pastures were green, and our eyes were glad, for we dwelt in the fairest land that eye could look upon. The whites, our neighbours, did not molest us, but traded with us many things which now we cannot do without. Why did we not keep what we had got? We could not. There came a demon among us, and we could not sit still. We made war.

“What was the result? We were beaten, driven back. We lost our warriors by hundreds, and our cattle were taken. We lost a portion even of our lands. Here was a lesson to us—to us who proudly thought we could eat up the whites because they were so few. But we would not learn. We made war again; and this time we fought well, but it was of no use, again we were beaten. And this time the white man gave us back the land which he had taken from us—gave it us back! Was ever such a thing heard of before? Did not this show that he desired to save us—to treat us as his friends? Yet we could not sit still. Evil counsels prevailed among us, false prophets sprang up, and lured the people to destruction. They went—poor blind sheep—they went straight to the slaughter. What could I do—I, Tyala? It was in vain that I warned and entreated; in vain that I lifted up my voice day and night against their besotted folly. They even threatened to take my life—my wretched life; that, they were quite welcome to if it would but save them from themselves. The counsels of the false prophets prevailed. The war-cry was raised again.

“Why should I go on? The rest you all know. We lost what we had retaken before, but even the third time the English forgave us poor deluded people, and then, when the famine came they fed us when we were starving and crept to their doors to beg for food. Why did they not kill us all then, when we were in their hands? And now look around; look at the fair lands which are about to be taken from us—rather which we ourselves have given up because we could not rest quiet upon them. Are they not large enough? Are they not fertile enough? Are our streams not abundant enough, and our pastures not rich enough? Yet we have thrown all this away because the chiefs of the house of Gaika have allowed themselves to be led astray by a parcel of youths, a parcel of boys, who had never seen war and must needs clamour for it as for a new plaything. And what is the result? Look at us now—hunted into our stronghold, tracked like criminals and wild beasts. And yet, I say, it is all our own doing.”

The old man's voice had become strong and firm as he spoke, though it shook slightly with the halting tremor of age. As he paused, many a deep murmur from his auditors told that his words had struck home.

"Who warned you against all this?—Tyala. Who warned you against the words of the false prophets?—Tyala. Who warned you against the rifles of the English?—Tyala. Whose voice has ever been raised in your behalf, in council, in diplomacy, even in the battle?—That of Tyala. But it has never been heeded. Now listen, my chief Sandili; and you, *amapakati*, my brothers. Here is a chance to stand well with the English, our conquerors; for they are our conquerors, even now. Do not throw it away. This man, our prisoner, is a man of rank and standing among his own people. What, then, shall we gain by taking his life? Let us restore him to his own people and say: 'The Gaika people are not wolves, when they make war they do not kill the prisoners. Take this man, whom we found among us unarmed.' The English are generous as well as brave. They will remember this act when they make terms with us. The man himself will speak well for us. It is an act that will gain us sympathy everywhere. Do I hear it said that Tyala is the white man's friend? That is true, he is. But he is still more the friend of his own people. Have we not seen enough blood? Has not blood been poured out until the whole of the land is red with it—blood, blood, everywhere, nothing but blood? We are weary of blood-shedding, we would fain rest. Now, my chief, do not listen to the clamour of the young men, or the boys. Do not allow them to shed the blood of this white man. Restore him to his own people alive and well. We shall be glad of it, when we have done so, and the English will treat us generously. This is the counsel of Tyala."

The old man ceased, and drawing his blanket around him, sat silent and motionless. Every word of his speech, illustrated by many a graceful wave of the hand and inflection of the voice, with here and there an expressive native ejaculation, was listened to with profound attention. When the murmurs which greeted its conclusion had subsided, another councillor, scarcely the junior of the first either in age or appearance, gave his opinion. His advice, too, was in favour of mercy. Unlike his predecessor he did not recommend the unconditional release of the prisoner, but rather that terms should be made beforehand.

After him, no one seemed inclined to plead the prisoner's cause any further, when, just as the opposite opinion was going to speak, Claverton suddenly found an unexpected advocate. This was Usivulele, the man whom he had held as a hostage, after the fight with the Hottentot Levy, when he had allowed the Kafirs to look after their wounded. He was not a councillor, but being a warrior of considerable standing, and a man of great shrewdness and sagacity, he was allowed a seat and a voice among that august body. As he had only arrived when the prisoner had been removed, the latter had not seen him.

Beginning with the usual complimentary allusion to the wisdom of his hearers, the speaker followed the lead of Tyala, setting forth with considerable power the inexpediency of provoking the vengeance of the English by pushing matters to their bitterest end. He dwelt upon the bravery in the field of the white leader now in their hands—having witnessed it in battle himself—upon his humanity to the wounded shown on more than one occasion, as in giving them water with his own hand, and saving their lives from the merciless rage of his own followers. Such men were scarce, and if the Amaxosa rewarded them by torturing and killing them, others of a different order would be put into their place. Far better let this man go. Then Usivulele went on, with cunningly veiled sneers, to cast ridicule upon the wizard Nomadudwana, whom they all hated. These impostors, he said, were gaining more and more ascendancy, till at last it seemed that chiefs and people were to be led by the nose by this impudent quack, who made pretended war charms, whose efficiency he had not the courage to test himself. He concluded with a powerful appeal to the chiefs to spare the prisoner's life, if only to show that they were still chiefs, and as such not to be dictated to by a shouting mob, or influenced by the wretched jugglery of a sham soothsayer.

But if men were to be found who had the courage of their convictions, the majority of those who sat there were wedded to the traditions of their order and of their race. They, indeed, regarded the wizard as a despicable sham, but then he was necessary to such a national institution as "smelling out," (Note 1) whereby, for purposes of gain or policy, obnoxious individuals might from time to time be got rid of; and the common people believed in him. It would not do to shake the popular faith in national institutions; to do so would be to aim a blow at authority itself, especially at such a time as this, when the Colonial Government was strenuously exerting itself to do away with chieftainship and tribal independence, and to substitute white magistrates everywhere. So one after another spoke at considerable length, combating the opinions of those who advocated mercy. It was a mistake to suppose, they said, that the liberation of this one man would make any difference whatever. They had reddened their spears, and must take the consequences; it was of no use thinking to cleanse them in such simple and easy fashion. There was no reason why this man's life should be spared. He had proved a formidable enemy in battle, and had slain dozens of their warriors; it was only fair, then, to hand him over to the vengeance of the people. The people were clamouring for him, and they ought to have him. That was the custom of the nation.

Thus spake the majority of the *amapakati*. One especially, a grim old war-wolf, whose toothless fangs could scarcely mumble out his bloodthirsty words, did his utmost to influence his hearers in the direction of vengeance. The English, he said, were not to be trusted. They would probably visit it upon them ten times more heavily for having taken the man prisoner at all. Did the English spare the Gaikas when they captured them? No, they handed them over to the *Amafengu* to be put to death by them. Free warriors of the house of Gaika to die at the hands of Fingo dogs! Let this white man be burnt.

The last consideration told, as the ferocious old ruffian intended that it should. The councillors were now all but unanimous against the prisoner, and Sandili, whose sympathies, moreover, were with them, yielded, as usual, to the voice of the majority. One or two urged Tyala again to speak, but the old man shook his head sadly.

"No," he said, "I have advised my chief and my people all my life. They have ever rejected my councils, and they have repented of it. They reject them now, and they will repent of it. I will say no more," and sinking his chin in his blanket, he sat motionless as a statue, and heedless of what went on around him.

Meanwhile, outside the notice of the august circle a livelier scene was being enacted.

When Claverton was ordered to be taken out of hearing, the crowd, seeing him brought towards them, took for granted that their prey was indeed theirs at last, and surged forward with a roar like a den of wild beasts let loose. Their longing for blood was about to be gratified.

“Bring him to the fire!” they yelled. “Bring him to the fire?”

Some fanned up the flames; others, bending down, drew out bits of red-hot iron and blew upon them. It was difficult for his guards, amid that deafening roar, to persuade the mob that the time had not yet come. They pressed forward, weighed on by those behind. They shook their assegais towards the prisoner, they glared and mouthed upon him, they howled and threatened, and all the while the red flames shot up with a dull, hungry roar, and the bright caverns glowed around the instruments of torture which lay in them. The women were among the most merciless of that fiendish crowd. Hideous hags brandished knives and skewers, explaining to the prisoner exactly how they meant to begin upon him, and their repulsive wrinkled skins, all shaking and perspiring in the heat, gave them the air of toad-like fiends from the nethermost hell. Boys held up assegai points which had been heated in the fire, and yelled shrilly that they were going to dig them into the white flesh. One imp, with a diabolical leer upon his face, took a bit of hot iron and glided between the guards, intending to apply it to the prisoner’s leg. Unfortunately for him, however, some one jostled him, and, instead of “touching up” the captive, the iron was brought into contact with the naked thigh of one of the guards, who, with a startled exclamation, turned sharply round, and, seizing the youthful fiend, administered to him such a thrashing that he slunk off, howling like a whipped dog, amid the jeers and laughter of his fellows. And the said guards had their work cut out for them. They dared not, on their peril, allow a finger to be laid on their charge before the chief’s “word” was given, and yet every moment the mob nearly tore him from their possession. So they laid about them lustily, whacking the women and children on the backs and shoulders with their assegai shafts, and even threatening some of the young men with the blades, and the crowd fell back a little. Then they were able to explain that the prisoner still belonged to the chief, and they must wait.

It was a frightful moment for Claverton; even though he knew that he was for the time being safe, yet the position was one calculated to try the strongest nerves. And it was but delaying the hour. He had small hopes that the councillors would decide to spare his life. It might be that they would elect to keep him prisoner a little longer; there was just this chance, and it was worth next to nothing at all.

“Aha, Lenzimbi! Did I not tell you it would come to this?” mocked Mopela, gloating over his helpless enemy. “In a few minutes I shall put one of those red-hot irons into your eye—slowly—slowly—like this,” and he illustrated his blood-curdling speech by taking one of the hot nails from the fire and gently boring a hole in the ground. The crowd had fallen back now, leaving an open space around the prisoner and his guards.

“Ha! What is this?” he continued, as something bright was disclosed to view through the open breast of the prisoner’s shirt; and, inserting his fingers, he drew out a chain, at the end of which hung a large and curiously-wrought locket of steel. The chain was clasped so near to the wearer’s throat that there was no getting it off by any method short of decapitation, it being fastened by a secret spring. In vain the savage jerked and tugged at the loose end by which the locket hung down on Claverton’s chest. It was of strong steel, and showed no signs of giving.

“Haow! Lenzimbi’s charm!” he cried. “We must take it away, then Lenzimbi will be weak and full of fear. This is what makes him strong. We must take it away.”

But this was easier said than done, for the chain was made of stout metal. At last a pair of pincers was procured, and Mopela wrenched and twisted with all the strength of his muscular grip.

“Take care what you are about!” whispered Claverton, his face livid with deadly rage. “The man who succeeds in taking that off will die on the spot. It is magic. Take care!”

For answer the savage only laughed, and redoubled his efforts to break the chain. A snap—a wrench—another snap—and Mopela sprang to his feet, triumphantly holding up the locket, with three inches of chain dangling from his hand, and crying: “Lo! the white man’s charm?” Claverton’s face was pale as death, white to the very lips, but his eyes were glowing like coals of fire. The crowd was watching him curiously. Already the removal of the charm had begun to take effect, they thought.

How it happened he himself could not have told to save his life, but the locket, which seemed as close as an unbroken egg-shell as Mopela was turning it over and over in his hands, suddenly flew open, disclosing, to the astonished eyes of the savage, the face of Lilian Strange. Yes, there it was, beautiful and lifelike, an exquisitely-painted miniature—her own work. A tender smile played round the curves of the sweet mouth, and the lovely eyes, opening wide beneath their long lashes, looked out with a calm, glad, trustful air that was inexpressibly bewitching. Even the warm flush beneath the delicate olive skin, and the soft wealth of bronzed, dusky hair, was true to the very life. A bordering of forget-me-nots, beautifully painted, was wound round the portrait, and in the opposite compartment of the locket reposed a thick coil of hair, matching exactly that in the miniature, and half hidden beneath this was the letter “L,” painted in blue upon a white ground. And this token of the purest, holiest love wherewith man was ever blest, was now held in the rude hand and gazed upon by the bold eyes of a savage. The firelight destined to wither up the limbs of her lover glowed upon the sweet, delicate features of Lilian, portrayed there, lifelike in her radiant beauty; and still Mopela stood gazing into the locket which lay in his hand, fairly lost in wondering amazement.

“Whaow!” he exclaimed. “Lenzimbi should have brought her here;” and then his voice was jammed in his throat. He was choking. For a marvellous thing had happened, and a shout arose from the crowd—a shout of awe, and consternation, and warning. The prisoner was free.

A madman, we know, is at times endowed with superhuman strength. Claverton was for the moment mad, and the stout raw-hide thongs fell from him like packthread, as with one tiger bound, he sprang upon Mopela and bore him to the earth. Then digging his knee into the shoulders of the barbarian, who had fallen face downwards, he grasped him by the hair and thrust his head into the blazing fire. It was all done in a twinkling, and a deathly hush was upon the bystanders, who seemed thunderstruck. He might even have escaped; but no thought had he of anything other than vengeance. He seemed transformed into a wild beast. His eyes started from their sockets, and he gnashed his teeth as he literally ground the glowing cinders with the face of the prostrate man, till the flesh crackled horribly and roasted in the heat, and even then his fury seemed but to increase.

With a loud shout the Kafirs, recovering from their momentary stupor, threw themselves upon him. He hardly saw them, he continued to beat his adversary's head into the fierce fire without heeding them. They dragged him off and secured him, but with difficulty; he was mad. Then some of them raised Mopela. The huge barbarian presented an awful appearance. The whole of his face was peeled and blackened—burnt to a cinder—and the sight of both his eyes was for ever destroyed. He lay, half insensible, and moaning like an animal.

“There!” shouted Claverton, in ringing tones. “There! That is my vengeance. That dog lying yonder dared to profane with his filthy eyes what was sacred. Now he will never see with those eyes again. They are taken from him. He will be in darkness until he dies.”

A vengeful murmur rose among his listeners. Suddenly some one cried:

“The charm—where is the charm?”

Where, indeed? They looked around—on the ground—in the fire—everywhere. In vain. Of the steel locket there was no sign. It had completely disappeared.

But the wonder and speculation of the superstitions savages was nipped in the bud by a mandate from Sandili that the prisoner should again be brought before him.

And now, once more, Claverton stood before that semicircle of dark, stern countenances, but he read no hope. They were about to doom him to torture and to death. Around pressed the crowd, eager, expectant, the women and children jostling against the warriors in front, struggling to obtain a view of the proceedings. Every now and then a red flash of lightning played upon the half-naked figures of the barbarians, and upon assegai points, and rolling eyeballs, and necklaces of jackals' white teeth and all the savage paraphernalia wherewith the fierce, lithe forms were decked.

A silence was upon all as the wizard stood, looking like a figure conjured up from hell, haranguing the assembly. The burden of his speech was a mere repetition of the wrongs they had suffered at the hands of the white men in general, and this one in particular, whom he now claimed on behalf of the nation, in pursuance of unvarying custom. And at his words a shout of assent went up from the fierce crew standing around.

“Give him to us!” they cried. “Give him to us, Great Chief!”

Then Sandili was about to speak, to utter the words of doom, when, in a strong, ringing voice which echoed through that savage fastness like the notes of a clarion, the prisoner cried:

“Stop! I, too, have something to say; listen to it all of you. First of all, who is this Nomadudwana, that claims to direct your councils? I will tell you—”

But he could get no further.

The cunning wizard was too much for him. Raising a series of terrific howls and effectually drowning his voice, and the voices of Usivulele and others, who would fain have allowed him a hearing, Nomadudwana made his way among the people brandishing his “medicine charms,” and crying out that there was a plot on foot to defraud them of their prey—of their lawful vengeance on the white captive—and stirring them up to clamour for him to be delivered over to them. The plan was successful. With one mighty roar every voice was raised besieging the chief with its bloodthirsty demands. Waiting until the tumult had subsided somewhat, Sandili raised his hand, and pointing his finger at the prisoner said, in slow but distinct tones:

“*Do with him what you will*.”

Immediately the firm grasp of many hands was upon him, and Claverton felt that his time had now come.

“Wait!” he cried, in a ringing voice. “Wait—I have a message for the Great Chief.”

His guards paused awe-stricken. A red flash darted into their midst, and loud rolled the thunderpeal immediately overhead. With a swift glance upward the prisoner continued:

“Hear me now, Sandili. My magic is greater than that of your most redoubted wizards. Who stood unseen at Nomadudwana's side in the spirit cave in Sefele's cliff and laughed?—I did. Who was wafted safely down yonder tremendous height and walked forth unhurt?—Ask the spirit of Nxabahlana, and the men who saw me. This is your sentence. Your tribe shall soon be driven from this land, which the English shall enjoy in its place. Your sons, Matanzima and Gonya there, shall work in chains for the English for many long years—the best years of their lives—shall slave beneath the hot sun with common convicts, driven like oxen by their taskmasters. And you, yourself,” he went on, speaking slowly and solemnly, as with outstretched hand he pointed at the savage chieftain, “you, Sandili—the Great Chief of the House of Gaika—before six moons are dead, you shall meet a dog's death at the hand of a Fingo ‘dog,’ and the chieftainship of the House of Gaika shall become in you a thing of the past. This is my ‘word’ to you, Sandili, and to all present.”

Nothing but the speaker's reputation as a wizard, who had made his magic felt, would have obtained for him a hearing. His listeners were obviously impressed. There was a moment of silence.

“Whaow!” suddenly exclaimed the Kafirs standing around. “Listen to the white man! He dares to revile the Great Chief!”

The countenance of the old chief became gloomy and troubled as Claverton finished speaking. Then again he raised his hand in fatal gesture.

“*Do with him what you will.*”

What is that frightful crash as if the earth were split in twain, rent by an indescribably terrible blow? What is that dazzling, steely glare, all blue and plum-coloured and liquid in its blinding incandescence? There is a smell of burning in the air, in spite of the rush of deluging rain slanting down like waterspouts on to the earth. Chief, councillors, captive, populace, can hardly see each other as they raise their heads, which they have bent, appalled beneath the crashing thunder-note of heaven. The blinding flood pours down upon them, lashing up the ground into a very torrent of liquid mud, as again that frightful peal shakes the earth, and the gleam of a fiery sea is in their eyes. No other thought have they for the moment than that of refuge from the fury of the storm. The prisoner is dragged into a hut, and, in a moment, not a single human form is to be seen in the open, while the terrific thunderclaps peal forth, and the lightning gleams blue upon the rush of water now flowing several inches deep over the soaked ashes of the fire which, but for this timely interference, would even now be devouring Claverton’s limbs.

The hideous sport of these barbarians must even be deferred till morning, for not another stick or straw will be induced by any power on earth to light as the deluging rain still beats down upon the earth in unabated fury—nor can the people stand out in such weather to witness it, and this is of the very essence of the performance.

So there in the dark, stuffy Kafir hut, securely bound, jealously watched, and the last hope of deliverance fled, lies Arthur Claverton; beyond all reach of his friends; cast off by her of whose love he was more certain than of his own life; his hated rival triumphant and secure from his just vengeance; and he only awaiting the morrow to be dragged forth, in the prime of life, to suffer a slow and lingering death among unheard-of tortures in order to make sport for a crowd of brutal savages. Truly his lot is a hopeless one indeed.

Note 1. An institution similar to the good old custom of “witch finding,” among ourselves.

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty Three.

“A Life for a Life.”

When a man knows that the first light of dawn will see him led forth to a lingering death by torture, he is not likely to pass a very tranquil night, be he never so courageous or philosophical. Claverton exemplified both of these attributes to the full; yet as he lay there, thinking upon his position, even his fearless spirit sank within him.

To begin with, there was not the shadow of a chance of escape. He was firmly secured with strong and well-tried *reims*—a detail to which his captors, warned by the Mopela episode, had given their extra attention—and two stalwart Kafirs, fully armed, mounted guard over him by relays, one lying across the door of the hut. Not a muscle could he move, not ever so slightly could he shift his wearisome position, but their eyes were upon him, as they sat chatting in their deep bass tones; but carefully avoiding any subject likely to interest their charge.

And he? He looked upon himself as dead already. His guards started and gazed at him watchfully, handling their weapons, as he ground his teeth audibly in the fury begotten of his reflections. Their task was not a congenial one, for in their superstitions souls, hatred of a powerful enemy was strongly dashed with a touch of secret awe. They had witnessed what hid befallen Mopela, then the terrific storm breaking over them all at the very moment when they were about to sacrifice the prisoner, and now they were by no means easy in their minds, shut up at such close quarters with such a formidable foe, even though he was bound, and helpless as a log. The rain swept down in sheets outside, and the wind howled in furious gusts; within sat the prisoner and his savage sentinels, the latter huddled in their blankets and talking drowsily.

Yes. At last Claverton felt that he must yield to Fate. Fortune had befriended him for long, but now it had forsaken him. Many a trifling incident, little thought of at the time, now seemed fraught with direful omen. Lilian’s forebodings of ill, followed by the reappearance of the hated rival; the unusually devoted leave-taking of his faithful follower; but what weighed him down most was the loss of the steel locket—the “charm,” to which scarcely less than the savages he attached a superstitious importance—as symbolising the constant protecting presence of his adored love with him in all danger. And now even this amulet had been taken from him, simultaneously with the love—the guiding star of his life—which it symbolised; well might the incident presage his doom, for life was of no further value to him.

Then an intense craving came over his soul once more to behold the tenderly-loved face, to hear the soothing tones of that voice; and with the grave yawning to receive him, Claverton would have bartered his salvation a dozen times over for one momentary glance of her who represented his all—his world—his Heaven—his God. And ever upon the thatch beat the monotonous fall of the rain, and in the dead silent night floated a weird cry from the lonely bush, answered by the occasional yelp of a half-starved cur prowling among the silent huts—and the prisoner slept. Slept, but rested not, for his mind was wide awake. Now he was talking with Lilian, as of old at Seringa Vale, when all their future was wrapped in apprehensive uncertainty. Now he sat with her in the garden at Fountains Gap, and the birds sang around, and overhead the sky was one fair expanse of unclouded blue, even as the golden dawn of perfect and uninterrupted love opening its flowery pathway before them. Now it was that sweet sad parting in the grey, chill morning—and lo, he stood within a lonely valley, and his pistol was pointing at the heart of a man who stood before him—a man with an awful expression of rage, and terror, and despair upon his features—and the face was that of Ralph Truscott. Ah, so real! Then he awoke. It was morning, and his time had come. Other voices were mingled with those of his guards, and a chill blast of air came in at the open door of the hut, which was what had aroused him. But it was far from morning, for outside all was still dark and silent, save for the ceaseless patter of the rain.

“Good; we will go,” the sentinels were saying in response to one of the new arrivals. “We are tired of sitting here in the dark, watching this white wizard; but it will soon be day, and then we shall get some rare fun out of him,” and with a grunt of farewell the two Kafirs, huddling their blankets about them, crawled through the diminutive door and made off in search of more congenial quarters.

For some time after the sound of their retreating footsteps had ceased, the relief guards kept almost complete silence. The prisoner could hear them settling themselves down with a word or two of remark, and every now and then the rattle of their assegais on the ground beside them, but the circumstance mattered nothing to him. His guards had been changed—that was all. But after a while one of the said worthies, opening a little of the wicker-work door, bent his ear to the aperture, and appeared to be listening intently. Then he softly closed it and whispered:

“Lenzimbi!”

In spite of himself, Claverton could not restrain a start. He did not recognise the voice, but the whole action had been suspicions to a degree. Surely he was dreaming.

“Whaow!” exclaimed one of the Kafirs in a brutal tone. “This is poor work. Let’s amuse ourselves a little with the cursed white dog!” and the speaker struck a match and proceeded to light his pipe, and, with a start of amazement, Claverton recognised the rugged, massive features of Xuvani, the ex-cattle-herd of Seringa Vale.

Hardly able to believe his eyes, he stared again and again; but there the old man was, his face distinctly visible as he pressed down the tobacco with his middle finger, blowing out great clouds of smoke from his thick, bearded lips. The discovery, however, brought Claverton no hope. Yielding to the combination of circumstances, he had long pitched that article overboard, as he told himself, and watched it sink, and now the sooner the whole ship went after it the better. And then, like lightning, there flashed upon his recollection the words: “*The future is uncertain, and we never know what turn events may take, and that if ever at any time he or Tambusa can render you a service they will do so, even should it be at the risk of their lives—a life for a life*.” How well he remembered Hicks translating the old cattle-herd’s speech—that day long ago in the sunny garden at Seringa Vale—and how little importance he had attached to the Kafir’s professions of gratitude! He had not believed in them then, nor did he now in the gloomy night of his abandonment and downfall. Gratitude! No. The word was not in the Kafir vocabulary, he thought, in bitter scorn, as again the brutal, mocking tones of the old savage fell upon his ear.

But along with them—covered by them, as it were—came that whisper again.

“It may be that Lenzimbi will watch the sun arise from among the tents of his people.”

“Who speaks?” whispered Claverton, quickly.

“A friend. Tambusa.”

“Ah!”

For a moment he could not speak—could scarcely think. His nerves had been terribly strained within the last forty-eight hours; and now the rush of blood to his head, the sudden overpowering revulsion of hope, succeeding the black, outer gloom of despair, would have been dangerous to the very reason of one less philosophically endowed. Life—liberty—revenge, and after that—love! He dared not think of it. Yet it was within his grasp once more. These two were about to redeem their promise. They would save him yet.

He had not seen them before, for the simple reason that they had only arrived at the kraal after he had been thrown into the hut; and then by the merest chance. And now, like the bright warming sunshine let into a cold dungeon which had never known daylight, came that friendly whisper through the darkness.

“I am ready,” he replied. “Just slip off these bits of *reimpje*, Tambusa; and give me an assegai and a stick or something, and start me outside, and then if ever these devils get hold of me again, why, they’re welcome to.”

“Not yet, ’Nkos, not yet,” whispered the young Kafir. “Too soon, too soon; there are still some of them awake. Leave it to us.”

What a lifetime now was every moment to the prisoner! Each rain-drop seemed to fall with a crash like thunder; every sound was to his fevered impatience as the beat of footsteps coming to rend from him for ever this one last chance. The old man still sat by the door, occasionally growling out curses upon the dog of a white wizard, and wishing it was morning that they might begin their horrid work; but this the captive knew now to be only a blind. Hours—weeks—years—seemed to roll by in that terrible suspense; in reality it was scarcely more than half an hour.

At length some one touched him in the darkness, and this time it was Xuvani who spoke.

“Don’t rise, Lenzimbi. Make the blood circulate, but do it quietly. Don’t move from your place until I tell you,” and, dexterously feeling his way, the old man, in a couple of slashes, cut through the prisoner’s bonds.

“Ah, that’s better,” whispered Claverton, stretching his limbs, which had been terribly cramped, so securely had they bound him. “But I say, Xuvani, there’s a poor devil of a preacher shut up here somewhere. Couldn’t we bring him out, too?”

"Do I owe the *Umfundisi* anything?" was the cold reply. "Lenzimbi shall go free, but I would not stir an arm to save a townfull of these black-coated preachers. If this white man is a real prophet, his God will save him; if not, the Gaikas may do what they please with him—I care not."

Now, I am aware that by all the laws of romance Claverton should have absolutely refused to accept his own deliverance rather than desert a countryman, whoever he might be. But, even at the risk of his irretrievably losing the reader's good opinion, the fact must be recorded that not only did no such wild idea enter his head for a moment, but that he there and then dismissed all thought of his companion in adversity from his mind. What was this cowardly, egotistical, "shoppy" preacher to him? He had never seen him before they had picked him up in the bush, and certainly had no great wish ever to see him again. If it had been Hicks or Armitage, or any of his old comrades, even Allen, the case would have been vastly different; but to sacrifice himself, Lilian, everything, for such as this—no, not he.

"Xuvani," he suddenly exclaimed. "Where is the 'charm' that was taken from me to-day? I cannot leave that behind."

"Whaow! It is lost," replied the old Kafir, a little impatiently. "Stand up, now, and roll yourself in that blanket, for it is time to start."

But Claverton did not move. A queer freak had taken possession of him. He might never see Lilian again; he was not going to leave her image here among the savages—that image which he had worn upon his heart throughout so many perils and trials. It was of no use accepting life. No wonder his would-be deliverer stood and muttered impatiently that he must be mad. Here was a man with a frightful death by torture awaiting him in a few hours, and who, instead of availing himself of the proffered deliverance without loss of time, refused to move because he had lost a trinket. The experience of the savage had never held anything so curious as this.

"We are losing time, we are losing time," he muttered. "Are you so very tired of life, Lenzimbi?"

"Yes—almost," and he made no sign of moving. "Ah!—"

Something had suddenly been thrust into his hand. He grasped it. It was the steel locket.

"Now I am ready," he exclaimed, springing up. "Luck is ours again; my star has risen," and, pressing the trinket to his lips, he put it away in its usual place next his heart.

"Ha! Lenzimbi is sane again," remarked the old Kafir. "Now roll that blanket well round your neck and head, and keep your chin sunk into it or the hair will betray you. Don't speak—not one word—but keep close behind me, without so much as looking up. We shall pass for two of the Gaikas going on a scouting expedition."

With what a feeling of relief did Claverton draw in deep breaths of the cool night air, so grateful after the stuffy, ill-smelling atmosphere of the hut! What a thrill ran through him as he grasped the pair of heavy ironwood sticks which were put into his hand, and felt himself once more a free man and to a certain extent armed! It was past midnight, and still raining steadily, but the night was not a dark one, owing to the moon, which was completely veiled by the thick, unbroken curtain of cloud—indeed, not dark enough, as both of them thought, with a quick glance upward. The huts stood around, half seen through the dim light, and Claverton could make out a black patch on the ground where had been the fire, and the place where the chiefs and councillors had sat in judgment upon him. A cur, half aroused, began to bark as they made their way through the silent kraal, bringing Claverton's heart into his mouth as he strode along, close behind his guide. He had rolled the blanket well round his shoulders, and his head was adorned with an old battered felt hat, the brim being drawn down over his ears; and now imitating the long, elastic stride of the natives, and also their way of carrying their kerries, he would very well pass in the darkness for one of them, all muffled up as he was after the manner of a Kafir obliged to travel on a cold or wet night.

Soon the huts were left behind and they had gained the lonely bush. So dark was it beneath the overshadowing trees that Claverton could hardly keep up with his guide as they threaded the wet, slippery path, plunging deeper and deeper into the gloom; but not for worlds would he diminish the pace, every swift step bringing him nearer to liberty and all that it involved. Branches flying back swept his face, drenching him in an icy shower, *wacht-am-bietje* thorns seized his garments and tore his flesh, but not for a moment would he delay. On, on—ever on—on, through that wet, dank, jungly wilderness, whose lonely terrors were to this escaped captive as the fairest of surroundings. Once a great owl dropped down in their faces, gliding along on noiseless wing uttering its unearthly hoot. Strange, mysterious rustlings in the brake on either side, and the patter of feet, betrayed that the beasts of the forest were abroad; the weird, cat-like cry of a panther echoed from a gloomy pile of towering rocks overhanging their path, and, afar, the ravening howl of the great striped hyaena blended in dismal cadence with the chorus of nocturnal voices, which from time to time startled the deathly stillness of those wilds, meet abode of savage creatures, and men even yet more savage. And the rain fell with its ceaseless drip, drip, drip.

"Why, where is Tambusa?" suddenly exclaimed Claverton, looking behind. "I thought he was with us."

"Silence!"

He obeyed, and subsided once more into his own thoughts. At length it began to lighten perceptibly. They had travelled for nearly four hours now, and travelled with marvellous directness, almost every inch of the ground being known to the experienced Kafir. Wooded heights, deep defiles, frowning krantzes, were all passed with a rapidity which astonished even Claverton, who would hardly have believed it possible to make such way on foot. Suddenly, and without turning his head, his guide breathed one single word, drowning it immediately in a slight cough.

"Caution."

Not by word or look did Claverton betray that he had heard; but his grasp tightened round the handles of his kerries, and lo, starting out of the gloom so suddenly and so noiselessly that they might have started out of air, five Kafirs, fully armed, stood in the path before them.

A hurried conversation took place, Claverton every now and then putting in a grunt of assent with the rest, in true native fashion. Xuvani did all the talking.

“We are carrying the ‘word’ of the Great Chief,” he said, making a step forward. “We must not delay.”

“What is the matter with your relation?” asked one of the five, Xuvani having thus categorised his charge for the time being.

“He has been shot through the cheeks, and the cold must be kept from the wound,” was the reply. By nature an intensely suspicious animal, the Kafir was peering distrustfully at Claverton, whose bronzed complexion, however, aided by the shade of the ragged hat, looked as dark as their own in the incipient dawn. But the very presence of Xuvani, whose valour and fidelity had been abundantly proved, disarmed further suspicion, and, without another word, the strangers disappeared as quickly as they had come, and the pair resumed their way.

“Do you think they will have discovered the joke, Xuvani?” asked Claverton at length, referring to his escape.

“The rain is good; it will have washed out our tracks,” replied the other. “It is unfortunate that we should have met with those men just now.”

“Did they suspect?”

Xuvani shrugged his shoulders. “In war-time every one suspects.”

“They’ll be roasting that poor devil of a preacher instead of me, I’m afraid, up yonder.”

But Xuvani was not of this opinion. The councillors always liked to stand well with the missionaries, he said, and this one would probably be released. Besides, there were plenty of mission-station men among the Gaikas—Dukwana, for instance, who was a real preacher himself, and several others—who would be sure to find an opportunity of letting the missionary go; which piece of information would have set at rest any misgivings Claverton might have had upon the subject, though, in truth, he had none, simply not having given it a thought until that moment. As for Xuvani, that unregenerate old heathen, though he understood and practised the virtue of gratitude so well, yet it was patent that the sacrifice of a hecatomb of missionaries would have inspired him with no compunction whatever.

“Do you remember giving water to a wounded man after the burning of the Great Place in Gcaleka-land, and watching over him while the Fingo dogs went by?” suddenly inquired Xuvani.

“Yes.”

“That was Tambusa.”

Claverton whistled.

“What on earth was he doing up there?”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes, it was,” he said. “Whaow! Lenzimbi. You must be a wizard, indeed,” went on the old man, when he had listened to the recital of Claverton’s miraculous escape over the cliff, and his subsequent capture. “That storm must have been brought up on purpose for you, for nothing in the world else could have saved your life when the chief gave the word for them to burn you. And, even as it is, I could not have saved you—I and Tambusa—if you had not blinded the eyes of that dog Mopela. If he had known I was about he would have smelt the game and rendered it impossible. Now he is half-dead himself.”

It was indeed miraculous, thought Claverton. He had been brought through this with a purpose. The web of Fate was nearly woven.

“Xuvani?” he said. “You have saved my life, and a great deal more this day. Now, be advised by me. Leave this business, you and Tambusa, and go away quietly into the colony until it is all over. You are bound to come to grief if you remain in it. Then, when things are ship-shape again, you shall see what my gratitude is.”

“*We* have paid our debt,” replied the old Kafir. “Lenzimbi was always open-handed. Some day we will come and ask him for a few cows to give us milk, when all our cattle have been taken. If we come into the colony now, Government will hang us for having fought.”

“Not a bit of it. At most you would get a few months’ imprisonment, and, perhaps, I could obtain a free pardon for you. Then we will talk about this day, and you will be none the worse off for it. You know me—that is enough.”

The rain had ceased and the clouds were parting, and now, through the widening patch of blue firmament, the rising sun began to dart his warming beams upon the saturated earth, and all the joyous freshness of early morning was around. A few days earlier, and what exultation would have thrilled around this man’s heart, snatched as he had been from a horrible death, and restored to a world of light, and joy, and gladness; but now he had a task on hand which precluded any such thought—the accomplishment of his fell purpose of vengeance. After that—well, the future must take care of itself.

“Look!” exclaimed Xuvani, pointing to a column of smoke arising from a hollow about three miles off. “There are your people. Now go. You are safe.”

“Come with me, Xuvani,” urged Claverton, earnestly. “Not a soul shall harm you, I pledge you my life. I shall be better able to repay you, then—and—”

His words were cut short by an interruption as sudden as it was alarming. A volley of six or eight shots in rapid succession was poured into them, and several yellow faces simultaneously came into view, peering from behind the bushes to mark the effect. Fortunately the bullets whizzed harmlessly overhead and around, though perilously near.

“Cease firing, men,” thundered Claverton, throwing off his native disguise and standing erect and commanding. The well-known voice had a magic effect. With a shout of delight the astonished Hottentots, disregarding all dangers—past, present, and to come—leaped from their cover and crowded round their former leader; for it was into the midst of his old levy that Claverton had walked.

“Allamagtig, Kaptyn!” cried old Spielmann—his erewhile favourite sergeant. “Why, how did you manage to get away? We thought those devils of Kafirs must have roasted you,” and the old fellow’s wrinkled parchment face was puckered up like that of a monkey, as he grinned from ear to ear in his delight, and the others were none the less loud in their expressions of gratulation. Meanwhile, Claverton looked around for Xuvani, but he looked in vain. The Kafir had disappeared.

“Where’s the other nigger?” cried a loud, harsh voice behind them. “What the devil were you fellows about to let him escape? After him—directly. Bruintjes—Spielmann! Damn it—don’t stand staring at me! Do as I tell you—d’you hear?”

Claverton turned—and stood face to face with Ralph Truscott.

“At last!” he said, with a cool, sneering smile. “At last. Twice we have met before. The third time’s lucky.”

The other started and changed colour visibly.

“Who the hell are you, sir?” he exclaimed, in a loud, arrogant tone. “Better be a little more civil, I can tell you!”

“Oh, you know me well enough,” was the answer. “Well enough to estimate me at the value of about one hundred pounds. Not very much, is it?” Truscott turned ashy white.

“Bah?” he cried, insultingly. “I think I do, and I think I know where the shoe pinches. Now be advised, my good fellow, and cry off that bargain. It isn’t for you, I tell you. I was in the field long before you were; I’m in it now, and in it I intend to remain—by God!”

There was a quick, panther-like movement, a spring, and a half-smothered imprecation, and Truscott staggered back half-a-dozen paces, reeling beneath two straight-out hits from Claverton’s clenched fists. With an awful execration, something between a yell and the roar of a wild animal, he recovered himself, and, with his livid features working violently, dashed at his assailant. He was the taller and heavier man of the two, as well as the stronger, but he had lived hard, whereas the other was in splendid order—quick, supple, keen of eye, and dangerously cool, notwithstanding his deadly wrath. Half blinded by his own rage, like an infuriated bull, Truscott rushed upon his adversary, drawing, as he did so, his revolver from the holster hung upon his side. But before he could bring it to bear it was struck violently from his grasp, with a blow of the heavy Kafir stick, and, quick as lightning, that terrible “one—two,” straight from the shoulder, met him in his onward rush, and this time stretched him, half stunned, upon the ground.

“Coward, as well as liar, thief, and murderer!” exclaimed Claverton, his voice shaking with suppressed fury, as he thought of all the ruin wrought by his foe’s unscrupulous malice. “I suppose even you would like to settle this as soon as possible. You know where to find me. I’ll be ready at any time.”

“Shoot him. Do you hear? Shoot him down! Fifty pounds to the man who shoots him dead!” foamed Truscott, raising himself, half-dazed, upon his elbow. “Do you hear, men, God damn you, or are you all in a state of mutiny?”

Claverton laughed coldly.

“I don’t imagine any of them will lay themselves out to earn the money,” he said. “They are not quite such fools as their leader. But I repeat, Captain Truscott, that you will know where to find me, unless you prefer to let well alone, that is, and console yourself with thinking over the thrashing you’ve just had.”

“Wait, my fine fellow,” replied the other, between his set teeth. “I’ll riddle that carcase of yours for this morning’s business. I used to be able to shoot pretty straight, I can tell you.”

“Yes? Glad to hear it. We’ll have some tall practice presently. Till then—so long!” and, with a mocking nod, Claverton turned and walked away in the direction of the camp, while the Hottentots, who had stood aloof, awe-stricken witnesses of this unexpected and stirring incident, hastened to raise their discomfited chief. Their sympathies, however, were all with the enemy; for Truscott, since he had had the command of Claverton’s old corps, had rendered himself exceedingly unpopular—as much so, in fact, as its former leader had been the reverse; and now—though by reason of their ignorance of the English tongue they failed to understand what the row had been about—they mightily but secretly rejoiced over its issue.

Great and terrible was the hubbub which prevailed in the temporary kraal of the Gaika chief as soon as it became known that the white prisoner had disappeared. And the circumstances which led to this discovery were as follows.

Obedient to the instructions of his uncle, Tambusa had not stirred from the hut which had constituted Claverton’s prison-house, so as to allow the two to get clear off without running the risk of exciting alarm. At length, towards morning, the young Kafir began to think he might fairly take steps to ensure his own safety. Accordingly he stole forth from the hut—not quickly, and of set purpose, but with apparent reluctance and rubbing his eyes as if he had just woke up—this in case any prying glance should be watching his movements. All was still, though there was just a sign of the coming dawn discernible in the east, and with his blanket over his shoulder and his assegais in his hand, Tambusa walked swiftly through the group of huts in the direction of the bush, when, as ill-luck would have it, he was hailed, and by one of the men who had been mounting guard over the prisoner the night before.

“Where are you going to?” asked this man.

“Oh, I shall come back in a moment.”

“I’ll just go and look at the prisoner till you do, then,” was the reply. “He oughtn’t to be left in the charge of only one man.”

“No, don’t do that,” promptly rejoined Tambusa, whose heart sank within him. “Xuvani is there, and he’ll be very angry with me. He doesn’t know I’ve gone out.”

“Never mind. He won’t hurt you,” said the other. “I’ll tell him I met you,” and he walked straight towards the hut. Could it be that his suspicions were aroused? Was there something in Tambusa’s mien that betrayed him? Anyhow, the latter’s safety now would depend on the use he could make of the very brief start allowed him by the time his interlocutor would take to reach the hut—that, and no more.

Opening the door, the man bent down and looked in.

“Xuvani!” he called.

No answer. Perfect stillness. Not even the regular breathing of a sleeping man broke the silence. For a moment the savage shrunk from entering, his superstitious soul fearing the spells of this redoubted white sorcerer. Then his loud cry of alarm roused the sleeping kraal. Dark forms came hurrying out of their huts, half expecting to find themselves attacked by the enemy; but quickly grasping the cause of alarm they gathered round their countryman.

“The white man—the prisoner! Where is he?” was heard on all sides.

Quickly one of the Kafirs made his way through the crowd, a box of matches in his hand. Striking one, he peered into the gloomy interior of the hut. It was empty.

“Treachery, treachery!” he shouted. “The prisoner has disappeared!” and the cry was taken up by the crowd, which glared inquiringly around, as if in search of some trace by which to follow the fugitive.

“Where is Tambusa?” cried the man who had first raised the alarm. “He is the traitor—he has released the white man—he was here a moment ago—where is he now?”

He might well ask. Tambusa, it may be readily supposed, had lost no time in following the prisoner’s example. He, too, had disappeared.

Then again the wild, thrilling cry of alarm rang out through the forest. It fell upon the ear of the devoted young Kafir, straining every nerve to make the most of that brief start, and it seemed to peal forth his doom. There was no lack of spoor to guide them in their pursuit of him, his fresh footmarks in the muddy soil were only too apparent to all; and away started two score of fierce warriors upon his track. The fugitive, husbanding his strength, dashes along at a swift, easy run, intending to gain the white man’s camp. There at any rate he will be safe; but he knows full well the fate in store for him should he fall into the hands of his fierce countrymen, for has he not just been guilty of what in their eyes is an act of treason of the blackest dye? On, on; the young warrior is lithe and agile, and in splendid training, and it may be that he will distance his pursuers yet. But those horrid whoops are resounding from many a hill-top, and with fatal effect, for the attention of the five Kafirs whom Xuvani and his charge met not long since, is attracted thereby, and, with the quick suspicion of their race, they put two and two together. So, as poor Tambusa comes flying down the narrow bush-path, five dark forms spring up panther-like in front of him, effectually barring his progress. On either side is the thick tangled bush, almost impenetrable. He is lost; the pursuers are advancing rapidly upon his rear, and his road is barred. Disregarding the warning voices of those in front of him, the hapless youth bounds off the track and plunges into the tangled thorny brake. He is on a rock; below and in front of him lies a deep, stony ravine all overhung with trailers, a tiny stream trickling down its funnel-like depths. Ha! It is his last and only chance. But at that moment two reports ring out through the forest. With a groan poor Tambusa sways, and then topples heavily forward into the bed of the rivulet ten feet beneath; and his fierce pursuers rushing up, find only a corpse. He has escaped the most terrible side of their ruthless vengeance, to wit, hours of frightful torture; but he has lost his life—rather has he given it devotedly in exchange for that of the man who has twice already saved it.

So there he lies, this young hero—a naked savage, but a hero for all that—dead among the ferns and rocks beneath the mass of foliage and trailing creepers, which the sun’s rays can scarcely penetrate, slain by his own countrymen. He has given his life in satisfaction of the debt incurred and the promise made long ago—given it in exchange for that of his benefactor—“a life for a life.”

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty Four.

Vae Victis!

Great was the astonishment in camp when the man who had been given up as hopelessly missing, and whom everybody by this time had come to think of as dead, turned up safe and sound. Jaded and worn out, however, he sought his tent at once, excusing himself from receiving the hearty congratulations of his friends until after the sleep of which he stood so sorely in need.

Waking at last he opened his eyes, with a start, upon the genial countenance of the Irish doctor.

“Hallo, McShane!”

“An’ what the divil have ye been up to now, Claverton?” began that worthy, without any further ceremony. “Here ye’ve managed to get off bein’ made mincemeat of by the niggurs, and, not content with that, ye must get to punching a fellow’s head, and now he wants to have a shot at ye, av course.”

“Does he?” said Claverton, drily.

“He does.”

“H’m! Well, sit down and have a pipe, McShane, and we’ll talk it quietly over.”

“Ah! that sounds better,” said the good-natured Irishman, in a tone of relief, for he was hoping that the affair might admit of a settlement. “See here, now—what’s it all about? Truscott wants to parade you, and sent me to arrange matters, and that’s about the size of it. Now who acts for you?”

“No one.”

“No one? Well, then, I suppose you’ll shake hands together, and say you’re both made fools of yourselves,” said McShane, brightening up.

“You’re quite wrong, McShane. I’m going to give your friend the fullest satisfaction—when, where, and as soon as he pleases,” and the look in the speaker’s eyes caused the Irishman’s hopes to fall to the ground. “When I said no one acted for me, I meant it. I’m going to act for myself, or better still, you can act for both.”

“Och! an’ it’s balderdash ye’re talkin’,” rejoined the other, angrily. “How the divil can I be second to both? Bedad, an’ who ever heard of such a thing! I’D have nothing to say to it, I tell ye.”

“Well, then, you see, McShane, it’ll amount to this—that we shall go out without any seconds at all; which will probably mean that the first of us who catches sight of the other will blaze away; for I don’t trust our friend any more than I do Sandili himself. *I’m* quite ready, however; but I don’t intend to run any other fellow’s head into this business. Who is there, for instance? Brathwaite—family man; Hicks, ditto; and so on. Poor Jack might have done, but he’s passed on his cheque. No; as you have agreed to act for the other fellow, well and good; I’m quite satisfied. But, I tell you, there’s no one I can rely upon.” And lighting his pipe he passed the match to his companion, with a hand as steady as a rock.

For a long time McShane was firm. He would have nothing to do with so preposterous an arrangement—it wasn’t fair to him—and so on. But, eventually, seeing that they were determined to fight, and would probably do more mischief if left to themselves, he reluctantly agreed to act. They were a couple of fools, he thought; and would wing each other, perhaps; but on any graver contingency the light-hearted Irishman never reckoned.

“That’s all right, McShane,” said Claverton. “I shall leave everything to you, as far as your man is concerned, and if there’s any advantage to be had it shall be yours.”

Then they arranged that the affair should come off that same night towards ten o’clock, in a lonely glen at a safe distance from the camp, and known to both of them. But, to avoid suspicion, they agreed to leave the camp at different times, and to ride in different directions.

“I tell you what it is, Claverton, this fellow’s a damned good shot,” said McShane, as he got up to leave.

“Is he? All the better—for him. But how d’you know?”

“He says so.”

“Oh! I see. H’m! Brag’s a good dog. He shall have every advantage, as I said before. Well—till this evening.”

McShane went out, sorely puzzled, and heartily wishing he was out of it. In a moment of impulsive good-nature he had consented to act for Truscott when mad with rage. That worthy had given his own version of what had occurred, and besought his good offices; and then, being a thorough Irishman, there was a subtle spell hanging about a row in any shape that was altogether too potent for him, and Truscott happened to be an old schoolfellow of his, though he, McShane, had never liked him much, nor did he now. And if he had cherished any hopes of talking Claverton over, they were scattered now. There was a deadly purpose in the latter’s speech and manner, all the more so because so quiet. No; things must take their chance.

Left to himself, Claverton sat for a few minutes in silent rumination. Then he got up, and, opening a chest, took out a polished wooden case and unlocked it, disclosing a revolver. It was a beautifully-finished weapon, small, but carrying a bullet of the regulation calibre, and on a silver plate let into the ebony handle were graven the initials “H.S.”

“Poor Spalding!” he murmured. “You were going to cut the knot of your difficulties with this little article once, and so am I, but in a different way.”

He scrutinised the weapon narrowly, clicking the lock two or three times, and taking imaginary aim.

The poise was perfect.

* * *

How calm and peaceful rides the silver-wheeled chariot of night! How tranquil, in their mysterious distance, shine the golden stars, darting a twinkling glance down into this still, out-of-the-world hollow, where not even the chirp of an insect or the rustle of a disturbed leaf breaks the absolute hush of the night! On the one hand a wall of jagged rock rises to a serrated ridge, standing out sharp and clear; on the other, the sprays of the clustering foliage are photographed in shining distinctness. Above, in a towering background, a great mountain peak rears itself, dim and misty, enflooded in the slumbrous moonlight. A scene of eternal beauty—a holy calm as of another world!

But, lo! Standing within the shade of the thick foliage is the figure of a man—erect, motionless, as though petrified. For nearly an hour has he maintained his immovable attitude; and now a suspicion of a start runs through his frame. He is listening intently, for the ring of a bit and the tramp of hoofs becomes audible. It is one of those nights when the most distant of sounds would seem to be even at one’s elbow; and now this sound draws nearer and nearer, and, in addition, a word or two in smothered tones. The listener’s face wears a ruthless look as two horsemen enter the glade and, reining in, peer cautiously around.

“Perhaps our valiant friend is going to cry off,” sneered one of them.

“Cry off? The divil a bit!” was the reply. “Claverton’s all there, I can tell ye. He’ll turn up in a minute.”

“Thank you, McShane,” struck in a voice, in the same low, cautious tone, as the watcher glided from his concealment.

“Och! there ye are! Now, we’d better get to business at once. First of all, we’d better lave the horses here close at hand in case we should want them.”

This was done, the three steeds being fastened securely to a small mimosa tree.

“I say, you fellows,” said the kindly Irish doctor, “is it determined to go through with it you are? Bedad, and hadn’t you better shake hands, and go straight home and have a brew o’ punch together? Faith, an’ it’s better than riddlin’ each other with lead.”

“My dear McShane, what on earth will you propose next?” said Claverton, while Truscott’s face, glowering with rage in the moonlight, was answer enough on his part.

“Ah, well I see it’s blood-lettin’ ye mane. Now ye’ll just both o’ ye sign this bit o’ paper. It’s meself that would rather be out of it. A duel with only one second! Why, it’s like an election with only one candidate—he gets kicked by both sides and thanked by neither, bedad.”

The “bit of paper” in question set forth that Dennis McShane acted in the matter at the joint request of both parties, and it was a precaution which he had deemed advisable to take in case the transaction should terminate disastrously, or at any future time be brought to light—or both. Without a word each affixed his signature, and then Dennis proceeded to pace out the ground. The duel was to be fought with six-shooters, the first three shots at twenty-five, and the rest at twenty paces.

“Now ye’d better look at each other’s pistols, as there’s no one to do it for ye,” he said.

What was it that made Truscott start and turn a shade whiter, and nearly let his adversary’s weapon fall as he took it into his hand to examine it? We have said that it was a beautifully-finished weapon, with a silver plate let into the handle, and on this, standing out distinctly in the moonlight, were the initials “H.S.” And Claverton, narrowly watching his enemy’s countenance, noted this effect and wondered not a little. These formalities over, the doctor proceeded to reload the weapons, which were both of the same calibre. Then he placed the combatants, twenty-five paces apart, taking scrupulous care that each should enjoy an equal proportion of advantage from the moonlight.

Truscott, to do him justice, was no coward. He had come there fully determined to slay his adversary if he could; and as for his own share of the risk, why, that must be left to the fortune of war. But, when his eye fell upon those initials, something very like a shiver ran through him. There was something portentous in the sight of this relic of the past rising up as it were in judgment upon him, here in this lonely nook, away at the other side of the world. There was no mistaking the weapon, he knew it only too well, for he had handled it often. It was the identical one. He would have gone so far as to object to it; but what valid reason could he give, seeing that in size and calibre it was an exact facsimile of his own? No; things must take their chance. But he felt greatly unhinged, for all that.

Claverton, on the other hand, was untroubled by any misgiving whatever.

Stay. What is that black object crouching high up on the cliff? It is alive, for it might have been seen to move had the trio beneath been less intent upon their errand of blood. Only a stray baboon wandering among the ledges of the rocks.

“Now,” said McShane, withdrawing to a safe distance. “Be careful not to fire till I count three. Every shot must be signalled. Now, are you ready?”

No cloud veiled the unbroken calm of the starry heavens. The silver moon looked silently down, flooding hill and dale in her pale, clear light, shining like chastened noontide upon that sequestered hollow and the strip of open glade in the centre, where stood two men pointing their weapons at each other’s hearts. It will soon shine upon a ghastly stream of ebbing life-blood, crimsoning out upon the dewy turf. One of those two men must die here. Which will it be?

“One—Two—Three!”

A double report, but sounding like a single one, so simultaneous is the effect. A dull, thundrous echo rolls sullenly along the face of the overhanging cliff. The smoke lifts slowly, and there is a sickly, sulphurous smell mingling with the cool, fresh air. Both men are standing motionless, waiting for the second signal. As yet both are unhurt; Truscott heard his adversary's ball whiz very close past his right ear, but his own shot was wider.

Again the signal is given. This time it is Truscott's left ear which feels the close proximity of the lead; and but for the fact of his own bullet ploughing up the ground some forty yards off, he might as well have fired with blank cartridge for all the apparent effect. His wrath is terrible, and blazes forth in his livid, distorted countenance and staring eyes. He can see that the other is a dead shot, and is, as yet, merely playing with him. And mingling with his wrath is a chilling misgiving; and as he stands fronting his opponent's pitiless eyes, he is almost unnerved. Fury, hate, and even despair, are stamped upon his features; the perspiration lies in beads upon his forehead, for he feels that opposite to him stands his executioner. Claverton, on the other hand, is dangerously cool, and his eyes gleam with a deadly purpose. It is a scene of horror, this drama being enacted in the moonlit glade.

The dark object overhead has disappeared from the cliff.

"Be jabers, but ye'd better knock off now," exclaims the Irishman, in grave, serious tones. "The shots make the very divil of a row, echoing among the rocks. We shall have a patrol down on us directly, or a host of niggurs, an' I don't know which'd be the worst."

"Has he had enough?" asks Claverton, in a cold, contemptuous tone, turning his head slightly towards the speaker.

An imprecation is the only reply the other vouchsafes, and again they exchange shots. Truscott, who is quite off his head, blinded by his helpless rage, blazes away wildly. But he feels his adversary's ball graze his right ear, exactly as the first had done, and his adversary's face wears a cold, sinister smile.

Three shots have been fired. The next three will be at a shorter range.

"Haven't you two fellows peppered each other enough?" asks McShane. "Well, if ye will go on ye must," he adds, receiving no reply. "It's at twenty yards now."

The distance is measured, and again the two men stand facing each other. Claverton, watching his enemy's features, can see them working strangely in the moonlight, and knows that he would give all he has in the world to be safe out of it. In other words, he detects unmistakable signs of fear; but it does not move him, his determination is fixed. He will shoot his adversary dead. He has, as Truscott rightly conjectured, been playing with him hitherto, and also with the desire to allow him every chance, but the next shot shall tell. He will have no mercy on this double-dyed traitor, who has sneaked in treacherously in his absence, and placed a barrier between him and his love.

No, he will not spare him. This time he will shoot him dead; and Truscott reads his doom in the other's eyes, as once more, with the distance diminished between them, they stand awaiting the signal.

"One—T—!"

A terrific crash bursts from the brow of the overhanging height, and Truscott, with a spasmodic leap, falls backward, as the red jets of flame issue forth, to the number of a score, from the rifles of the concealed savages. Claverton feels a hard, numbing knock on the left shoulder, as he and the doctor rush to the side of the fallen man.

"Truscott, man, where are you hit?" is the letter's hurried inquiry; but as he lifts the other's head he is answered, for it lies a dead weight in his hand. A dark stain is oozing forth upon the moonlit sward, welling from a great jagged wound. The "pot-leg" has gone clean through Truscott's heart; and now, as McShane lays down his head, the glazed eyes are turned upwards to the sky, and the swarthy face is livid with the dews of death.

"He's dead as a door-nail, bedad," said the doctor. "And it's ourselves that'd better be lavin', and that mighty quick, or we'll get plugged, too." Even while he spoke the leaden messengers were whizzing about them with a vicious "pit—pit!"

Truscott, as he had said, was dead as a door-nail, and it was clearly useless to remain. And now came in their foresight in keeping their horses close at hand. Loosening the terrified animals, which were snorting and tagging wildly at their bridles, they mounted and dashed off at a gallop just as a number of dark forms issued swiftly and stealthily from the bush to cut off their retreat, while the enemy on the cliff kept up a continuous fire. Two or three assegais were thrown at them; and then the Kafirs, who could now be descried pouring down the rocks in swarms, seeing that they were well mounted, and the ground ahead was fairly clear, relinquished the pursuit.

"An' didn't I tell ye that we should have the niggurs down upon us?" cried McShane, turning in his saddle to look back at the peril they had so narrowly escaped. "That poor divil's lost his number anyhow, and it's glory be to the blessed saints that we're not lyin' alongside of him."

"I rather think I'm hit, too. My arm feels as if it was going to drop off," said Claverton, quietly. But he was deadly pale.

"Hit! are ye?" rejoined McShane, with an anxious glance at him. "Well, hold up till we get back to camp. It may not be very bad after all. Is it in the shoulder?"

"Yes, I think it's only a spent ball. The bone isn't touched."

"Faith, and ye'd better have knocked off and come away when I first spoke. That poor divil would be alive and well now."

Claverton turned to him in amazement.

“My dear McShane, what *do* you suppose I came out here for to-night?” he said, with a sinister laugh. “Not to play, did you?”

“Well, it’s lucky Jack Kafir took the throuble off your hands, me boy, or it’s on your way to the Orange River ye’d have to be now, and meself, too, likely enough. As it is it’ll be murdherin’ awkward.”

“Why?”

“Well, what possesses three fellows to go riding off into the *veldt* at night—eh? An’ then when the row ye had this morning comes to lake out, sure won’t they be puttin’ two and two together, anyway?”

“Nothing can be proved, and if it could, I don’t care. Who’s to prove that there was any exchange of shots, at all; and there’s no mistake about that pot-leg that rid the earth of the greatest blackguard it ever held being *not* a revolver ballet,” replied Claverton, in a hard, pitiless tone.

“There’s a good deal in that,” assented the other.

It was nearly midnight when they reached the camp, and the news spread like wildfire that Truscott had been shot by the Kafirs, the other two barely escaping; and before long some one appended the rider that Claverton was mortally wounded in trying to rescue him, which report reaching that worthy’s ears, he received it with a sardonic grin, and said nothing. And by a curious piece of luck, the row between the two had not got wind, the spectators of it, terrible gossips by nature, fearing consequences to themselves should it become known that they had stood calmly looking on while their officer got a thrashing, deemed it wise to hold their peace.

“Half an inch more, me boy, and ye’d likely as not have lost an arm,” said McShane, as he bound up a jagged and furrowed wound just below Claverton’s shoulder. “It’s nothing to spake of now, as long as ye keep quiet; but if ye don’t thur’ll be the divil to pay.”

The operation finished the patient turned in, and slept a heavy, dreamless sleep for thirteen hours.

In the morning a party was despatched to bring in Truscott’s body. It told its own tale; for in addition to being horribly cut about, after the time-honoured custom of the noble savage, the wound which had caused his death gaped wide and ghastly, bearing witness, as his late enemy had said, that it had been inflicted by no revolver bullet, even if the bit of pot-leg, which resembled the slug from an elephant gnu, had not been found. Everything belonging to the unfortunate man had been carried off—his horse, arms, and ammunition, even most of his clothing—indeed, when the expedition saw the spoors of the Kafirs all about the spot, the only wonder existing in their minds was that the other two had managed to escape. So far good; and it was not until long after that the faintest rumour of a duel having taken place began to leak out.

Meanwhile, we will return to another personage whom we have lost sight of for a space, our friend Sharkey, to wit, who, almost immediately upon Claverton’s return to camp, had been reported missing, the general impression being that he had deserted, and, as men could not be spared just then, no search was made for him. But for once that interesting individual had been maligned. It happened that morning that the attention of a patrol returning to camp was attracted by the sight of a cloud of *aasvogels* hovering above the bush. More of the great carrion birds rose, flapping their huge white pinions and soaring leisurely away, and then the reason of the gathering was made plain. There, in the long grass, half devoured by these hideous scavengers, lay the remains of the missing man, Vargas Smith, *alias* Sharkey, *soi-disant* Cuban gentleman, late corporal in Truscott’s Levy. Though the body was horribly torn, yet it was evident that the man had met his death from a couple of assegai wounds, one of which must have pierced his heart.

And this is how it came about. When Xuvani, having safely conducted his charge within the lines of the latter’s own people—a service which the people aforesaid repaid by opening fire upon both of them, as we have seen—he disappeared; that is to say, he dodged down behind the bushes, and half running, half crawling, rapidly made good his retreat. And he would have made it good, but for the fact that one man had caught sight of his manoeuvres and was determined he should not. This was our friend Sharkey, who was on the extreme outskirts of the column, and who, anxious to have the fun all to himself, started off at a run to take up a position in a certain narrow place through which he judged—and judged rightly—that the Kafir would be almost certain to pass; when he could shoot him at his leisure.

But alas for the uncertainty of human calculations. The ex-cattle-herd of Seringa Vale was far too old a bird to be caught in any such trap as this—moreover, he had obtained just one glimpse of his enemy running through the bush to waylay him, and his eyes glared as he broke into a short, silent laugh of contempt. Meanwhile, Sharkey, having ensconced himself in a snug corner, waited and listened, gun in hand, ready to give his quarry the contents of a heavy charge of buckshot in the back as he ran past. But somehow the said quarry didn’t appear, and the watcher began to grow uneasy. Slowly and cautiously he put out his head. Then, immediately above him, sounded a fiendish chuckle which curdled his blood, and before he had time to turn, much less bring his gun to bear, the Kafir sprang upon him like a tiger-cat and, quick as lightning, with two strokes of his powerful arm stabbed him twice through the heart. The mulatto fell, stone dead, with scarce a groan, and Xuvani, wrenching off his ammunition-belt and picking up his gun, which lay in the grass, trotted away with a sardonic grin upon his rugged features. He had done a first-rate stroke of business; slain a foe, and possessed himself of a fairly good fire-arm and some ammunition—the acme of a Kafir’s desire.

Thus by an unaccountable turn in the wheel of Fate, the two conspirators met their deaths on the same day; and both, moreover, through the indirect agency of the very man against whose life they had conspired.

When Claverton opened his eyes on awaking from his heavy sleep, they met those of George Payne, who was sitting opposite him, watching him intently.

“Hallo, George! What brings you up here? Oh-h!”

For he had forgotten his wounded shoulder, and, starting up suddenly on that elbow, an agonised groan was the result.

“To look after you—and you seem rather to want it,” replied the other, gravely.

Claverton lay back for a minute with closed eyes, and in racking pain; for he was more seriously hurt than the good-natured doctor would have had him believe. No compunction entered his mind as his thoughts recurred to the affair of last night. Why should it? he reasoned. They had met in fair fight, and he had certainly given the other every chance. If any one tried to rob him of his life, all the world would hold him justified in defending it to the uttermost. This man had tried to rob him of what he valued ten times more than his life, so he had been more than justified in defending that to the uttermost. And the agglomeration of frightful perils through which he had just passed, were indirectly owing to this man’s agency. Moreover, when all was said and done, *he* had not shot him. He had intended to, certainly, but the Kafirs had saved him the trouble and the risk by shooting him instead, by shooting them both, in fact; for all the world like in the case of two small boys indulging in fisticuffs, and a fond parent or stern preceptor staying hostilities by impartially cuffing the pair of them. And, when viewed in this light, the affair struck him as so comical, that he burst into a laugh.

There was a queer look in Payne’s eyes as he rose, and, going outside, intently studied the weather for a moment, apparently, that is, for, in reality, he wanted to make sure of not being heard—and then returned.

“How did the affair go off?” he asked, shortly.

“Haven’t you heard?”

“Yes. That Irish fellow told me a yarn about your being attacked; but it won’t wash, you know,” and he winked.

“Fact—upon my oath!”

“And you didn’t do for friend R.T.?”

“Devil a bit! I meant to; but the niggers were too sharp for us. They winged me into the bargain, as you see.”

“Then *he* didn’t pink you?”

“Confound it, no. The niggers did. It’s about the queerest thing, I suppose, that ever happened.”

“It is,” assented Payne, lighting his pipe.

Claverton could see that the other only half believed him, but he didn’t care.

Payne smoked on in silence for a few moments. He appeared to be intently contemplating a chip of wood which lay on the floor, and which he was poking at with a riding-crop. At length he said:

“Have you any idea what brought me here?”

“H’m. A horse, most probably.”

“You’re a sharp fellow, Arthur Claverton,” said Payne, deliberately. “Now don’t you go and act like a fool. Mark my words. Unless you want to be the death of a certain young lady—I mean it, mind,” and his voice sank to a great seriousness, “for that cursed telegram was nearly the death of her—the sooner you get on a horse and go and exhibit your ornamental visage in my town establishment, the better. Now don’t be a fool—d’you hear?”

The advice seemed needed, for at that moment Claverton gained at a bound the door of the tent, where he stood bellowing for Sam.

“Blazes! I’m forgetting. He isn’t here. What can we do?” he said, helplessly.

“But he is here,” was the imperturbable reply, and simultaneously that faithful servitor entered, grinning with delight at seeing his master again, and firing off a tremendous congratulation in the Zulu tongue. His master cut him ruthlessly short, however.

“Sam, take that bit of paper,” tossing him a fragment, on which he had hastily pencilled a few words, “and ride as if the devil were chevvying you, till you pull up at the telegraph office in ‘King.’ Now off you go. The road’s quite safe, isn’t it? Can’t help it if it isn’t. Take my horse and start at once, and wait there till I join you.”

“Yeh bo, ’Nkos!” said the obedient Sam. His heart was in his errand, for he well knew the destination of the message he was to send.

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty Five.

A Voice out of the Past.

“Safe.”

Only one little word of four letters, and yet to Lilian Strange it seems just all the difference between death and life; and the great spidery characters in which that one little word is scribbled across the slip of red-brown paper which she holds in her trembling hand, are fairer in her eyes than the most tasteful of gold-engrossed illumination. At times, during the last few days, she has marvelled at the bare possibility of existence under the circumstances; and now, this morning, as she gazes upon the contents of the telegram which has just been handed to her, and which she has hardly had strength enough to open, so awful the apprehension of what it might disclose—the relief is almost too great.

"*Safe*."

Only one word, but it is from himself; his own hand penned that message, which in its brevity is worth to her a column of detail at second hand. The colour comes and goes in her ashy face, and she sinks into a chair, faint and giddy beneath the shock. He is safe, and she will see him again. But then flashes in the thought of that other barrier—Truscott and his fatal knowledge. Was it not in this man's power to part them again? Ah, surely not. Whatever dreadful mystery there is, she feels sure somehow that it will be cleared up. She will see him again—her one heart's love—whom she sent forth to a cruel death. She will explain all, and he will forgive her—though it is the second time she has driven him from her—yes, she knows that, even if that last hurried note, which he had sent back to her on the eve of his awful peril, and which is now all blurred from the tears which have rained upon it—that last precious relic—had not been what it was.

And Annie Payne, entering at this moment—having the while been at the back of the house, where she could neither see nor hear the telegraph boy—started and stared in amazement, for Lilian broke into a radiant smile as she held out the despatch, and then burst into a flood of happy, grateful tears.

"There, Lilian darling. Didn't I tell you while there was life there was hope? And now you'll see that everything will come right," said her warm-hearted friend, going over to kiss her. And then out of sheer sympathy, she began to cry, too.

"Please, missis," said the Hottentot servant-girl, bursting into the room in great trepidation, "there's a lady at the gate who's very ill. She seems hardly able to stand."

"Goodness gracious!" cried kind-hearted Annie Payne. "Who can she be? We must get her in—Come, Lilian!"

The sun beat fiercely down into the wide dusty street, which was silent and deserted in the broiling forenoon. Not a soul was visible, save one. Leaning unsteadily against the garden railings, as if for support, stood a figure clothed in black conventual garb.

"Why, Lilian, it's a nun," whispered Annie Payne. Then aloud, as they reached the stranger's side: "Now, do please come in at once and have a good long rest, and a glass of wine. The heat has been too much for you. Here, take my arm. No, don't try and talk yet."

The nun looked up with a faint smile, at the kindly, impulsive tones.

"You are very good," she began, speaking with a foreign accent. "The sun is so hot, but I shall soon be better."

"Of course you will," was the cheery reply; and in a moment the sufferer found herself on a comfortable sofa in a cool, half-darkened room, so refreshing after the glare of the street, while her hostess and Lilian set to work to administer restoratives.

Their charge was a striking-looking woman, still quite young. Of foreign aspect, her face, though deathly pale, was very handsome, and lighted by a pair of large dark eyes. An uncommon face withal, and one which interested her entertainers keenly.

"Who is she, Lilian?" whispered Annie Payne, hurriedly beckoning the other from the room. "Roman Catholic, or one of your High Church Sisters? You know all about that sort of thing."

"She must be from the convent. There are no Anglican Sisters here. Besides, she's foreign, evidently."

They returned to the nun, who, professing herself quite restored by her short rest, declared she must return home.

"Not to be thought of, for some hours at least," replied her hostess, decisively. "You have narrowly escaped a sunstroke as it is. I'll send round to the convent immediately, and let them know you're here, and that I'm not going to allow you to move before the evening. At least, I'll go myself, that'll be better than sending. Lilian, take her to your room, it's quieter there, and away from the children's noise, and make her lie down for at least three hours. By the way, I was nearly forgetting. Who shall I say?"

"I am known as Sister Cecilia. God will bless you for your kindness to me, and—"

"There, there, you are not well enough to talk," interrupted Annie, with good-humoured brusqueness, as she hurried away to prepare for her errand.

Of a certainty the sufferer could have been left in no better hands, and just then such a work of mercy was doubly grateful to Lilian, whose own hopes had been so miraculously fulfilled. Her charge having sunk into a deep, refreshing sleep, Lilian moved noiselessly to a seat in the window, and there, with her eyes fixed upon the outside world, she let her busy thoughts have free scope. Something in the stillness of the day took her memory back to that fatal afternoon when Truscott had come in and dashed the cup of happiness from her lips. She remembered the terrible shock the discovery of his reappearance had been, and then the ruthless manner in which he had seared her heartstrings as with a red-hot iron, and a reaction overtook her. If there was anything in his knowledge, why, his terrible threats were all-powerful for evil still. Yet her lover's life was safe for the present. He had been snatched almost miraculously from the cruel hands of his savage enemies. Let her be thankful for that, at any rate. Perhaps Heaven might be even yet more merciful to her—to them both—and the other dark mystery might be cleared up. Ah, that only it would!

For a couple of hours her reverie had run on, when a sudden ejaculation and a few words, muttered hurriedly in a foreign language sounding like Spanish or Italian, recalled her.

"Are you feeling better, Sister?" she began, softly, rising at once, and going over to her charge.

The latter hardly seemed to hear. With gaze set and rigid, her attention was fixed on something opposite the bed, and Lilian noticed that her lips were livid and trembling.

"Who is that?" she gasped. "Am I dreaming? What is he—to you?"

Lilian's face flushed softly, as she followed the other's glance. It was riveted on two lifelike cabinet portraits of her lover, which stood framed upon the table.

"What is Lidwell to you?" went on the sufferer, half raising herself, while her burning eyes sought Lilian's with a feverish glow. "Ah, I see—I need not ask. But where is he? Here? *No*—not here!"

It was now Lilian's turn to grow deathly pale. She pressed her hand to her heart to still its beatings, and felt as if she must faint. Lidwell! Only once before had she heard that name—only from one other. Who was this woman, and what did she know? There must be truth in Truscott's sinister allegations, then. Better to know the whole truth, whatever it might he, than walk blindfold any longer. Her impulse found vent in a despairing cry.

"Oh, Sister, I am in sore trouble. For the love of the good God, whom you are vowed to serve, tell me all you know about him you call Lidwell."

The nun lay back for a moment as if to recover her self-command. Then she said in a firmer tone, but hurriedly, and with a foreign accent:

"If I tell you all I know about him, I need only tell you that you are the happiest woman in the whole world."

"But he is in great danger. He has an enemy; a ruthless, unscrupulous enemy who is determined on his ruin—to take his life even."

"Who is this enemy? What is his name?" asked the nun, with awakening interest.

"Truscott—Ralph Truscott."

"I never heard of him. He is an Englishman. I do not know any Englishman that knew Lidwell. But now tell me—how does this Truscott threaten him? Tell me all—then I can possibly help you. Do not fear, I shall keep your secret as closely as the grave. I am dead to the world, remember."

Lilian needed no further persuasion. She poured forth the whole of her woeful and heart-breaking story into this stranger's ear; the first, in fact, to hear it. At one point in her narrative the listener's pale face flushed, and her eyes burned, but mastering herself, she preserved her impassibility to the end.

"You did well indeed to tell me all," she said, when Lilian ceased. "It was indeed the finger of Heaven that directed me here to-day. The man, Truscott, has told you infamous lies, and his threats are powerless. He cannot harm your lover, about whom at that time no one knows more than I. But—guess. Who do you think I am—or was?"

A light seemed to dawn upon Lilian, but the other anticipated her.

"Before I entered religion my name was Anita de Castro."

Lilian was too overcome to make any reply. The nun continued:

"As I said, I am dead to the world, and such matters can hurt me little now; but the man need not have slandered my poor name. It is perfectly above slander, thanks to Lidwell. I tell you he was the saving of me. I dare not think of what and where I should be now but for his influence and the remembrance of him. My father was taken prisoner, with three others, by a British vessel, and hanged, and I was adrift in Zanzibar without a friend. I need not have been an hour destitute of mere creature necessaries; but that influence saved me. For *you* will understand me when I tell you how I loved him; yet he never cared for me. He liked me as a something to amuse him—a plaything—a child—but no more."

She paused, and Lilian sat holding her hand, but did not interrupt.

"Your lover is safe," went on Sister Cecilia. "All that was told you is untrue. He never fought against the English flag, or against any one but the tribes in the far interior. The affair with the *Sea Foam* took place a year before he came among us; I remember it well. And now tell me about this spy of Truscott's. What was he like?"

Lilian remembered the man only too well, and described him minutely.

"I know him. He was shot by Lidwell in self-defence, and left as dead. He reappeared again, though, but after Lidwell had fled—to save his own life, for there was a plot to murder him. The man Truscott must have got the whole story from this other man, for neither of them have the slightest idea of my whereabouts. I only arrived here the day before yesterday, and to-morrow I am to leave with three others to join a mission in the Transvaal."

Her quick Southern nature enabled her to master the whole plot at a glance. Truscott was a bold player at the game of intrigue, she thought; for to throw in her own name in the way he had done was a skilful stroke indeed.

"To think that I should be held as a sword over Lidwell," she went on; "I, who would not harm a hair of his head, even if I had, as that slanderer said, anything to revenge, which I have not—quite the reverse. But show me the portrait. I shall never see *him* again; nor do I wish to—I have done with such desires. Yes, it is a splendid likeness; I can look at it calmly now. And, listen! He was as a demigod in that horrible slave settlement. I do not know why he came there, but many and many a time has he mitigated the sufferings of those poor tortured creatures, often at the risk of his life. At last, when he was obliged to fly, I helped him to get away. I, all unaided, delayed his murderers many hours, and enabled him to get safely beyond their reach. I do not boast; it is only that the recollection is sweet to dwell on. And now listen," interrupting Lilian's fervent utterance of admiration and gratitude. "His last words to me were these: 'You are made for something better than this kind of life; leave it as soon as you are able.' Then I hurried him away, for I heard them coming. He left that horrible place for ever, and I—well, I only prayed that I might die. But I lived—lived that I might remember those last words, and obey them to the letter."

Lilian was crying. There was something inexpressibly touching in the narrative to which she listened; to her something grandly heroic in the way in which this girl—for the ageing effects of her Southern nationality and conventual dress notwithstanding, she was little more than a girl—had shunned the ease and luxury of evil to devote her whole life to the fulfilment of the last injunction of one whom she would never see again. This, too, was the daughter of a slave-dealer—reared among ruffians—whose father had met a felon's death. And this protecting influence which had hallowed another's pathway, was that of her own lover.

"You have, indeed, obeyed them," she said at length. "And you are happy now, Sister?"

"Perfectly. The Church has been a true mother to me. But—you are of the Faith, are you not?"

"I hope so, although there are slight differences between our Churches; slight, but rendered greater than they need be," answered Lilian, gently.

"Ah, I thought you belonged to us. Some day, perhaps, you may be vouchsafed more light—you and he. And now, you say he has another name—not Lidwell. What is it?"

"His real name is Arthur Claverton. I never heard of the other name until—the time I told you of."

"Whatever his real name is, its owner has always been in my prayers. Now I shall add yours. What is it?"

Lilian told her.

"It is a pretty name, and suits you well. And you—you are worthy of him, and will make him happy. God keep you both!"

"Ah, Sister, you have, indeed, come among us as an angel unawares!" exclaimed Lilian. "But a few days sooner, and so many days of frightful anguish might have been spared us."

"I rejoice that I have been the poor means of restoring your happiness—*his* happiness. Still it may be that even those few days of suffering to which you refer, are for some wise purpose—for the good of you both. And now tell me something more about him; I can think of him with a clear conscience, for I have found my vocation. I could even meet him again, but it is better not; and by to-morrow at this time, I shall be far away. And you—you will tell him that I obeyed his last injunction, will you not? He will, perhaps, like to know that."

Lilian fervently promised to do this. She would even have suggested a meeting between them; but, apart from the other's vocation, she was in ignorance as to how the rule of her order bore upon a matter of the kind, and was shy to urge it. And the two women sat and talked long and earnestly of him whose presence should make the life of one, and whose memory had protected and hallowed that of the other, until the sound of Annie Payne's voice in the next room, in converse with a stranger, reminded them that time was flying rather rapidly, for it was nearly evening.

The stranger was a nun from the convent, who had come to look after the invalid and to see her safe home—a cheery, bright-mannered Irishwoman, who was profuse in her appreciation of the care they had taken of her colleague. Then they took their leave.

"You have brought perfect peace to one in this house, at any rate, Sister," said Lilian, as she bade her charge farewell.

"Peace be upon all within it—and especially upon you," murmured the other, tenderly returning her embrace. And Lilian, too happy for words, stood watching them depart homewards. All was clear and bright before her now, and how unexpectedly it had all come about!

But surprises were not at an end for that day. While the two ladies were still talking over their late guest, the tri-weekly newspaper was left at the door, and in it a telegraphic slip containing the tidings of Truscott's death. Just a bare statement of the fact that he had been shot by the Kafirs, and would be buried that day. No details of any kind.

Lilian was thunderstruck. All the agony which he had inflicted on her there in that very room; the cruel voice gloating over her fears while vowing vengeance on him she loved; the brutal words decreeing their separation, as fiend-like he mocked at her despair; all rose up before her now. Then she shuddered, for was she not perilously near rejoicing over a fellow-creature's death?

"It's very shocking, isn't it?" she said, in awestruck tones.

"Yes, dear, it is. But in war-time, you know, we must expect these dreadful things to happen. Oh dear—oh dear—but I wish it was all over and we were at peace again. Shall we ever be? And now there's George must needs go racketing off to the front, and—" She stopped in dire confusion, remembering the cause of her spouse's speedy departure. But Lilian's arms were around her neck.

"Dear Annie. It was very good and noble of him to go, and I for one owe him a debt which I can never repay."

"Not a bit of it, Lilian," was the cheery reply, though the speaker did half turn away her head to conceal a tear. "Don't you think anything of the sort. The rascal would have gone anyhow, for he was tired of staying quietly at home. You remember what he said the other day when he didn't know I was by. He only made a pretext of poor Arthur's predicament, for you'll see that now he's got him out of it he won't come back—no, not for the next two months."

"Indeed!" said a third voice, making them both start as if they had been shot.

A man stood in the doorway, contemplating them with a satirical grin.

"Goodness gracious!" cried Annie, with a little shriek. "Why, it's George himself."

"Well, and what if it is?" retorted that worthy, quizzically, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the door-post. "Mayn't a fellow walk into his own house, or rather into old Sievers'—infernal old skinflint that he is—hasn't had that chimney put right yet!" And thus, characteristically, George Payne effected his return to the bosom of his family as if he had never left that desirable ark.

"Oh, George, how I maligned you!" cried his wife, penitently. "I made sure you wouldn't be back for a couple of months at least. Once up there I thought you'd stay, and go getting yourself assegaied most likely."

"Sorry to disappoint you, my dear. But, the fact is, Johnny Kafir's beginning to have about enough, and is skulking away in the Perie; when he hasn't surrendered already, as is the case up Queenstown way. Brathwaite's men are all talking of coming back soon, and—"

"Pa, where's my Kafir assegai?" cried Harry, bursting into the room.

"Eh, what—where's your—? In the bush, sonny. Never mind, though. You shall have a stack of them soon, but not those that have been shied at me," replied Payne, passing his hand over the curly head of his first-born. "That's how the rising generation welcomes its paternal ancestor returning from the wars—asks for scalps the first thing. Well, Miss Lilian," he continued, in his bantering way, "I told you to keep your spirits up, and that all would come right, didn't I; and it about has. Come along, Annie; we'll leave her to make it lively for that chap who sends me on to prepare the way before him, and then doesn't give me half time to do it." Lilian followed his glance. A man was dismounting at the gate, in hot haste. She needed no second glance to assure her of his identity.

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty Six.

In Peace.

Surely we have stood upon this spot before.

But the drooping boughs of the old pear-tree afford no shade now to those two persons seated on the rustic bench beneath—being leafless. For it is mid-winter; yet the sky is a glory of unclouded blue above the rolling landscape and dark forests, and the white and dazzling shroud upon the distant mountains.

Not only have we stood upon this spot before; but we have stood here—though unseen—in company with these two identical persons. One of them now wears one arm in a sling, and looks like a man lately recovered from a desperate illness. We will draw near—still unseen—and hear what they are talking about.

"Now, Arthur, I declare I saw you shiver," exclaimed a bright, playful voice, which sounded very like that of Lilian Strange. "That won't do, sir—Didn't the doctor say you were to take enormous care of yourself for a long time to come—the English of which is that I am to do it for you—and I'm going to begin by buttoning up your overcoat, for it's anything but warm to-day, although the sun is so bright. That's done," continued she, with a joyous laugh. "Now for the letters."

"Bother the letters. They can slide."

"Can they? Business can slide, eh? And I'm sure one of them looked like a regular 'dun,' or a lawyer's letter at least, in its big, blue envelope. That won't do, my dear. You've got a termagant to deal with, I can tell you. Besides, when all's said and done, sir, they're *my* letters, so out with them."

She dived her hand into the pocket of his overcoat, and produced two missives. The post had just arrived as they were starting for their stroll; but Lilian, reluctant to let in thoughts of the outside world upon this their first visit to all the dear old places, had deferred investigating the contents.

"Yours, are they?" said Claverton, when he had recovered from the shout of laughter which her idea of a "termagant" had evoked. "Let me set you right on that head. They're mine, now, at all events. What's yours is mine—what's mine's my own. Eh?"

"But, look—they're addressed to me. Look! 'Miss Strange,' 'Miss Lilian Strange,'" cried she, triumphantly, with her bright, witching laugh. "What do you say to that?"

"That young party has ceased to exist, I tell you; so, in the logical sequence of events, we ought to return those to the Dead Letter Office. What do you say to that, Mrs Arthur Claverton?"

"This is from that dear Annie Payne," she went on, not heeding him, as she extracted a closely-written and crossed sheet from its cover.

"Wants a microscope to read. We haven't got one here—*ergo*, it can stand over," he rejoined. "Why, Lilian; what on earth's the matter?"

For she had opened the blue envelope last of all, and her face wore a very curious expression indeed, as she mastered its contents—a little surprise and a great deal of amusement. It was a lawyer's letter, even as she had conjectured, and it informed her, in dry, concise phraseology, that she was entitled to the sum of nine thousand pounds under the will of her distant cousin, "my late esteemed client, Mr Herbert Spalding," which bequest reverted to her, being forfeited by the present legatee, Mr Arthur Claverton, that gentleman having failed to observe the conditions under which he enjoyed the legacy, etcetera, etcetera. The writer begged to know her wishes in respect of this bequest, and remained her obedient servant, Robert Smythe.

Blank astonishment was the only feeling Claverton was sensible of as he sat staring at the bit of paper which she had put into his hand. He had written to the lawyer on the day of his marriage, as a matter of course, renouncing all further claim to the bequest, and sending in all the necessary papers; as nearly three years were wanting to the time when it should be his irrevocably; and had expected to hear nothing more about the matter, beyond a brief acknowledgment. It was a nuisance, of course, being docked of about half his means, but he had quite enough left to go on with; and weighed in the balance of recent events this one was a mere trifle. And, now, the legacy had simply reverted to his wife. But how the deuce had it come about—that was the question?

"Good God!" was all he could ejaculate.

"Don't be profane, sir," retorted Lilian, with such a merry peal of laughter. "Why don't you congratulate me on my good fortune?"

"Eh—what? Hang it, this beats me. I don't understand it at all!"

"Don't you? Well, then, poor Herbert Spalding was my cousin—a very distant one—and I hardly knew much about him. He was very pleasant and kind, though, the little I did see of him at Dynevard Chase; but at the last he seems to have had the bad taste to prefer you to me. Undue influence, sir, undue influence—isn't that what the lawyers call it?" concluded she, in a playfully reproachful tone.

"For Heaven's sake don't joke about it, Lilian," he interrupted, in a pained voice. "For it amounts to this, that I have simply been robbing you all these years—robbing you—you, whom I would have given the last drop of my heart's blood to shield from a single want. All this time, while you have been fighting a hard battle alone and unaided, I have been literally robbing you of your own. Good Heavens! the very idea is enough to make a fellow cut his throat."

"You were not robbing me of anything of the sort. Don't be absurd, you dear old goose! But, darling, you don't know how pleased I am that you should take this from me now, even though it is like giving you back what belongs to you," she added, lovingly.

"But, upon my soul, I don't understand it yet," he repeated, amazedly. "Who on earth was that old parson who came badgering me one morning? I thought *he* was the next in reversion."

"'That old parson,' as you so disrespectfully term my dear old uncle, George Wainwright, went to you on *my* behalf, Arthur," she answered, with a smile. "I tried to prevent him, but he would go. He failed, for you stuck to it like a leech," she concluded, with a merry laugh.

"Heavens! Of course I thought he was speaking for himself. He never mentioned you."

"Didn't he? That's so like Uncle George! And when I asked him who you were, he had forgotten your name. Said it was Clinton, or something like that."

"But, Lilian, is this the first you've heard of the rights of the affair? Didn't you ever suspect anything?"

A soft smile stole over her face. "I did once," she replied, "long ago—here. Something Mrs Brathwaite was telling us about you gave me a sort of an inkling."

"Oh, but this is simply dreadful! How could I have any idea how things stood? I never saw the will, and never heard the name of the next in reversion. 'A distant relative' was all that old Smythe said. But I'll write to the parson, Mr—what's his name?—Wainwright, and get him to tell you all that passed between us. I'll—"

"I'm afraid not. Poor Uncle George died four years ago," she answered. "But, darling, don't take things to heart like this. I only see it in an amusing light. Isn't it a queer chapter of coincidences?"

"Good God!"

"Don't be profane," she repeated. "And if you don't want to make me quite unhappy, you will think no more of this odd little coincidence, Arthur dearest. I declare I mean it. And then, isn't it best, after all? Why, nothing now can rid me of the knowledge that it was entirely for myself, and myself alone, just as I stood, that you threw away that dear, foolish heart of yours." And she gave him such a look of tenderness, and love, and trust, that he caught her to him with all the passionate love of the old yearning, hopeless days.

"My Lilian, nothing can rid *me* of the knowledge that I have robbed you all this time; and how am I to pass it off so lightly?" he whispered, in a broken voice. "My darling, you see it was impossible that I could have known—do you not?"

"Why, of course. How should you have? But isn't it the most amusing of coincidences! Come now, you are to own that it is. We women are supposed to be deficient in a sense of humour; but, I declare, in this instance I am proving the rule by making an exception to it, while you are not keeping up the credit of your lordly sex. Do you hear that, sir?" she went on, in a tone of soft banter that was very bewitching. Her great happiness had completely changed Lilian. The longing sadness in the sweet, lustrous eyes had given way to a calm peace that was infinitely beautiful, and a sunny, gladsome smile had taken the place of that former tinge of melancholy which had always been upon her, even at the brightest of times. No cloud was in her sky now. The lurid curtain of war had lifted, and though still upon the horizon, daily receded—rolling back farther and farther. The Past might be put away, as the golden Future disclosed in bright, fair vista.

Yes. The war was at an end, now—or nearly so—for the wretched insurgents, broken-spirited, half-starving, and thoroughly sick of fighting, were flocking in daily to surrender themselves at the different frontier posts. The gaols were crowded with red-blanketed, forlorn-looking beings, squatting about in sullen apathy, their chief speculation—next to the interest of their daily rations—being whether *Ihuvuménte* (the Government) would be very hard on them, when they should be placed in the dock in batches, at the approaching special Circuit, and called upon to answer to the charge of having "wrongfully, unlawfully, and maliciously taken up arms and waged war against our Sovereign Lady, the Queen, etcetera, etcetera," of which exalted personage most of them had but a very hazy idea. The insurgent leaders had either been captured or slain, and in the latter category was the fate of Sandili, the Great Chief of the house of Gaika, who was shot by a party of Fingoes during his flight; and when his body was found some days afterwards in the Perie Forest, behold, it was partially eaten by wild animals. So the fate which his captive had predicted, when condemned to the torture and to death, to the old chief, was fulfilled to the very letter. His two sons, Gonya and Matanzima, together with Gungubele, Umfanta, Tini Macomo, and other rebel leaders, were also in gaol, awaiting their trial for high treason (Note 1), and altogether the war had come to about as ignominious an end as was possible.

Jim Brathwaite was at home again; his corps, which had done such good service, having been disbanded. Indeed, nothing remained to be done. A few forlorn bands of insurgents were still under arms; but these clung so pertinaciously to the wildest and most inaccessible tracts of country—a region of holes, and caves, and dense tangled bush—that the work of hunting them out was left to the Police and native levies, aided by that powerful ally, starvation. So troop after troop of burghers and volunteers left the field, and soon there were signs of re-occupying the long-deserted farms in Kaffraria and upon the immediate line of hostilities; for the savage enemy had lain down his arms, and the prospect was that of a speedy return to the ways of peace.

Jim Brathwaite is at home again, and there is quite a gathering of our old friends at Seringa Vale on this first occasion of their meeting together since the war. And how they fight their battles all over again, for, needless to say, the conversation turns wholly upon the doings of the colonial forces in general, and upon the exploits of that doughty corps, Brathwaite's Horse, in particular. Some growling, too, is heard. Time has to be made up for. Things have gone more or less to the deuce during the period our friends have all been away at the front, which period, with the exception of a brief interval, covers the best part of a year. In fact, campaigning has been an undertaking of neither pleasure nor profit. Stay—as to the pleasure. The jolly, sunburnt visage of our friend Hicks, yonder, has lost none of its brimming contentment. Indeed, its owner has been heard to say, that he, for one, would be quite ready for another bout of Kafir-shooting as soon as convenient—a remark which obtains for him an angry scowl from his right-hand neighbour, Thorman, who growls resentfully that "the sooner fellows shut up talking that sort of damned bosh, the sooner the country will settle down to its legitimate business again." A sentiment which, though ungraciously expressed, contains a strong element of truth; for, undoubtedly, the irregular, happy-go-lucky, jolly good fellowship of camp-life, and the glorious uncertainty of war, is not without a somewhat demoralising influence on the energies of the colonial youth in the more prosaic run of workaday life—to which it must now return. But Hicks is young yet, and brimful of animal spirits. His losses during the outbreak have been but slight; and now he is back among his old friends, after having seen some real good service. And opposite him sits his wife—quiet, gentle-looking as ever—for whom he has abated not one jot of his old adoration; for Laura, in spite of her reserve and apparent self-obliteration, has a shrewd, sensible little head of her own, and manages her lord completely, he being just the fellow who requires management—and Hicks is as happy as a king. So, with a laugh, he tells Thorman to shut up, for a jolly old growler, as he is, "and always was, by Jove!" and to let a fellow have his say now that they are all festive together again, and to knock up a sort of grin himself, for once in his life, if he can.

Naylor, too, is there, quieter and staider, but full of dry "chaff," which he every now and then turns on one or other of the party. His hair and large beard are beginning to show streaks of grey; but, then, as he says, a fellow ceases to be a chicken at some time in his life, and he, for instance, is growing a fine crop of "prime whites." Which ostrich-feather witticism so tickles his son and heir, Tom—a well-grown, sturdy boy of fifteen—that he bursts into a fit of immoderate mirth, necessitating his sudden retreat from the room.

As for Allen, he has not changed in any single particular, but, having shown that there was good stuff in him, underlying his external eccentricity, he has gone up several pegs in the estimation of his friends; and now that poor Jack Armitage is no longer at his side, he enjoys a kind of immunity from chaff, for even Naylor leaves him in peace, failing the more merciless wag to arouse the spirit of emulation, and to keep the ball rolling.

There sits Will Jeffreys, not much more happy-looking than of yore. He is doing by no means badly in the world, for he has five waggons on the road—transport-riding is paying well just now—and owns two flourishing and well-stocked farms left him by his father, who has gone the way of all flesh. But his saturnine temperament remains pretty much as it was, and Claverton has a bet on, of considerable magnitude, with Mrs Jim Brathwaite that, in a year hence, Jeffreys will have attained greater proficiency in the art of scowling than even Thorman.

But serious thoughts will intrude upon the mirth and great cordiality present in the gathering. The hand of Death has been laid upon the familiar circle since last we saw it here assembled, and well-loved faces have dropped out of it, never to be beheld again on earth. Jim Brathwaite—jovial, light-hearted, and popular in the best sense of the word—reigns at Seringa Vale now; but in two hearts especially to-day lingers a very warm and loving remembrance of the dear old couple whose kindly, genial presence ere while made sunshine in that room.

And the grisly war-god, too, had exacted his tribute even from that small circle, and poor Jack Armitage, that best of good comrades, would no more enliven them with his quizzical countenance and reckless, boyish love of fun. Even Allen sadly missed his erewhile tormentor, and thought his immunity from chaff and practical jokes dearly purchased. But the dead man lies in his lonely grave away in savage Kafirland, and his young widow weeps for him, and his old comrades think of him with an affectionate, but shadowed regret. Poor Jack!

When the good fellowship and general cordiality is at its height, Hicks is suddenly inspired with an idea that some speech-making would very appropriately mark the occasion, which idea he communicates to Jim; but he is overruled, on the ground that “the women would be safe to turn on the hose” if anything of that kind were started, which would inevitably put a damper on the prevailing good spirits; while Thorman, who has overheard him on the other side, remarks, with a contemptuous growl, “that Hicks, of all people, on his legs, speechifying, would remind him of nothing so much as a damned bear jumping up at an apple tied to a string, because he’d be trying to catch at something that wouldn’t come—he would, by so and so, and so and so.” A statement, however, which in no wise disturbed the exuberant good-humour of the subject thereof.

Meanwhile, behind the cattle-kraal are seated, in close confab, two other personages who have played no unimportant part in this history. These are Sam and Xuvani. And how comes the latter here?

After he had so deftly turned the tables on the Cuban mulatto, Xuvani retraced his steps in the direction of Sandili’s kraal, keeping the while a careful lookout for Tambusa, whom he expected to join him. But, after a while, his nephew not appearing, the old man began to suspect that something had gone wrong. He redoubled his caution, but the lone, silent bush betrayed nothing of the tragedy of blood just enacted in its cruel depths. He was perplexed. If the plot had been discovered, and the lad was captured before he could make good his escape, he would be dead by this, and it was clearly useless for himself to rush on to the very points of his countrymen’s avenging assegais. While pondering over his plan of action a shadow passed between him and the sun. He looked up. It was a vulture; and another and another swept between the tree-tops and the blue sky. The mystery was explained now. A few steps more and the old man knelt beside the stiffening corpse, not long cold, of the luckless Tambusa. The murderers had gone down to him to ensure that he was dead, and had left him there in the rocky glen just where he had fallen, and the traces and footmarks supplied all the missing links in the bloody tale to the eye of the shrewd savage. Hastily piling a heap of stones on the dead body of his nephew, Xuvani left the spot, decided as to his future course of action. To return to Sandili would be to commit suicide. He regretted poor Tambusa’s fate, but accepted the event with true native philosophy—it was done, and it couldn’t be helped now. They had both been guilty of an act of treason towards their countrymen, albeit of one of chivalrous gratitude towards the white man; and the lad had fallen a victim. It was unfortunate, but could not be helped. So, acting upon Claverton’s advice, Xuvani then and there made his way quietly into the colony, where he engaged himself as a labourer on some railway works in the Western Province, and where a powerful, able-bodied, well-conducted Kafir like himself was too good a workman for any questions to be asked. There he remained some months, till at length, the war over, and as soon as he could safely do so, he returned to the frontier, and obtained employment under Jim Brathwaite, in his former capacity.

So here he is at Seringa Vale again, looking a trifle chapfallen, perhaps, but on the whole, deeming himself marvellously lucky, when he thinks of the frightful grief to which have come so many of his old companions in arms. And he is, moreover, enjoying substantial advantage by reason of having saved Claverton’s life; for he already owns more good cattle than ever he pictured to himself in his dreams, and will own even more when things are settled, and he knows where to bestow his possessions. And he professes great veneration for Lilian, and is enormously proud of a large, handsome and curiously-wrought armlet which she has given him, and, although to expect him to declare that he prefers this to the more material benefits would be to demand an effort of gallantry too great for Kafir human nature, yet there is no doubt that he looks upon the ornament as a very great distinction indeed, with which nothing would induce him to part.

Sam and the old Gaika have struck up a great alliance, and the only subject on which they fall out is that of the respective prowess of the Kafirs and the colonists in the field—for the war is an inexhaustible topic between them—on which occasion Sam would inevitably be tempted to fire off the Kafir equivalent of his pet ejaculation, “Amaxosa nigga no good,” were it not that such a course would either draw down upon him the old man’s anger, or contempt for him as a “boy,” and the sly dog has a reason for standing well within the other’s good books just now.

And this is the reason. It happens that Xuvani owns a couple of nieces—half-sisters of poor Tambusa—whom he has brought to keep house for him, their father having been slain in the war. Both are fine, well-made, bright-eyed wenches, with a merry laugh and a wealth of cheerful spirits, and Master Sam has developed very decided intentions in that direction. Even now, as he sits there, he is warily trying to ascertain the smallest number of cattle old Xuvani is likely to accept for one of them, and turning over in his mind whether his savings will be sufficient to enable him to lay in the stock needed for the requisite *lobola* (the price in cattle paid to the father or lawful guardian, for a wife), and if not, whether his master will help him. And yet another difficulty besets Sam’s path. He cannot quite make up his mind which of the brown Venuses he shall propose for. Mnavnma is decidedly the best-looking, and he has a sneaking partiality for her; but, then, she is flighty, whereas Ngcesile is a good worker, steadier and rather better-tempered. So poor Sam is in a cleft stick.

On the afternoon of the day which witnesses this gathering of so many of our old friends at Seringa Vale, a girl is sitting at the window of a pretty house in one of the leafy suburbs of Cape Town. A beautiful girl of four-and-twenty, with exquisitely-chiselled features, and a great mass of golden hair in a shining halo above her face; but there is a hard look in the deep blue eyes, and the full, laughing lips are set and grave as she sits absently gazing out upon the broad surface of the bay, upon whose waters, curled into ripples by the afternoon breeze, the white sails of a few sailing-boats are skimming to and fro. She rouses herself from her reverie, and her glance falls upon something she holds in her hand. It is a newspaper, two months old; and it needs not the pencil mark against one of the notices in the marriage column to attract her eye, for she has gazed upon it many times already. Then she rises, and unlocking a desk takes out something. Only a few faded blossoms, originally distributed over half-a-dozen rank and sorry-looking stalks, but long since fallen off. Yet how tenderly, almost reverently, she handles them! There is something else—a sketch in a few bold pencil strokes, roughly executed on the inside of an envelope. It represents a large full-grown ostrich standing in menacing contemplation of the draughtsman, who, sitting under a bush, has included himself in the sketch as a foreground. Beyond the truculent biped, are the indistinct faces of several persons looking over a wall, and underneath the whole is pencilled the legend: “Cornered—or Brute Force *versus* Intellect.” For a few moments the girl stands gazing upon these relics, and the hard look in her eyes gives place to a softened and wistful expression that is unutterably sad as she murmurs something to herself, and a tear falls upon the faded and withered blossoms; then, as with an effort, she walks to the fireplace, and, crumpling up the newspaper, places the flowers and the pencil drawing upon it, strikes a match, and watches the whole consume to ashes. That done, she returns to the window and gazes out for a few minutes upon the blue bay and the distant mountains. Footsteps on the gravel beneath, and a ring at the front door, recall her to herself with a start. She tarns from the window, looks in the glass for a moment, and then Ethel Brathwaite goes downstairs to say the word which shall render Gerald Hanbury, Major in H.M.’s 999th Foot, quartered at Blazerabad, India—but now on leave at the Cape—the “happiest dog on earth”—as he thinks.

Note 1. These and other chiefs of the insurgent Gaikas and Tembus, were subsequently sentenced, some to death, others to long terms of penal servitude. The capital sentences, however, were commuted, and it should be mentioned that the Governor was largely memorialised in favour of this merciful course, by the very colonists whom these men had so wantonly and unprovokedly attacked.

Volume Two—Chapter Twenty Seven.

Curtain.

Six years!

Who are these two men seated together in the verandah, as the afterglow fades on the distant head of the Great Winterberg, at the close of this radiant spring day? One has evidently just arrived, the other, equally evidently is at home here, and it is six years since we saw either of them. The house, a newly-built one, is situated with an eye to scenic and climatic advantages, for it stands high up on the hillside, so as to command a magnificent and sweeping panorama. Below, in the valley, a silver thread winds in and out among the green bush, and on still evenings the murmur of the plashing stream is audible up here. Opposite the house, but its brow a little below the level of the same, rises a majestic cliff, whose aspect somehow seems familiar; and well it may, for it is no other than the classic and redoubted Spoek Krantz.

He who is now speaking looks remarkably like our old friend Arthur Claverton. And he it is. Outwardly his hard and stirring experiences have aged him beyond his years, leaving more than one grey intruder among the gold-brown hair, although he is not quite forty; but his face wears a look of great contentment, though the cool resolute firmness stamped upon the clear-cut features is unchanged.

“I dare say it does strike you as rather queer, George,” he was saying, “that we should elect to cast our lot here in this land of niggers, and drought, and bush-ticks, instead of taking it easy in old England. Old England? Old Humbug! Well, the rural and squirearchic life didn’t suit me—didn’t suit either of us, in fact. We tried it for five years, which is time enough to test the advantages of anything of the kind. Dynevard Chase is an uncommonly snug place; but, somehow, when one has got accustomed to this country and its life, one doesn’t take kindly to England. Then, the climate is vile—gruesome winter eight months in the year—sleet, and fog, and east wind only varied by rain. As for the summer, it’s a farce; about three weeks of fine weather throughout, and even then the air is thin. Our neighbourhood could furnish no kindred spirits; heavy parsons and their domineering and heavier spouses, and upholsterers who have made their pile. The British rustic, too, is a quite detestable animal and vastly inferior to Johnny Kafir, than whom he lies harder and thieves more persistently, but does both with infinitely greater clumsiness. So taking every drawback into consideration, we decided to let the Chase for a term of years, and pitch our tent out here again among all our old friends—and by Jove, here we are.”

“And a thundering good decision it wan, too, old chap,” says Payne, puffing out a great cloud of smoke.

“I think so. And now we are going to make ourselves thoroughly snug here. We have got the house in a first-rate situation—plenty of air, and a grand view. Poor old Jack Armitage! His shanty does duty as an out-station now. You can almost see it from where we sit. And the queer part of it is that, whereas formerly you couldn’t get a Kafir to stop on the place, now they don’t seem to mind a hang. Whether it is that we are farther away from the haunted cliff, or that I’ve set up a reputation as an opposition wizard, I don’t know; but, anyhow, they don’t funk it now, and I can get as many as ever I want.”

“Well, you seem to have impressed them a bit, anyhow. Possibly the way in which you predicted old Sandili’s end and that of the rest of them may have had something to with it. By Jove, though, that was a narrow share for you.”

The other looks grave.

“It was. Look, from where we are sitting you can almost see the place, right away over there, where that wily dog Nxabahlana ran me to earth.”

And now in case the above conversation does not sufficiently explain matters, it may briefly be stated that soon after we last saw her, Lilian had inherited Dynevard Chase, and the whole of her stepfather’s personal property besides. Her stepsister, to whom passing reference has been made, had died suddenly, having for long been delicate and ailing, and Lilian under the provisions of Mr Dynevard’s will found herself sole heiress. But her delight on re-entering her old home was not destined to last. In the first place the circumstances were altered, and all the remembrances which had endeared it to her before, were things of the past; and, more practical consideration still, her health suffered from the rigours of the English winter so severely that her removal to more genial climes became an absolute necessity. So they had returned to South Africa to make their home among their old friends; and being now in extremely good circumstances, not to say wealthy, that home is surrounded with all the resources that taste and comfort can devise. It is a lovely spot, and the bold and romantic scenery is thoroughly congenial to Lilian’s love of the beautiful, and she takes great pride in being the possessor of a site famous in savage legend. For they have bought Spoek Krantz, poor Jack Armitage’s old farm, and in the building of the handsome and commodious dwelling in which we see them, and in the laying out of grounds, and otherwise improving the place, both of them take an unwearied delight.

And if further explanation of the renewal of Ralph Truscott’s suit be needed, the above paragraph may afford it; for those who have mastered that worthy’s character will have learned, ere this, that it was not for love alone that he had sought out Lilian. A word or two before we leave Truscott. About a year after the war was over a Kafir brought to a certain trading-post two curious rings, exactly alike, though of different sizes. The design was two ropes of plain gold intertwined. The native told a strange story, to the effect that these were taken from the white man who had been shot at night. One of the rings the man was wearing, the other was found lying beside him. The trinkets disposed of—to the advantage of the trader—somehow or other the facts of the duel began to be darkly hinted at. But that the dead man had met his fate by the hand of the Queen’s enemies and not by that of a compatriot there was abundant proof. And, by a curious coincidence, just at the same time it came to the knowledge of the other principal in that midnight meeting that the man to whom poor Herbert Spalding owed his blighted life and premature death was no other than Ralph Truscott, whom thus, by a startling combination of events Nemesis overtook in a twofold capacity and brought to signal grief, as we have seen.

The two old friends are not destined, however, to pursue their conversation in peace, for now draws near a sound of childish voices, then the patter of small feet scurrying round the corner of the verandah, and, with a rush and a spring, a fine little fellow of five years old flings himself into Claverton’s arms.

“Hallo! Hallo, sir! What’s this?” cries the latter, catching hold of the youngster and perching him on his knee. “Well, now, what have you got to say for yourself?”

“Father, I want to go with Sam and hunt a porcupine to-night. He says we are sure to find two or three, and—”

“Does he? Well, we’ll think about it. Isn’t this chap a true Briton, George? Bent on killing something, even from his very cradle.” Payne laughed.

But the boy is not to enjoy a monopoly of his father’s attentions, for, lo! a small toddler comes pattering up to put in her claim to the same, and, finding that her brother has forestalled her, stands with one tiny fist crammed into her eye, looking inclined to cry, while with the other she makes a feeble attempt to dislodge the more fortunate one from his vantage-ground.

“Hallo, Dots! And have you given the authorities the slip, too? Come along, then. There, there, don’t turn on the hose! Arcturus secundus, get down, sir! Always give way to the ladies, because, if you don’t, they’ll move heaven and earth till they find a way of making you. That’s right. Come along, Dottums.” And he picks up the child, who clings about his neck, and laughs and prattles away in her delight. She is a lovely little thing, with Lilian’s eyes and hair, and promises to be an exact reproduction of Lilian herself.

“You chatterbox! Now you must be off to by-by. Cut along!”

But the little one is not at all inclined to fall in with this suggestion, for she clings to his neck harder than ever.

“N-no. Fader, take Dots for ride—far as de ‘big points,’” she pleads.

“Off we go then,” and mounting the little thing on his shoulder, where she sits half timorously, half exulting in the unwonted altitude, Claverton makes his way to the entrance hall. The said hall is a perfect museum, being hung all over with trophies of war and of the chase collected by its master during his wanderings. Here, the huge frontlet of a buffalo scowls down upon the grinning jaws of a leopard, whose crafty eyes in their turn glare thirstily towards the heads of various antelopes, tastefully arranged opposite. Then there is a brave show of armoury. Great savage-looking ox-hide shields, flanked by circles of grim assegais, formidable knobkerries, and grotesque war costumes of flowing hair and swinging cow-tails, combine to render this trophy barbarous and picturesque in aspect. To the children, the adornments of this hall are an unfailing subject of interest, not unmixed with awe.

And now Claverton halts in front of the war-trophy for Dots to look at “the big points,” as she calls the assegais, and even gingerly to touch them, for it is one of her little pleasures in life to be hoisted up on her father’s shoulder, as in the present instance, to inspect them closely, when they look even more awful than from the far distance of the floor. So, with a thrill of awe, little Dots’ hand is put tentatively forth, and the baby fingers play upon the cruel blades of the grisly weapons and pass wonderingly down their dark, spidery hafts. But nothing on earth will induce her to touch the ox-hide shields, which she is convinced must be alive.

“There. Now then, Dots. By-by’s the next thing.”

So, reluctantly, and with a final hug, the little one resigns herself to be carried off, *en route* for the land of Nod, and Claverton, relighting his pipe, rejoins his friend on the verandah, just as his wife approaches from the garden at the same moment.

Time has dealt very kindly with Lilian. The soft, serene beauty of that sweet face has not one whit abated its charm; and the attractiveness and winning grace of her manner is just the same as it was in the Lilian Strange of former days. Payne, as he responds to her greeting of cordial surprise, thinks that, lucky dog as his friend always was, the day he went to Seringa Vale was the very beginning of his real luck.

“Unexpected pleasure?” he answers. “Oh, yes, I like astonishing people. But this, as a surprise, don’t come near the day I picked up our friend, there, wandering about the *veldt*, and ran him in to Fountains Gap, just before the war. Eh?”

“Picked *me* up! Well, I like that,” is Claverton’s reply, cutting short the other’s satirical chuckle. “It strikes me, friend George, that if there was any ‘picking up’ in the case, you were the party who underwent the operation, and that considerably damaged by a Kafir knobkerrie, too.”

Payne, of course, was ready with a bantering rejoinder, and much chaff followed. A soft blush had come over Lilian’s face at the recollection. She stood for a moment, gazing at the purple peaks of the distant mountains, standing steely against the sky from which all the afterglow had now faded. Then, with a bright laugh, she turned to enter the house, saying:

“Well, I shall leave you to fight out the question between you.”

Reader, we will follow her example, even as we have followed her through her joys and sorrows. We must now part company with all our friends whose fortunes and reverses have entertained us throughout this narrative, but with none more reluctantly than with these two. Yet what better moment can we choose than this, when we leave them surrounded by every happiness the world can afford, here in their beautiful home, in that bright and sunny land which to them has been the scene of so many marvellous and stirring experiences?

The End.

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