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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CLAW ***

Cynthia Stockley

"The Claw"

Chapter One.

Part One—The Skies Call.

"It works in me like madness, dear,
To bid me say good-bye,
For the seas call and the stars call,
And oh! the call of the sky."

Hour after hour Zeederberg's post-cart and all that therein was straggled deviously across the landscape, bumping along the rutty road, creaking and craking, swaggling from side to side behind the blocky hoofs of eight mules.

At five o'clock in the afternoon the heat was intense, but the sun lay in the west at last, and tiny flecks of cloud in the turquoise sky were transforming themselves into torn strips of golden fleece. The bare bleak kops of Bechuanaland were softened by amethystine tints, and the gaunt bush took feathery outlines against the horizon.

The driver of the post-cart, a big yellow Cape boy with oystery eyes, took a long swig from a black bottle which he was ready to affirm contained cold tea, though the storekeepers who filled it at every stopping place referred to its contents variously as *dop*, Cape smoke, and greased lightning. Afterwards he lovingly bestowed the bottle under his seat, cracked his whip, and shouted in a ferocious voice:

Hirrrrie-yoh doppers!

I sat behind the driver, on the floor of the cart crammed amongst cushions and rugs and parcels and mail-bags and luggage, aching passionately in every bone, deadly weary, and very cross. For when you are extremely tall it is not all rapture to sit for hour after hour with your length hunched beneath you like an idol of Buddha. And when you are thin, not bonily thin but temperamentally slender, you don't care for parcels bumping into your curves as if you were made of wood, and mail-bags apparently stuffed with flints and jagged rocks piercing through the thickest cushions into your very marrow.

Hirrrrie-yoh doppers!... Slaagte... Verdommeder skepsels!...

Heaven knows what terrible significance was contained in these cabalistic words, but the eight mules immediately broke into a shambling run, the post-cart swaggled from side to side, the mail-bags hit me and stabbed me, and clouds of fine dust arose, wrapping us round in a smothering fog. Five minutes later the mules resumed their usual slouch, the fog subsided into a feathery mist, and all was as before. Slowly and deviously we straggled across the landscape. I tried for the hundredth time to arrange my rugs into the semblance of a nest, and for the hundredth time failed to do anything of the kind. There was no rest or comfort anywhere in that post-cart. In spite of my chiffon veil I could feel the fine road-dust powdering thickly on to my charming face. Mosquitoes sped down silently from strongholds in the hooped tent of the cart and without even a warning serenade took long draughts of my nice young blood through the linen sleeves of my blouse. A hundred grass ticks having at various times of outspan made convenient entry through open-work brown silk stockings, chewed at my ankles causing exquisite irritation not to be assuaged by a violent application of finger-nails.

The breeze, if heavy turgid masses of air displaced by the movement of the cart might be so called, conveyed to my face the steam arising from the mules and the extraordinarily pungent odour of native that emanated from the driver. It was something to be thankful for that the latter was so busy with the mules and his black bottle that he did

not often turn his big *café-au-lait*-coloured countenance to me, for when he did there was something so revolting in the spirituous odour of his breath and the expression of his oystery eyes that I could feel my scalp stirring as though my hair had suddenly been brushed the wrong way. At such moments I was extremely glad that I had a small but business-like Colt slung conspicuously from my waist-belt, and that in the boudoir of a little old hunting-box in Meath there were to be found three rather nice silver cups (probably all filled with late roses) awarded to me by various ladies' shooting clubs for making the highest aggregate of bulls-eyes. It was at such moments too that, good shot or not, I realised that I had been utterly foolish and reckless to adventure forth alone and unprotected upon this wild journey into Mashonaland.

At six o'clock the heat was still intense, and the western sky resembled a vast frameless picture daubed in primitive colours, slashed and gashed with reds and yellows. An hour later the sun shot past the horizon like a red-hot cannon-ball aimed at the other side of the world, and for a short time the land was suffused in wilder lights of orange, and the skies seemed streaked with blood. Then suddenly the heat was over, the flare died out of the picture, the far-off kops turned a faint pink colour, and the grimness of the bush was blurred in a drapery of purple chiffon. At once night unsheathed her velvet wings, and darkness fell in dim purple veils embroidered with silver stars. Some subtle scent as of flowering trees growing by a river blew through the tent of the cart. The world seemed filled with gracious dimness and made up of illimitable lovely space. An indescribable feeling of happy freedom filled my heart. It seemed to me that the lungs of my soul drew breath and expanded as they had never done in any land before. It was a sensation that came to me every morning when I saw the sun turn a gaunt country into a blue and golden world; and every evening when the sun fell and the land was wrapt in purple and silver vestments. It seemed to me then to be possible to disregard the discomforts of the day, and to forget what terrors the night might hold, by just succumbing to the charm and the magic of this wonderful great empty land. I was content to be in Africa!

Leaning back, my head against a mail-bag, my eyes half closed, I found myself suddenly remembering a brown-faced man with vivid blue eyes, with whom I had once danced at the Viceregal Lodge on the night of my "coming-out," and who had talked to me about the lure of Africa, saying that it was worse than the call of the East. He had spoken of Africa as *she*, and with a mingled hatred and love that conjured up to my mind a vision of some false, beautiful vampire, who dragged men to her and fastened her claws into their hearts for ever.

"It's a brute of a country!" he said. "Quite unfit to live in. Thank God to be back to civilisation again." But a moment later he was talking of the veldt as tenderly as a lover might talk of the woman he loves. I remembered being intensely interested and fascinated at the time, but it was in the middle of my first real ball, and it was also my eighteenth birthday and the occasion of my first serious proposal, and I had had, very naturally, a great many other absorbing things to think about. Moreover, the dance with the blue-eyed man had come to an end, I had been whirled off by some one else, and had never seen him again. Such blue burning eyes, set in such a dark burnt face! What added more strangely to his vivid appearance were two tiny blue points of turquoise stuck in his ears.

"Shades of George Washington!" I said to myself. "Can the man be an Indian—or a Hindoo?" But who ever heard of an Indian or a Hindoo having blue eyes? Just as I was going to ask him, in the frank way that always seemed to me to be the best and simplest method of getting to the heart of things, why he wore them, I found him looking with such a deep, strange glance at me, that, most unaccountably, my lids fell over my eyes as though weighted with little heavy stones, and for a few moments I could not lift them again. Also, my gift for airy conversation suddenly deserted me and I became tongue-tied. I remember feeling glad that I was so charming to look at or he might have thought me a fool. For I had not a word to say; I could only listen eagerly to him talking about Africa like a lover. At least I felt that was the way I should like my lover to speak of me. Perhaps it was because Herriott could not talk like that that I refused him that night, though I had always intended to take him, and I knew I should vex both my people and his by not fulfilling what had been almost an accepted situation for months past.

But that was all long past—three years past to be accurate—and I had never again seen the man who talked of Africa, though I had often glanced round ball-rooms and theatres for that dark face with the burning eyes and the ridiculous blue turquoise ear-rings. Many strange things had happened since then to swallow up the memory of him, and it *had* been swallowed. But it was strange how often I had remembered him again since I set out on this journey to Mashonaland, and passing strange that though I had only been in Africa for a month and known the veldt for only eleven days I seemed to understand all he had said about it.

Why did I understand? I wondered. Was the lure of Africa on me too? Was this strange brown land of golden days, and crimson and orange eventides, and purple nights, calling to me? Would it keep me as he had said it always kept people who felt the lure and heard the call? At the thought I trembled a little, and felt afraid of I knew not what. Afterwards I laughed to myself at the absurdity of the thought. How could Africa keep me? I belonged to the civilised cities of the world. My home was in Paris, London, Dublin, sometimes New York. I had lived always amongst pictures, and sculpture, and books, beautiful music, lovely clothes, jewels. All these things were necessary to me. I could not contemplate life without them. Africa was only an interlude—an experience. In a few months I should be back again hunting with the Meath pack from our dear little box near Balbriggan; flying over to London for balls and Hurlingham, or with my pretty Aunt Betty van Alen in her Paris studio, entertaining her and her friends with the strange tale of my adventures in this strange land. How ridiculous to fancy that I could feel the thrilling pain of a claw in my heart—Africa's claw! What was Africa to me or I to Africa?

I shivered. There were mists rising everywhere now, and joining the clouds of dust they wove gauzy scarfs about us and white things moved before us on the road, like spectres showing the way.

The sunshine that I loved so much was gone! It was my passion for sunshine and blue skies that had brought me for a time to this barbaric land. My passion for sunshine that I had never really been able to indulge to the full, until the crushing failure of a great bank in America had transformed me from an heiress into just an ordinary girl with a few hundreds a year whom the world no longer concerned itself particularly about.

That was one of the strange events that had occurred to change my life and swallow up many vivid memories. First

my lovely and much loved mother, the one parent I could remember, had died, passing away softly in her sleep one night and looking so happy—almost gay—as she lay there dead, that it had seemed wrong to regret what had happened and the blow had thus been robbed of half its terror and pain. Then, directly afterwards, had come the banking disaster, sweeping away the great fortune my mother had left and leaving nothing from the wreckage but a few thousands to be divided between my brother Dick and me. That had been the end of my fashionable career, and when I realised it I rejoiced with an exceeding great joy, for it was a life that, as the French put it, had "never said anything to me." Immediately the future had become far more interesting. Hundreds of people whom I had never cared a button about, but whom I had been obliged to meet and smile with, "and gladly endure," dropped instantly out of my life and I never saw them again. The horizon became a blank canvas that I might fill in with any figures I liked against any background I chose. Well! the background I chose was sunshine, which I sought in many out-of-the-way places where sunshine abounds, and the people I let into my picture were all the odd, charming creatures I met in my travels and the delightful writers and painters and sculptors who made up the world of my Aunt Betty van Alen, herself a gifted sculptress and a beautiful Bohemian soul. She had been appointed my guardian by my mother, and we spent most of our time together, only, a true American, she never could be drawn very far from her beloved Paris. However, she was American in this, too, that she considered the world as free to women as to men, and that no harm could come to a self-reliant girl who had been well brought up and taught black from white. So that when she could not be with me herself she suffered no qualms in letting me go off on my excursions alone, and was perfectly satisfied that I should never come to any harm. She was of opinion that every true-born American girl has her head so well balanced and such a fine sense of beauty and the fitness of things that she could never step from the paths of wisdom, or stray from that straight white road that her religion and early training had laid down for her; that the more you trust an American girl the more she is trustworthy. And I think she was right. But what she never took into account with me was that though my mother was American and I had been born under the Stars and Stripes, my father's half of me was Irish, and Irish drops in the blood spell love of adventure, love of the extraordinary in people and places and things, love of beauty, and lots of other loves, that not only cause one exquisite pleasure that is more than half pain, but lead one into many strange places where convention is not. However, I never told her or any one else of these things. Indeed it was only dimly that I realised them for myself.

On this visit to Africa, so very far away from her, Betty had unexpectedly held out rather firmly about the necessity of a chaperon, and to please her I had travelled out with a frumpy old German governess we had both known many years, who was visiting Africa to see about some property an uncle had left her in the Transvaal. All the way out I had made it quite plain to Madame von Stohl that I meant to go up to Mashonaland and see my brother Dick, that in fact it was one of my chief reasons for coming to Africa at all; and she never said a word against the idea. But lo! after I had trailed around with her to all sorts of uninteresting places in Cape Colony and the Transvaal she calmly and firmly refused to fulfil *her* part of the programme and go with me to Mashonaland. She said she was afraid of being eaten by Lobengula, the King of the Matabele.

The only thing to do, then, was to make my own plans and enquiries. Every one told me it was a journey of the very roughest and wildest description, and that very few women had done it before. It appeared that there were already a great number of women in Mashonaland, but they had all travelled up by waggon, with their men-folks to look after them, taking about three months to accomplish the journey. Instead of this information daunting me, as it was evidently meant to do, it made me only the more eager for such an adventure. Therefore, when I heard one man remarking to another (through the open window of the Johannesburg Hotel where we were staying) that if I took that coach journey alone it would take the curl out of my hair, I merely felt sorry for the man:—first, because he never would and never could know that my hair curled naturally, and secondly, that he should have so poor an opinion of an Irish-American girl as to think that a few rough adventures would scare her from a plan on which she had set her heart. In any case it was really no business of his. But Africa is chock full of people who mind your business for you as well as large quantities of their own. At first I was amazed and indignant at the number of utter strangers who came along and tried to interfere with my contemplated journey. Later I learned to listen, in the same spirit as it was given, to advice that was not really meant for anything but friendly information and a touching interest in the mistakes of other people. And when I smiled at them and told them that I loved adventures and couldn't get enough of them, the men gazed at me with admiration, mingled (they told me) with a longing to start for Mashonaland by the same coach, and the women looked wistful but denied their longing to follow my example.

As for Madame von Stohl, she refused to budge from her comfortable quarters in the Johannesburg hotel. I was secretly delighted, for anything more tiresome than a fortnight's unmitigated von Stohl in the cramped-up space of a coach I could not imagine. But I felt it my duty to reproach her. She thereupon in great irritation made some not at all agreeable remarks about the unfortunate fate of persons descended from two entirely irresponsible nations, without any sense of duty towards society, a craving for excitement, and no proper regard for the conventions of civilised life.

She said all this whilst I was packing my prettiest gowns for Fort Salisbury, and I, with the light heart of a girl who knows she is going to get her own way, responded with some cheerful reflections on heavy pudding-headed Teutons who had not an ounce of *nous* in the whole of their make-up, were absolutely lacking in imagination and the spirit of adventure, and simply did not know the meaning of *joie de vivre*. What was the use, I demanded, of sticking in Johannesburg and all the other stupid imitation towns and imagining we were seeing *real* Africa?

"One might just as well be in England or Germany, except that life in Europe is more comfortable and not so expensive. What I want to see—besides Dick, of course—is the illimitable veldt, and Brother Boer, and prowling lions, and Lobengula's fifty wives."

Elizabet von Stohl had answered that her desire was not unto these things. I then, having pitifully but very firmly told her that of course she could not help having been born a German, went out and telegraphed to Dick to come down to Johannesburg and fetch me. I thought I would give convention a fair deal. However, he wired back:

"Impossible. You must not think of coming up here at present. Country very unsettled. May be trouble with the natives at any time."

That was ridiculous, of course. If his wife could be up there, why couldn't I? And if he couldn't fetch me, well, it was quite simple to buy a ticket for the coach journey and go up by myself. There was nothing monstrous in that! What did it matter about the country being unsettled if one had a revolver and was an excellent shot?

Certainly twenty pounds was an amazing price for a coach ticket. But the coach agent never said a word about its being a dangerous journey, or tried to dissuade me in any way. On the contrary he told me that it was a beautiful country, and that he was sure I should have a very agreeable time. That was *something* for my twenty pounds.

When I showed the ticket to Madame von Stohl she expostulated more bitterly than ever, and said she should cable to Aunt Betty, failing that, to Mr Rhodes, the Governor of Natal, Dr Jameson, and the Bishop of Grahamstown. On my suggestion that the King of Timbuctoo might also be a good man to consult she turned dark blue. Afterwards she made a gesture like the washing of hands and said that I might go my ways, for which I was very much obliged to her. And I did go them two days later behind eight prancing mules, in company with a cheerful telegraphist for Tuli, and a missionary who travelled in dancing pumps and a mackintosh. Since then the magnificent red four-wheeled coach we had set out in had been changed for "cart, carriage, wheel-barrow, and donkey-cart"; drawn sometimes by mules, sometimes by oxen; driven by men sometimes black, sometimes white, sometimes yellow, but always profane.

At Tuli we had shed the telegraphist, with regret, for he was a merry and ingenious soul, full of plots for the commissariat and the general comfort. At Palapchwe the missionary got off to call on Khama, the King of the Bechuanas, who likes missionaries, though not to eat. The poor man was minus his dancing pumps, having left them unwillingly in a mud-hole where the cart had been stuck for several hours and we had been obliged to flee for our lives from a horde of mosquitoes as large as quail.

From Palapchwe I had travelled alone, but always in the care of reliable drivers, and wherever there were telegraph stations I found that Dick, (who had come round, once he knew I was well *en route*) had wired to people to meet me and do all they could for me, and I had experienced nothing but kindness and hospitality from the settlers, and storekeepers and the officers at the police camps. On the third day out from Palapchwe, however, my good driver had broken his arm, and been hastily replaced by a man whom the coach agent did not know so well but hoped would be reliable. This was my friend of the oystery eyes who so vociferously bellowed—*Hirrrr... rrr... rrie-yoh doppers!... Slaagte eiseltjies*!

Night was on us at last. The pace of the mules grew slacker and slacker: they were reaching the end of their run, and obviously the end of their endurance. The rush of water could be plainly heard on the still air, and close ahead loomed the denser, taller bush that on the veldt invariably outlines the banks of a river.

I began to think rather wistfully of the little tin hotel or thatched store I knew must be near, where we would outspan for the night. The travellers' bedrooms in such "hotels" were the most amazing and extraordinary places I had ever met, but they were nevertheless an improvement on my present confined quarters. I should at least be able to stretch my cramped limbs, and there would be lights and perhaps a cup of tea, and hot water to wash off the suffocating dust. These things had never yet failed me at the various halting places, and there was nearly always a woman of some kind to do her best for me.

The driver presently got down from his seat, lighted a lantern, and going to the head of the team began to guide his tired mules along the broken road. This was now little more than a wide foot-path, waggon-rutted and holed-out by the hoofs of the beasts of burden that had gone before. The stumps of trees chopped down by the axes of the Pioneers were still green and sappy in the track, and the wheels of the cart jarred against rocks that traffic had not worn down, and crushed through the houses of white ants who had not yet acquired the wisdom to build elsewhere than on the road leading to the country of Cecil Rhodes.

At last the cart stood still. The driver swinging his lantern went on alone and in a few moments was lost sight of in the bush. The mules began to quiver in an eerie way, and the trembling of them subtly communicated itself to the cart which also began to quiver and creak like an animate thing. I shivered and pulled a rug round my shoulders. It seemed we had come to a lonely and desolate spot. The trees standing black against the stars looked enormous and sinister, and there was something menacing in that sound of swift rushing water.

After a long while the driver came stumbling back, fixed his lantern on a hook in front of the cart, and began to be extremely busy with the mules. The jingle of harness falling to the ground was heard, accompanied by more creaking and shivering. My interest was aroused.

"What are you doing, driver?" I asked sharply. I knew quite well this could not be right. If the mules were unharnessed how could we reach that most desirable little tin hotel? The driver answered in a voice considerably thicker and more incoherent than the last time I had heard it (greased lightning, I had observed, frequently has this effect upon the vocal cords):

"River's full—cart can't cross d' drift to-night."

"But the little tin—the hotel—?"

"Hotels d' other side," was the laconic response, and he continued to undo the mules. Harness fell around him like hail.

"But what are you going to do?" I faltered.

"Going to put d' *eisels* into d' stable," he answered stolidly, indicating with his arm a mass of blackness on his left, that might have been either a hay-stack or a cathedral, "an' shut me in wid dem. You better come saam, Miss." He

gave a drunken chuckle. I fingered my Colt, and that gave me courage to answer in a clear voice that betrayed no sign of the panic in my soul:

“Nonsense, driver! of course there must be some decent place for me to spend the night. Take me to it at once.”

He had all the mules loose, and holding each by a small head-rein they radiated from him like the rays of a black star of which the lantern in his hand was the scarlet centre. By its light I could see his stupid brutal face clearly, though I was hidden from his vision in the dimness of the cart. However he could recognise authority when he heard its note, and looking towards me answered with a faint shade of respect in his voice if not in his words:

“You got to take your choice, Miss. Come saam into d’ stable wid me and d’ mules or else sit in d’ cart all night wid d’ lions. We can’t cross d’ river.”

“Lions!” I stammered. “But there *must* be some place, somewhere for me to go to—a hut—a store—something!”

Such a desperate, horrible situation was incredible. The mules were shivering with the steam still rising from them and the driver grew impatient. Apparently he acknowledged a duty to them if not to me. He came close to the cart and spoke menacingly and finally into it.

“See yere: dis is d’ Umzingwani River. No hotels yere, oney plenty of lions, worst place in Africa for lions; dat’s why I’m going to shut me up with d’ *eisels*. See dat place over dere?” He pointed to another grim shadow that might have represented *anything* in this grim place of shades—“Baas O’Flynn and Baas Jones kept a store dere. Baas O’Flynn died of d’ jim-jams, and his grave is round back of d’ hut: and a lioness fetched Baas O’Flynn out from behind the counter one day and walked off wid him in front of two kaffirs. I tell you lions is thick round here. Dat’s why dey built a stable dis side for when d’ river’s full, and dat’s why I am going to shut me up wid d’ *eisels*. So now you better take your choice, Miss, d’ *eisels* and me—or d’ lions.”

I was silent in amazement and horror, petrified with apprehension; dew was on my forehead. The driver, supposing that I was making my choice, waited for a moment or so, then getting no answer, turned his mules and moved away amidst the jingling of headstalls, muttering and chuckling to himself:

“Ach! arlright den, I told you what, if you don’t come *saam* wid me!”

I watched his going with despair; but my dry tongue refused to call him back. It seemed to me there could be no worse horror than to spend the night shut in a stable with that brute and the mules. And yet—lions! My backbone became a line of ice.

But I would not recall him. I watched him staggering away from me, the lantern rays flickering between the dark bodies of the mules. They seemed to go a long way off before they reached the stable, but at last I descried the inside of a brick building, narrow and manger-lined. For one moment I had a glimpse of the mules nosing eagerly to their places, then the closing of a heavy door shut out the pale vision, a bar fell heavily into its place, and I was shut and bolted into the outer darkness: alone in a wild and lonely part of Africa.

Began then for me the strangest night of all my life. In the midst of the thick darkness there suddenly and unwarrantably appeared between the branches of trees taller than any I had seen on the whole journey a wraith-like new moon, white as a milk opal. It peered through the black trees like a ghost that has lost its soul and seeks for it in desolate places. It shed no light at all, but just hovered there, peering, paling the light of the stars, and etching into view things that had better have been left hidden. It outlined some white bones that lay in an apart place at the foot of a tree, making them glisten as if they were composed of silver. It revealed the stable crouching amongst the bush like a grey monster. It showed up a spectre-like kopje on the left that I had not known was there at all and that was unlike any kopje I had ever seen, bare as a glacier with neither stock nor stone on it, nothing but one malignant-looking tree perched on its summit, leafless and crooked, holding out a forked arm that beckoned me hideously.

It is not for nothing that a superstition exists purporting bad luck to those who see the new moon through trees. There is indeed something disquietingly sinister in the sight. My Irish heart beat wildly in my breast. I was all superstitious Celt at that moment—not a drop of calm, sane American anywhere about me. My shaking hand clutched at my revolver. I had heard or read somewhere of people shooting the moon, and I wondered vaguely whether it was upon occasions such as this that the dread deed was done. Afar a wail of infinite sadness and melancholy pierced and echoed through the silence. In months to come I was to learn to hear music in the hungry jackal’s dirge, but at that time it sounded to me like the cry of some despairing soul suffering the torments of everlasting fire.

I could not keep my eyes closed. Some mysterious force compelled me to open them again and again upon the scene of terrifying ghostliness. Also, when I shut them the rush of waters seemed to surround the cart, and I expected at any moment to find myself being swept away down the strong river. In reality, nothing moved, not even a leaf on a tree. All was still, silent as the dead under the watching moon; even the little chirping cries and noises of the grass insects were hushed, or swallowed up in the smooth swift sound of rushing power. Only far away the wailing tragic cry of the jackal found many an echo and response.

Hours passed that were centuries to me, sitting Buddha-like on the floor of the cart, stiff and motionless, clutching my revolver. The moon lingered long, seeming to cling to the branches in a vain effort to stay longer, but at last she sank despairingly, and once more the clearing above the drift on the Umzingwani River was wrapt in the blackness of the nethermost pit.

It was only then that I dared change my position a little. Feeling for the hoops of the cart-hood I very slowly dragged my agonised limbs upwards, until my head touched the top of the hood. Even so I could barely stand upright, and the exquisite pain of leaping blood circulating once more in my numbed limbs was almost more than I could bear. But as I stood so, Fear, full-armed, rushed upon me again, for in the sea of darkness round me, I distinctly heard something

moving:—on swift, padded feet something was stealing round the cart and *breathing*! Sinking down noiselessly to my former position, I peered between the mail-bags into the darkness, and once more dew stood on my forehead in little beads. Suddenly, I saw two small pale green fires that moved together, then two more exactly the same, and I knew they were the eyes of savage beasts. Paralysed with fright, I was afraid to stir, afraid almost to breathe. But my mind, still working vividly, considered the best thing to do—to sit perfectly still in the hope that they would not venture into the cart after me, or to fire my revolver into them one barrel after the other. The noise of breathing and moving was plainly made by more than one beast, and there were growlings now and horrible purring noises. I came to the conclusion that there was not one lion but probably half-a-dozen after me. To my increased horror the cart suddenly began to shake. Were they preparing to spring upon me? I grasped my revolver firmly, and with the other hand swiftly crossed myself and whispered a prayer, for indeed I believed that my last moment was come. But nothing happened. Only the coach went on shaking softly, and the snarlings and growlings in several keys continued; there was a faint jingle, too, of the harness that had been left lying on the ground. What could be happening?

I began to feel strangely sick and faint. Since morning I had eaten nothing but a very stale sandwich, and the long fast, together with the series of emotions I had gone through, began to tell upon me. My mental vision grew a little dim and unattached. I found myself thinking vaguely about things that were not at all apropos to the situation. I reflected, as drowning people are said to do, on all the things I had done and seen since first I could remember, and on all the persons I had known, including and especially Elizabet von Stohl who had so emphatically opposed this journey. I suddenly detested her exceedingly! How pleased though shocked she would be if she could know how faithfully her prognostications of evil were coming true! Would she pretend to be shocked? But she should never know. Even in my extremity I gave a desolate smile to think that if the lions *did* get me they would carry me off into the deep bush and leave nothing behind to tell the tale. My fate would be wrapped for ever in romantic if terrible mystery, and no one would know what naked depths of terror my soul had sounded amidst the fearsome darkness of the veldt. But I resolved that if ever I got out of this alive the eloquent reserve which marks the truly great should distinguish me also as far as my African adventures were concerned. One thing was certain: my taste for prowling lions was appeased. I also felt a diminished interest in Lobengula’s fifty wives. As for the illimitable veldt it was the limit!

And all the time the breathings and purrings and snarlings went on; and as if that were not enough they began to *chew*. Heaven knows what they were chewing, but I felt sure that it would very shortly be me. Suddenly I became aware that *something* had approached the step of the cart and was close to me. I could hear its breathing and plainly I saw the gleam of two little pale green fires. An enterprising lion had smelt me out at last and meant to do unto me as had been done unto Mr O’Flynn. The thought was too much; with the last desperate courage of the doomed I took Fate into my hands, and leaning forward fired barrel after barrel from my revolver in the direction of the little pale fires. The noise of the detonations echoing and repeating through the silent place was enormous and terrifying, but in the tingling stillness that followed, my straining ears caught the sound of fleeing padded feet and the crackling of small branches and undergrowth at gradual distances. Then my senses swam, and I sank back behind my barricade of mail-bags.

Chapter Two.

The River Calls.

> “And there’s no end of voyaging
> When once the voice is heard,
> For the river calls, and the road calls,
> And oh! the call of the bird.”

I suppose I fainted, and later perhaps I slept. At any rate it seemed, and must have been, a long while afterwards that I waked up to a sound so pleasant and comforting that I believed at first I must still be in the land of strange dreams in which my mind had been wandering. But I presently realised that though I was still lying curled up in the cart, it really *was* the sound of wood crackling and burning in a fire, and that the aromatic flavour in the air was the smoke of wood mingled with the curiously sweet scent of burning leaves and branches, still hissing with sap. Very softly I raised myself upon a cramped elbow and looked out of the cart. The place was transformed. The circular clearing, no longer gaunt and terrifying but a scene of tall enchanted trees and frondy ferns, was lit up with leaping rose-and-amber lights from four large fires built at the corners of a square. The post-cart, well within the radius, had a munching horse tethered to it, while stretched at full length on a rug in the firelight was a man.

He was lying carelessly at his ease, and by the flickering light of the fires looking through a number of letters and papers. One hand supported a determined-looking jaw; the rest of his face was hidden under a hat with so evil a slouch to it that it might easily have belonged to a burglar. He wore no coat; only a grey flannel shirt open at the neck, with a dark blue and crimson striped handkerchief (the kind of thing college men put on after boating or football) knotted loosely round his bare throat. His khaki riding-breeches were “hitched” round him on a leather belt from which also depended a heavy Service revolver and a knife-case. By the side of him on the rug lay a gun. He was evidently taking no risks as far as lions were concerned.

I began to have an extraordinary curiosity to see his face. Moreover I longed with a fervent longing not only to get out and sit in the warmth of those homely and attractive fires, but to speak with another human being. If he would only look up, I thought, and let me see whether or not he had an honest face! I could not trust that hat. With such a hat he might be a horse thief, an escaped convict, an I.D.B., or a pirate on a holiday, and though any of those might possibly be interesting persons to meet I felt that the time and place were hardly suitable for such a *rencontre*. The only thing to do was to lie *perdue* until I was able to come to some conclusion as to what manner of man he was.

Even while I so decided he moved.

Sitting straight up he rolled the letter he had been reading into a ball and aimed it with violence and precision at the nearest fire, uttering at the same time some bad and bitter words that came quite clearly to my ears. However, I was by that time inured to bad language. Every one in South Africa uses it when they think you are not listening. Also, it is apparently the only language that mules and oxen understand for drivers never speak any other. I had become so accustomed to wicked words that I no longer took the slightest notice of them.

To my amazement I discovered that he was muttering verse to himself—bits of Stevenson:

> "Sing me a song of a lad that is gone.
> Say, can that lad be I?
> Merry of heart he sailed on a day,
> Over the sea to Skye.
> * * * * *
> Glory of youth glowed in his veins
> Where is that glory now?"

He whipped the muffler from his neck at this and flung it down, then drove his hands into his pockets and continued his sullen chant:

> "Give me again all that was there.
> Give me the sun that shone.
> Give me the heart, give me the eyes,
> Give me the lad that is gone!"

He flung off his hat. I was able to get some idea of his general appearance then, as he passed up and down in the varying lights and shadows, and that too seemed strangely reminiscent of some one I had known. But I was disappointed to find that he didn't look the least bit like the hero of a romance. He was not even tall. What was worse he had the most awful hair. It was black and lank like an Indian's and distinctly thin in front, and one strand of it like a rag of black silk kept falling away from the rest and hanging down between his bad-tempered blue eyes—at least I felt sure they must be bad-tempered, and I had to come to the conclusion that they were blue, because every time he passed the fire I got a suggestion of blue. He perpetually smeared the rag of hair back from his eyes and it as perpetually fell down again. A curious thing about him was the way he moved, so softly and firmly on his feet, yet without making a sound, and when he reached the end of one of his enforced marches he swung round in the same pleasing way that the sail of a boat swings in the wind. It was hard to admit that a sort of burglar in riding-breeches could interest one by the way he walked, but I had to admit after a time, that there was a queer distinction and grace about him. He made a further remark to the stars:

"'Give me again all that was there.' But what for, good Lord? To let women wipe their boots on and throw in the mud! Ah, they leave one nothing! They throw down every shrine one sets up."

I began to feel almost as safe as when the lions were prowling around.

"This terrible Africa is full of brutes!" I said to myself. "If I once get out of it, will I ever come back again? No!"

The man suddenly left off tramping, and going to each of the fires fed them in turn from a large pile of wood which he had evidently collected on arrival. Then he came to his horse and putting his arm round its neck spoke to it in a voice curiously sweet, quite unlike that in which he had been reviling women; and the horse whinnied softly to him in return.

"Dear old Belle!" he said, "you've had a rough time, but there's a rest coming—a good rest coming and after that boot-and-saddle! We'll get away from them all once more; and maybe if we have any luck, we'll get a rest once and for all—a long, long rest—under the wide and starry sky."

I was ashamed to hear these intimate bitter things he was confiding to his horse with his arm round her neck and his face bent. But could I help it? Only I was no longer afraid. I felt that in spite of his fierce and violent words there was nothing to fear from him.

Walking back to his rug he threw himself down once more, this time on his back, clasping his hands under his head and closing his eyes. In a few moments he was sleeping as peacefully as a child.

It really seemed after awhile that I might venture to descend. Apparently there was no danger to be anticipated from any quarter. He had guarded against lions by making fires and now he himself was asleep. There was nothing to fear but still I was horribly afraid. As quietly and carefully as possible I unknotted myself and crawled out of the cart, for I was really too stiff and weary to do anything but crawl, and when at last I stood on the ground by the step, my legs would hardly support me. However, I eventually gained the courage and strength to steal to the nearest fire and stretch my numbed fingers to the blaze. It was so big that I was able to warm myself without stooping, a fact I was intensely grateful for: I felt that I should never want to sit or kneel again for the rest of my life.

The man slept peacefully on. I could not see him clearly for the firelight dazed my eyes, but I could hear his quiet and regular breathing. Later I crept closer and gave another glance to the face I was so curious to see. At the same moment a bright flicker of light passed right over his eyes and I saw that they were open and regarding me with a

wide and steady stare. Without a sound he rose to his feet.

My hands dropped to my sides, and I drew myself up to my full height, prepared (though my heart was nearly jumping out of my body) to be very calm and dignified indeed to this woman-hater who could only be nice to horses. As for him, the wind was entirely out of his sails also: he simply stood there staring at me, dumb with amazement at finding one of the hated brood of women in his camp. I might have got a good deal of malicious satisfaction out of the situation if I had not been almost stunned into confusion and astonishment myself in the revelation that the man who stood staring at me was the dark, blue-eyed man with whom I had talked about Africa three years before at the Viceregal Lodge. I recognised in a moment his extraordinarily vivid eyes with the careless lids that covered so intent a glance. And there were the little bits of blue turquoise still stuck in his ears!

I can only account for not having recognised him earlier by the fact that I had not really seen his eyes. He was one of those men whom you might pass without a glance, thinking him ordinary, until you looked in his face or he spoke to you. Then you saw at once that he was not ordinary at all, that so far from being short he was seemingly at least about three heads taller than most men, also that his hair was perfectly nice, and what was better perfectly original. In his crakey, thrilly voice he was now assuring me that he had never supposed for an instant that there was any one in the post-cart.

“And a lady, good God!—I mean it is unbelievable; but where is your driver? Do you mean to say, Madam, that you have been here alone in that cart all the evening?”

Madam! That was funny, though I did not much care about being taken for a madam. But of course he could see nothing of my face through my thick veil.

“Yes,” I said. “The driver gave me my choice between being shut into the stable with the mules or staying out here in the cart alone. I preferred this.”

“The infernal scoundrel! The—” His mouth shut, he hastily swallowed something, doubtless more profanity. “The scoundrel!” he repeated.

“The river is full. He said we could not cross to-night.”

“That is true, but his business was to make fires here and guard you. This is one of the most dangerous places in Africa. I cannot think, Madam, how you came to be on such a journey alone and unprotected. Some one is gravely to blame.”

“No, indeed,” I faltered. “No one is to blame but myself. I insisted on taking this journey against all advice. If the lions had eaten me it would have been my own fault.”

I don’t know what was the matter with me, but suddenly the remembrance of all my terrors overwhelmed me and I began to cry. I never thought I could have been so utterly silly and ridiculous, but the cause was something that I had no control over, something quite outside myself; it may have been the reaction of suddenly feeling so safe after all my misery, or that his voice was the kind of voice that stirs one up to doing things one didn’t intend to do; really I don’t know. Only, I cried quite foolishly and brokenly for a few moments like a child, and he took hold of my hands and patted them and said ever so kindly:

“There, there—don’t cry, for Heaven’s sake don’t cry—it’s all right now—you’re quite safe—I’ll take care of you. And I’ll hammer that, brute within an inch of his life to-morrow morning,” he added savagely.

He made me sit on his rug by the fire, while he went over to the cart and hauled out mail-bags and cushions and rugs, all bundled up together, and dragged them over by the fire, and in two minutes had a most delightful sort of lounge-seat ready for me. I never thought other people’s letters and parcels could be so comfortable and useful.

“Now,” said he, “have you got anything to eat or drink? I am sorry to say I haven’t a thing. I’m ‘travelling light,’ and expected to cross the river to-night and get to Madison’s for dinner.”

Of course I had a travelling basket with plenty of tinned things in it, and some stale bread. There was also tea and a little kettle which he filled from the water-bag under the cart and had over the fire in the twinkling of an eye, while I spread a napkin on the ground and laid out as invitingly as possible such provisions as I had. Then, while he was once more replenishing the fires, I pulled a little mirror from my vanity bag, and by its aid removed some of the dust which by reason of my tears had now turned to mud on my face. I arranged my veil over my hat, and my dainty, tragic brown face looked back at me from the hand-glass. I say *tragic* because so many people have said it before of me and I’ve got used to the word but I could never really see myself what suggested it. Only I know that I am rather original looking. I do not profess to be pretty: but I am unusual; and I have nice bones, and the shades of brown and amber in my eyes and hair are really rather charming; and I know I’ve a good line from my ear to my chin—one cannot study sculpture without getting to recognise fine lines whether in one’s self or other people.

When he came back with the kettle of boiling water, I knelt by the cloth and made the tea, while he stared at me in perfect silence. Perhaps he was surprised to see that I didn’t look much like a madam after all. He made no sign of recognition, which was rather disappointing, but I did not mind at the time as I was so frightfully hungry. So was he. There was not the faintest attempt on the part of either of us to disguise the fact that we each possessed what Dick called an “edge.” We drank our tea and fell like wolves upon the sandwiches I had made of stale bread and potted turkey. We also cleaned up a tin of sardines, about three pounds of biscuits, and a pot of strawberry jam. We ate like schoolboys and were as merry as thieves in a wood. It did not seem in the least strange to be sitting there under the stars in that wild place taking possession of a large meal with a man who did not know my name nor I his. Nothing is strange on the veldt! Besides, I felt as if I had known him all my life, even if he did not recognise me. All the same, I was aware that he never ceased to stare at me intently, with the little rag of black hair hanging between his blue

eyes. He told me he was riding across country from Tuli to Fort George. He had been buying waggons and horses in the Transvaal for the Chartered Company.

“I suppose you know you have come to this part of Africa at a very bad time?” he said. “The Chartered Company is going to send an expedition into Matabeleland against Lobengula. Almost all the men in the country will be needed to fight, and while they are away in Matabeleland the ladies in Mashonaland will all be shut up in forts. That will not be very interesting. It would have been better for you to have postponed your journey until a little later.”

“*Au contraire*,” said I. “It is far more interesting to be in a country while history is being made than to arrive afterwards when everything is settled and dull. But why are we going to war with Lobengula?”

He laughed at the “we” which slipped in unconsciously.

“Ah! I see you are one of us already, so I can tell you all about it. Well, Loben has been behaving very badly for a long while. Ever since the Chartered Company took possession of Mashonaland he has been harassing us in various ways. But lately he has taken to serious menace. Large *impis* of his armed warriors have been raiding across the border laid down by agreement between the two countries, murdering the Mashonas who are under our protection, and taking up a very threatening and insolent attitude to any white men who remonstrate with him. He has paid no attention to official remonstrance, either, but broken promise after promise, so that at last we have had to take things into our own hands. If we don’t they’ll wipe out every white man in Mashonaland one of these days. So we are going to invade them and break their power once and for all. There is a chance of some interesting fighting first, though, for the Matabele are twenty thousand strong, all in fighting trim, and as ferocious as the Zulus from whom they are descended. *Now*, are you sorry you’ve come?”

“Not at all,” I laughed. “Afterwards, when this is all over, I may have an opportunity of seeing Lobengula’s fifty wives. That is one of my most important reasons for coming out to Africa. That and prowling lions; however, I think I’ve had more than enough of *them*.”

He began to laugh.

“You won’t find Lobengula’s wives very enchanting, if you do succeed in seeing them; and there are only six, by the way. But where did you get your experience of lions?”

“Here!” said I, and told him something of what I had gone through; only *something*. I did not think it necessary to go into details about my terror, nor to tell him I had fainted. I left him to suppose that I had been asleep when he came to camp. He looked at me keenly at this part of my story, remembering, I suppose, his pleasant remarks about women. But I returned his gaze with frank eyes.

“Ah! I heard those shots,” he said at last. “I was about two miles off then, and supposed some one was camping round here, but I could not locate them at all; no sign or smell of fire anywhere; so on finding the river full I camped here, ready to cross the drift the first thing in the morning. I looked into the post-cart, but only casually, for naturally I didn’t expect any one to be in it. I guessed that the driver had locked himself in with the mules—they usually do in such circumstances, but not when there are passengers. Those were not lions, by the way. As soon as I got here I knew by the behaviour of my horse that there had been beasts of some kind about, and when I had made fires I looked for spoor and found traces of about half-a-dozen hyenas. They must have been hungry, too, for they had chewed the mule harness to ribbons.”

He smiled at me gaily, but I felt myself turning pale.

“Hyenas! How horrible! How glad I am I did not know! I’d much rather they had been lions!”

“Thank God they were not,” he said quietly. “I’m afraid your revolver would not have been much use. Hyenas, on the contrary, hardly ever touch a human being, and are easily scared off.”

“But they laugh!” I cried, shuddering, and then sprang to my feet, for the most terrifying noise I had ever heard in my life suddenly split the stillness and rang around us. I have heard lions roar in the Zoo, and that is bad enough; but the cry of a caged lion is a dove-like call compared to the awe-inspiring, mournful, belching, hollow roar of the king of beasts when he makes his presence known to the wide and empty veldt. My companion was on his feet too.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said quietly, “but get into the cart again as quickly as possible.”

I obeyed without the least delay, another roar, closer at hand, considerably accelerating my steps. In a moment I was back in my old place on the floor; and he was swiftly untethering the horse from the back of the cart, to fasten it in front, more fully in the glare of the fires. Then he stepped into the driver’s place, and half-sitting, half-stooping, laid his rifle across the splash-board, right over the horse’s head. We waited.

“Don’t make a sound,” he said over his shoulder. There was no alarm in his voice, but rather a kind of gay elation, and my fear immediately died away. I began to watch and listen with interest for what was to happen next. There were no more roars, only an ominous stillness, that was broken presently by the restless moving and shuddering of the horse. The poor beast began to try to break loose and get away, but its master leaning forward, spoke to it in a soothing gentle voice, and the terrified creature was presently quiet, except for an occasional shudder that it could not control.

Silence again for a time that seemed hours, then at last the click of a broken twig that sounded to my straining ears like a pistol shot. There was just the faintest suspicion of a rustling of leaves. An instant later something in my companion’s intent gaze and attitude told me that the psychological moment had come. He could see something, and was taking aim. I glanced at the dim, shadowy mass of foliage towards which his rifle pointed, and for one

moment saw nothing. Then something huge and pale and massive came bounding high in the air out of the shadows, and the horse cried out like a human being. The Martini-Henry cracked twice and a blinding flash of gunpowder filled the air. Later I heard my friend's voice speaking to his leaping horse and as the smoke died away my dazed eyes saw lying stretched between the fires something that had not been there before. The only sounds to be heard were the creaking of the cart caused by the shudderings of the horse, and the chattering of my teeth. I don't know which was the louder. But I know that I crouched beside the man's knee and was grateful and glad for one of his strong brown hands on mine, and his crakey, thrilly voice saying close to my ear:

"There is no danger. Only we must be quiet. There's probably another of them about. I should like to pot him too."

Needless to say, I sat still with all my might. The great honey-coloured body fascinated my eyes, but there was something extraordinarily reassuring in the scent of mingled gunpowder and tobacco that hung about the grey flannel sleeve so close to me. We sat in silence for what must have been nearly an hour and nothing happened: no more roars, no sound anywhere but the far cry of the jackal, and the rush of the river. It was my companion who at last broke the spell, speaking in a low, absent voice, almost like a man in a reverie.

"So you have come to Africa after all, Miss Saurin!"

I could hardly believe my ears were not playing me false. It seemed the strangest thing of all the strange things that had come to pass that night that he should know my name and speak it thus. He had recognised me after all, then! In the same voice of gentle reverie he spoke again, staring not at me but straight before him.

"—And this is the way she receives you!"

"You know my name?" I faltered.

"Of course. Do you think I could ever forget your face?"

I felt my cheeks grow hot. I was not unused to hearing men say charming, flattering things, and I knew very well how to parry them. But there was something so unusual in the quiet serenity of this man's words and the vibration of his beautiful voice that I could not lightly turn aside his strange answer. I am all woman, too, and could not refrain from feeling a little thrill of pleasure in what he said. It is surely something rather sweet to be remembered for three years by a man to whom one has spoken only once, for a few minutes, in a crowded ball-room.

"And that dance—I think you remember the dance we had together—and our talk of Africa. You said you would love to come out here, and I told you then you surely would. I think you must remember?"

There was something so appealing and yet compelling in his question that I felt obliged to answer him sincerely, though such worldly wisdom as I possessed strongly counselled me to do otherwise.

"Yes, I have always remembered," I said, and found myself remembering other things, too, vividly: the way his words had moved me, the way my lids had fallen under his strong glance.

"And you are still Miss Saurin? *Deirdre Saurin*?"

It would be impossible to describe the beauty and gentleness of his voice as he so unexpectedly spoke my name. It sounded almost as if he were blessing me.

"You did not many Herriott after all? But you could not have, or he would be here. No man who married you would ever leave your side."

That was ridiculous, of course. I felt it was ridiculous, but he said it so convincingly that I almost believed it. In fact, I was obliged to recognise that this man was very convincing indeed. You could not treat his remarks with the indifference they deserved, even if you wanted to. However, there was one thing I felt I ought to make clear to him, though it was rather embarrassing to say these things.

"I think as you know so much," I stammered, "you ought to know a little more. I was never engaged to Lord Herriott."

"But I was told by two different people that night, both relatives of his, that you were engaged; that the announcement was to be made immediately."

"They had no right to say so," I said firmly. "We were never engaged."

"Will you tell me that he never asked you to marry him?"

"I cannot tell you more than I have," I answered rather stiffly.

"And you think it insolence on my part to ask so much?" His voice had gone back to reverie and his eyes to the dying fires. "Do not think that, Miss Saurin. Insolence has no place near you in my mind and memory. It was no business of mine I suppose whether you refused Herriott, or why. In any case I should have left Ireland at once as I did. Only—I wish to God I *had* known in all these years."

I had to realise at last that this man was making love to me, and that the fact aroused in my heart neither anger nor indignation. I felt not the slightest disposition to reprove him, but rather to go on sitting there for ever listening to his strange burning words and vibrating voice. It seemed to me suddenly that I was listening to an old song I had known all my life, but had never before heard set to music. My heart began to flutter like a wild bird in my breast and a trembling thrilled me unlike any trembling I had known through the past hours of darkness and fear. A faintness stole over my senses. I, too, had kept my gaze straight before me while we talked, but now, while I felt myself growing

pale to the lips with some strange emotion, I turned my eyes his way and found him looking at me. Glance burnt glance. His blue, intent eyes searching in mine as if for something that was his. Mine reading in his—I know not what—something I had long known dimly but dared not recognise. In that moment I realised why I had come to Africa. I knew why I had refused Herriott. It was for the sake of seeing again this strange man with the voice that pulled at my heart-strings and the burning eyes that searched in mine as if for something that was his. And now, alone with him in this wild and desolate spot, where conventions and all the superficialities of life fell sheer away, and left us just simple man and woman, I was afraid of the poignant sweetness and wonder of it. I was afraid for my immortal soul.

For the second time that night, and half unconsciously, I put up my hand, and as do all good Catholics in the supreme moments of life, crossed myself. I hardly knew what I had done until I found my right hand touching the shoulder nearest him and almost as if in answer to my action, which he could not have failed to observe, he lifted his hand, which still lay upon my left hand, and pushed back from his eyes the fallen streak of hair. Afterwards he did not replace it, though mine still lay where he left it.

“You are a Catholic?” he said abruptly.

“Yes, the Saurins have always been Catholics,” I answered. Then a silence fell between us that I feared. For some reason I did not understand, I began, in a voice at first a little strained and uncertain, to tell him of the love there had always been in my family for the beautiful old faith, of how much its forms and ceremonies meant to even the most irreligious of us. I told him legends of long-dead rakes and scamps among my paternal ancestors who, forsaking their sins, had gone from their own country to fight for the faith they loved in other lands. How never a Saurin for three centuries had died without a scapular about his throat and a *De profundis* on his lips. I told him how my mother, coming of a rigid Protestant American family, had yet, for love of my Irish father, embraced his faith with all the fervour of the convert, and taught me to love it as she did herself. I told him things, I knew not why, that had never been told out of my family before. Whether he was interested in my facts or the soft and even flow of my voice I cannot say, but the sweet and dangerous silence was dispersed, and a kind of fragrant peace fell around us, cooling our hands and quieting our hearts.

“Catholicism was the faith of my fathers, too,” he said at last, “but I suppose we fell away from it through wandering far from our own land. I have never practised Catholicism or anything else. What religion the love of my mother put into my heart is there still, and I recognise it in great moments—at this moment—but oh, Lord! Where do these things go? The clean, fair dreams of our youth, the fine visions we began to fight with, the generosity wide as the horizon! All lost in the scuffle, buried under the mud and scum. Do you know that tag of verse—

> “‘In the mud and scum of things
> Something, something always sings?’

“It is something, I suppose, in the end, if we still can hear the singing. There is some rag of grace left in us, perhaps, if we can recognise a man like Rhodes when we see him, and, leaving all, go after him into the wilderness to do or die for a man with bigger dreams than our own—but it isn’t much, by God! considering what dreams we ourselves set out with!”

He seemed for the moment to have forgotten me, and to be communing with the desolation of his own soul. I offered him no word. Something told me then, that no woman can quite comfort a man for his lost dreams. At the best she may be able to create others for him; but surely they are never quite the same as those first dreams that had the freshness of the morning on them. Even as I mourned for him his mood changed, and he laughed with a laugh that turned him into a joyous boy.

“Listen to the river!” said he, laughing. “Listen to the jackals chanting their dirge of the empty stomach! Smell the rolling leagues of emptiness! Look at that beauty lying there in the grass! Oh, I tell you, this is good enough for a man! One can get back some of the old fair visions here. One might even go back to the ‘gold for silver’ creed that Whyte Melville put into some of us long ago!”

“The ‘gold for silver’ creed?”

“Do you not know your *Bones and I*? They were the last of my prophets.”

He began to misquote, laughing a little, but without any bitterness at all now:

“Gold for silver: old lamps for new: stack your capital in the bank that in the end pays cent for cent—the bank of human kindness, where the bonds are charity, help to the broken-down, sympathy with the bust-up, protection to the weak-kneed, encouragement to the forlorn, etc; and afterwards the inscription on your tomb or in some one’s memory:

“‘What he spent he had: what he saved he lost! What he gave he has.’

“Ah! what a long time since I heard those words, and believed that any one could be such a fool as to try and live up to them!”

“How can you say that?” I said. “It is still your creed. If ever any one protected the weak-kneed and encouraged the forlorn you have done it to-night.”

At that we both began to laugh. The shadows had fled from his brow, and his face had no more marks on it than Dick’s when he and I played together as children. Indeed, we were both as happy as children. Later he stepped down from the cart to feed the fires and fetch my rugs from where they still lay on the ground. He wrapped them round me,

for the air had grown very chill, and told me to sleep. And I did, for the heavy weariness of the small morning hours had suddenly stolen upon me.

When I awoke the stars were pale in the sky, and dawn, with pearl and purple and amber on her feet, was treading the distant hills. A long line of red-legged birds streaked overhead, calling to each other as they passed. The rush of the river, which could now be plainly seen glinting between the trees, was like music on the air. A cloak of silver dew lay over grass and fern and the massed foliage of the bush; and little veldt flowers were lifting their pink faces to give forth a sweet scent. Against the faint rose and amber of the horizon a blue spiral of smoke ascended from a newly-built fire, on which the kettle was already boiling for breakfast. The only grim thing to be seen in all that fair place was the long, honey-coloured body of the dead lion, stretched upon the carpet of grass and flowers. His great shaggy head lay amidst a mass of bright wild lilies: but already little beetles and ants were busy about his blood-reddened mouth and open eyes. It was the only joyless thing to be seen, but it had no power to sadden me. I, too, was full of the glad spirit of morning, and my singing heart gave thanks as it had never done before for the magic gift of life.

Chapter Three.

Cats' Calls.

> "Originality, like beauty, is a fatal gift."

Once more I was alone in the coach with my driver, moving onwards towards my destination—Fort Salisbury. In an hour or two I should reach Fort George, which was only a day or so from my journey's end. My new driver, also a Cape boy, was a big, honest-looking fellow named Hendricks, one of the most trusted men in the coach service, and possessing no traits in common with the last man, except a vocabulary and an affection for "cold tea." This man had been waiting at the other side of the river with fresh mules and another cart the morning after my adventurous night on the banks of the Umzingwani. The river had been still too full to cross by cart, so a wire apparatus for slinging mails and passengers from one bank to another had been brought into requisition. My new friend and the driver (grown curiously meek and submissive after I know not what threats and imprecations flung at him in an unknown tongue when he emerged from his fastness into the light of day) then engaged together in furthering a nerve-racking business of which I was to be the chief victim. First the mails were taken out and divided into lots weighing about 130 pounds, then each lot was placed in a sort of canvas bucket and slung across the broad sweeping stream on a piece of wire about the thickness of a clothes-line. When all the mails were over, and my luggage, I thought my turn had come and advanced with what I hoped was a nonchalant air (though my knees were trembling under me) to my fate. But the blue-eyed man was already in the bucket and whizzing across the stream. Half-way over the wire sagged hideously, and the sack touched the water. I closed my eyes with a sick feeling, and when I opened them again it was to see him just starting to recross. As he jumped from the bucket on my side of the river once more, I realised that he had been trying the wire for me. Then my nonchalance was not all assumed, as I took my turn in the horrible contrivance, for what had carried him would surely bear me safely. All the same, it was sickening to feel the slither of the bag on the wire, to see the grey-yellow water shining beneath me smooth and waveless as a mighty torrent of cod-liver oil, to experience the sag in midstream and the extra jerk of the wire to overcome it. I confess that at that moment I was not captain of my soul. I was not captain of anything, even the canvas bag! I should have given up the ghost if I had not known that a strong brown hand was on the wire, and blue keen eyes watching every movement. I think it was the most *effarouchant* of all my experiences, and I was still rather limp when he, having crossed once more, came to me standing by the new post-cart. He held out his hand.

"But what are *you* going to do?" I asked in surprise.

"Going back across the river," said he. "I have just come over to say good-bye."

"Are you not coming on too?"

"Not just yet. First I have a little business to transact on the other side. Later, I shall take my horse and swim a drift I know of about three miles lower down."

I stared at him in astonishment. What business could he possibly have on the other side of the river, unless it was to skin the lion? Then I suddenly remembered his threatening words about the driver the night before, and the man's meek mien that morning.

"I hope you are not going to beat the driver," I said quickly.

"Good-bye," said he, still holding out his hand.

It naturally annoyed me to have my remarks ignored in that way. I looked at him coldly.

"You will please not hurt the man on my account," I said stiffly.

"Then I must hurt him on my own," he calmly replied. "These men have to be taught their duty to white ladies."

It vexed me curiously to think that he should so resent having been left alone with me all night that he must needs punish the driver for it.

"I hate brutality," I said. "The thought of one man hitting another makes me feel sick. I think you are very vindictive."

"I am sorry," said he, but there was not the faintest trace of sorrow anywhere about him; in fact, he was smiling me hardily in the eyes and I saw that he had every intention of beating the man in spite of my wishes. I turned away from him to hide the vexation that surged through me, and began to arrange my rugs in the cart, but when I had finished he was still there, and with something further to remark.

"Miss Saurin, I hope you will pardon me for saying that it would be unwise of you to let any one know that your last night's vigil included my society."

That was really too much! I stared at him haughtily, utterly taken aback by such a remark and its inference. But he met my eyes quite unabashed. It occurred to me at the moment that he had probably never been abashed in his life, and the idea did not please me.

"I'm afraid I do not quite understand you," I said at last in a frozen voice, "but if it is that you do not wish me to boast of having made your acquaintance—I can assure you that you need have no fear."

Even his hardened pelt was pierced at last, though he tried to hide the fact under a sardonic grin that did not become him in the least. He threw back his rag of black hair—a sign of battle I was beginning to recognise.

"Hardly that. I was merely proffering a little friendly advice, but I remember now that you do not take kindly to advice —or you would not be here." He grinned again, and I flushed with anger. After the terrors of the past night to fling the advice of people like Elizabet von Stohl into my teeth!

"I believe myself perfectly capable of minding my own affairs," I said. "Further, I very much resent your inference that people would dare to talk scandal about me."

"Evidently you do not know people as well as I do." I merely looked over his head. "Certainly you will allow that I know my own reputation better."

There was an opening for a dart, and I flung one with all my might.

"That is a matter that does not interest me. I do not even know your name, and probably never shall."

But do you think that crushed him? No! "Oh, you will hear it," he said with his careless smile, "'blown back upon the breeze of fame,' perhaps—of a kind. In any case we are bound to meet again."

"Oh, will it be necessary?" I said, driven to open rudeness by his imperturbability, which I considered very much like insolence. "Will it really be necessary if I thank you *now* for—for the services you have been so extremely kind as to render me?" His withers remained unwrung. "You cannot escape meeting even your open enemies in this country. And it will indeed be necessary to *me*, even if I thank you now for the most wonderful night of my life."

Without waiting for any newly-barbed darts I might or might not have had ready, he swiftly departed, leaving one last hardy blue smile in my eyes. A moment later he was slithering across the river on the screeching, wriggling wire.

We had left the bare, bleak kops and tall strange trees of Bechuanaland far behind now, and had crossed the last of its wild and fearful rivers. Everywhere about us stretched level country, which gave a curious impression of the sea, for the thick, hay-like grass, bleached almost to whiteness and as high as a man's waist, swayed perpetually like pale waves. Even when the land seems a heated brazen bowl and the upper air is faint and heavy with breathlessness the veldt grass has some hidden air, some "wind from a lost country," flitting amongst it making it sway and gently whisper.

Patches of trees grew against the horizon, but they were short and scrubby and in the nature of "bush," though occasionally one was to be seen by itself, sprayed like an ostrich feather upon the skyline. Others, of a singularly gnarled squat type, sent all their branches up to a certain height and then flattened them out and wove them together so that the top of the tree presented the appearance of a strong, but rather stubbly, spring-mattress.

Far away on the edge of the landscape, never seeming to come nearer or recede farther, was the usual line of amethyst hills. Nearer hills were saffron coloured, and some turning pale pink in the evening light. Everywhere the eye was feasted with colour. Sard-green bushes stretched branches like candelabra high above the pale grass, and from each branch sprouted forth flowers that were like leaping scarlet and yellow flames. Creepers that had great black-pupilled crimson eyes hung from trees; and purple clematis, tangled with "old man's beard" and some waxen white flower that gave forth an odour like opopanax, dripped and clung from huge rocks that, standing alone, looked as though they had jerked themselves loose from some mighty mountain of the moon, and dropped abruptly into the silence and solitude of this wild place. Sometimes an enormous boulder with a massive flat top would be balanced on a single narrow point, showing like a miniature Table Mountain set amongst seas of swaying grass. I imagined it would be very pleasant to sit on one of them, high above the dust and the unfragrant odour of the mules, but the rocky sides looked steep and inaccessible; and my fate was still to swaggle wearily across the landscape.

I was so tired that even the glorious hues of sunset could not comfort my soul. I drank them in, it is true, but I would rather at that time have had a cup of tea. My skin was parched with heat and dust, and I was wearied to death of being bumped and banged and sitting crumpled up in a ball.

The driver had put back the hood of the cart so that we might get what air was going, but when suddenly some large, drops of rain began to fall on me I felt, like Job, that my sorrows were too many.

"Driver!" I cried, "you don't mean to tell me that it is now going to rain!"

"Ach! That's nixney," he replied. "We'll be in Fort George before ten minutes. See the lights? *Vacht* till I wake them

up.”

He produced the post-horn, and I hastily stopped my ears, but that did not prevent me from hearing the series of frightful blares that he gave forth. The noise cheered the mules, and they took heart of grace and threw themselves into a last desperate run. The road became smoother and the barking of dogs could be heard. I slipped on my coat and tied the ends of my veil under my chin into a big enough bow to hide behind, for I had learnt with diminishing enthusiasm what it meant to be an occupant of the mail-coach, arriving in a small township in the African wilds. I well knew that every man, woman, and dog in the place would be there to meet and examine me with curiosity. I rather liked it at first, when I could still contrive to be fresh and uncrumpled after a day amongst the mail-bags. But after a fortnight in one gown, my face decorated with tan and mosquito bites, and absolutely a *crack* in my best lip (the top one, of course, though the other one is charming, too) I naturally did not feel ardent about meeting a lot of people. I held a hasty consultation with the driver between his yells at the mules.

“You say there is a good hotel here, Hendricks?”

“Yah, Miss... there’s the Queen’s... and Swears’s Hotel... Mr Swears is a very good Baas... keeps a very nice bar, and a good brand of dop.”

Upon this warm recommendation of the man with the profane name I instantly decided to go to the Queen’s, and ordered him to drive me there as soon as we got into the town. But he argued that he must go to the post-office and discharge the mails, so then I knew there was no hope for me. The only thing to do was to bless Heaven for such small mercies as chiffon-veiling, darkness, and a drizzle of hot rain that might keep the curious away. But, regardless of such trifles, there was the expectant crowd arranged before the post-office. Dimly I descried about fifty people, most of them men, as usual, but I could hear women’s voices and laughter. I tried to hide behind the mail-bags, but Hendricks began to seize them and fling them forth with a splendid *sang-froid* into the road. Suddenly I heard my name spoken in a woman’s voice—a very languid, weary voice.

“Where is your passenger, Hendricks—Miss Saurin? Didn’t she come?”

I knew then it was no use hiding any longer. Dick had evidently been kind enough to ask some one to meet me. Bother his kindness! I leaned out, swathed in chiffon, and said more sweetly than I felt:

“I am Miss Saurin.”

A woman mounted on the cart step and peered in at me, and to my astonishment I recognised my sister-in-law.

“Judy!” I cried in astonishment.

“Oh Deirdre! how could you come? Dick has been almost out of his mind with worry about you, wiring to me all day long for news. What makes you think you will be amused up here?”

This was not the kind of welcome I had expected after travelling five or six thousand miles to make a visit!

“I thought you lived in Salisbury,” I said rather flatly.

“So we do. But several of us came down here for a change of air, and now the Company won’t let us go back because of the threatened trouble with Lobengula.”

“Is Dick all right?”

“Oh, quite; but he couldn’t get away. I’ll tell you all about it presently. Are you going to get down here, or let Hendricks drive you to my hut?”

“Oh, do you live in a hut, Judy? How delightful! I’m longing to live in one. No, I’d rather not get down here. You direct the driver where to go.”

She dropped from the step, and I heard her talking in her languid voice to the people all round and giving directions to the driver, who was still slinging mail-bags and handing out packages to people who all peered in and tried to get glimpses of me. There was an enormous amount of chatter and laughing, and a man, presumably the postmaster, was making a terrible scene with Hendricks because a mail-bag was missing. But Hendricks was impervious to insult. He merely replied:

“I drive Zeederberg’s mules, don’t I? Well! What you asking me about the scarlet mail-bag for? *Allemagte*!”

A stream of wicked words flowed eloquently from his lips, English and Dutch all mixed up together and sounding like successive explosions of bombshells. However, there was some one in the crowd who did not approve of Hendricks’s vocabulary at all:

“Stop that, Hendricks. What do you mean?” a voice demanded.

Hendricks was instantly silent, and having at last emptied his cart of all but me and my luggage, he grabbed the reins sullenly and drove off muttering to himself:

“I drive Zeederberg’s mules, don’t I?” with some phrases appended which startled even the mules. Judy had told him to drive straight to her hut, but he pulled up first at Swears’s and got a drink of soup in a glass; at least he called it a “soopie,” though the aroma that reached me was not of soup at all, but the same old black-bottle, cold-tea aroma that I had known all the way up, and that would for ever be associated in my mind with South African scenery.

Judy's hut was made of mud and thatch, like the rest of those I had seen in all the other townships, only to my disappointment it was not round like a beehive, but low and long—rather like a thatched barn with a verandah to it. But the front door stood open and I could see into a sitting-room that looked homelike and cosy under the rays of a rose-red lamp.

Judy came out at once, and three natives appeared behind her, eyeing me curiously and shyly.

"The boys will bring in your things, dear. How tired you must be! Do come in. I have ordered something for you to eat at once, and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe and Mrs Brand and Miss Cleeve and Mrs Valetta have all come to welcome you, too. They're all Salisburyites."

"How sweet of them," I said crossly. I thought they might very well have postponed their welcome until the next day. Neither did they look particularly ardent as Judy introduced them. They touched hands languorously and sank back into their chairs, fanning themselves with palm-leaf fans and gazing piercingly at me. I blessed the god of chiffons once more and retired into the dimmest corner I could find. It was quite a big room, pretty and odd, and had been furnished and arranged (as I afterwards learned) by the Native Commissioner for his wife who was coming from England very shortly. He had lent it in the meanwhile to Judy and the lady I had last been introduced to—Mrs Valetta. All the panoply of native warfare was displayed upon the walls: shields, knives, assegais, head-plumes, and bracelets; besides much-coloured bead-work, snuff-boxes, and curious gourds. The chairs were covered with beautiful fur rugs, called *karrosses*, and lion and wild-cat skins lay upon the floor.

I longed and prayed that Judy would take me away at once to bed, or, failing that, would let me at least go and remove one of my many coats of dust, but she pushed me into a chair, saying:

"Here is your tray, dear. Now do take off your veil and eat something."

I was obliged to do as she asked with as much grace as I could summon: but the dormant cat which is in every woman began to wake up in me and sharpen its claws; for all round about me in the room I began to hear the soft and gentle purring of other felines, and in eyes that raked my sun-flushed face and disarranged hair (grey eyes and brown, Persian blue and an odd shade of green) I recognised the same expression I had often seen in the eyes of our big tortoise-shell cat, Elaine, when she was stalking a bird in the garden.

There was antagonism in the air. As I sat amongst the kaffir curios before an amazing tea-tray I felt it. For some reason these women who had come to welcome me resented my advent and were maliciously inclined towards me. I am peculiarly sensitive to the mental atmosphere and I felt it. Even Judy was not really friendly. She had changed very much since I had last seen her. A peevish look hovered round her mouth and all her brightness and dash seemed to have been swallowed up in a great languor.

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, a little, soft kitten of a woman with striped grey eyes and the softest, whitest paws in the world, peached out and gave me the first scratch.

"Your complexion is spoiled for ever, Miss Saurin. When any one with your peculiar shade of mahogany-coloured hair gets so badly sunburnt as that the skin never recovers. I am awfully sorry for you." She looked perfectly delighted.

"And your nose will always be subject to sun-blisters after this. Wretched, isn't it?" Miss Cleeve said this.

I stared at them both, in surprise and indignation. My hair is not mahogany-coloured at all, but exactly like a mass of crushed wallflowers, and I am extremely fond of my nose, which is small and pale and distinguished. It may at that time have been faintly sunburnt, but certainly there was no *slightest* sign of a blister on it. Miss Cleeve herself had one of those wide-nostrilled noses that are called by their owners artistic, but which *I* consider degenerate.

"Oh, every one loses their good looks in this desolate place," said Judy. "It is a truly awful country, isn't it, Constance?"

Constance was Mrs Brand, a plump, tan-coloured woman with a silent manner and a leathery skin. She had so far given no sign of life, but she now made a graceful though brief contribution to the conversation.

"Rotten!"

She then beat a spot of dust off her skirt with a riding-crop she held in her hand, stuck out her boots and stared at them. I observed that they were riding-boots of the kind that finish somewhere near the throat, and I thought how very hot and uncomfortable they must be for evening wear. She was evidently eccentric, for my eye mechanically travelling upwards made the further discovery that she was dressed in a riding-habit. Certainly it fitted her as though it had been painted on her. But what an odd garment in which to make an evening call!

It is quite simple for plump women to have well-fitting clothes. All that is necessary is to have the things made tight enough—the plumpness does the rest. But I have noticed that a silent manner nearly always accompanies that kind of good figure. Women who have it do not seem to have any desire to talk, and when they do it is rather crossly—almost as if they had indigestion. They are also very fond of sitting down.

It is the graceful, curvy woman who has a bad time at her dressmaker's, being fitted and fitted and fitted. Personally, I did not own a rag that hadn't cost me hours of weary standing and having pins stuck in me before a mirror.

The behabited lady had transformed the glances of her sulky eyes from her boots to me with such a disagreeable expression in them that I couldn't help thinking how pleasant it would be to tell her these things. In the meantime, Miss Cleeve was speaking again.

"I can't think what anyone wants up here," she said, with an air of the utmost *ennui*. I looked at her keenly, for I had

heard her name on my journey up. At that time girls were not plentiful in Mashonaland; in fact, Miss Cleeve had so far enjoyed the distinction of being the only one in the country. People had hinted to me that she would not regard my arrival with ardour, and I couldn't imagine why. Personally, I am fond of other girls, and think them ever so much nicer than married women, who get most frightfully tiresome with their stupid airs of mystery and superiority. Just as though any one couldn't be married if they wanted to! I think it requires far more cleverness in a charming girl to keep unmarried.

Annabel Cleeve had been described to me as "not exactly pretty but extremely fascinating"; and it was further said of her that she could marry almost any man in the country if she wanted to. But as I said before I didn't think *that* so wonderfully clever.

Her complexion appeared to be pale, dusky, mysterious, everything that is romantic; but she had her back, quite by accident of course, to the rose-red lamp, so it was rather difficult to tell. Only I *have* known those romantic lamplight complexions to bear in the daylight an extraordinary resemblance to Indian curry. I couldn't see her eyes very well, but I afterwards discovered that they were a pretty though rather cold grey. It was a pity that she always kept them half closed, for it gave her a rather *blasé* air. Like so many *chic* girls she hadn't any girlishness at all about her; it seemed to have all been swallowed up in *chic*. Certainly her hat was very clever.

Mrs Valetta was the only one in the room who had not yet tried her claws on me, the reason evidently being that she was too tired.

She was a wicked-looking woman with weary manners. Even her coat and skirt hung on her as though it was worn out with fatigue, although it was really quite smart. After saying "De do?" to me she had sunk with a Mrs-Pat-Campbellish air into a low chair, and closed her eyes as though hoping it was the last act she need perform on earth. It was she who had the Persian-blue eyes; and die wore a felt hat slouched over them and fastened up at the side with a B.B. Police badge.

Quant-à-moi, I was not at this time at all smart. It is true that my Panama hat had come from Scotts, my grey velvet-corduroy coat and skirt had *Lucile: rue de Rivoli* in gold letters on its waist belt, and my shoes and stockings bore the stamp of the good Peter Yap. Nevertheless, I was not smart. Africa's sunshine, dust, mail-bags, winds, rains, grass-ticks, mosquitoes, and mules had done evilly unto me and my clothes, and my appearance had not the original charm and freshness peculiar to it. Wherefore I felt very much out of tune with the world in general, and most particularly with these ladies who scrutinised me with such curiosity and penetration.

If they had shown the smallest scrap of enthusiasm or pleasure it would have been different. But no: there they sat, watchful and grim as man-eaters. With the exception of the leathery-faced one, of whom I afterwards heard that she ate, drank, slept and had her being on horseback, and never wore anything but riding-kit, they were all imperturbably cool and fresh in light dresses, though I thought it curious that no one wore a dinner gown. Perhaps it was because they had not dined, but only "partaken of a meal" like the remarkable one which stood before me on a tray. Judy had begged me to excuse it, saying that dinner had been over for some two hours and the boys had been obliged to scratch up a meal from the ends of the earth for me. It had that appearance. There was a *very* hard-boiled egg, a box of sardines, a dish of terribly *déclassé* potatoes, and a cup of tea. Accidentally, there was also a plate of tomatoes, freshly plucked, with a bloom on them like a mist on a ripe plum, and for these I was truly grateful. I cut them into slices and with my bread-and-butter made little sandwiches which assuaged my hunger and thirst at the same time.

The grey-eyed kitten again addressed me:

"Dear Miss Saurin, have you brought any *poudre de riz* with you? No one here has any thing but Fuller's Earth, and you know how greasy that makes your nose."

I had no such knowledge. However, I answered civilly:

"Yes, I have *poudre de riz* and every kind of thing made by Rimmel and Piver and Guerlain. My sister-in-law wrote me that these things were hard to get here, so I brought bags full."

An electric wave of enthusiasm passed round the room, and for a moment Judy looked almost rapturous, until I added, "They are all with my luggage, which is coming up by waggon."

"What!" cried Mrs Skeffington-Smythe. Miss Cleeve bit her lips, and Mrs Valetta, looking wickeder than ever, closed her eyes apparently for ever. Mrs Brand was the only one who remained unmoved, but it was clear that her tanned face and a powder-puff had never made acquaintance. Judy gave a little cold laugh.

"It might have been just as well to stuff a box of *poudre de riz in* your pocket."

"Dear Judy, my pockets were stuffed with the necessaries of life—tea, sugar, soap, sometimes even bits of meat; they called it *biltong*, but it was really nothing more or less than dried meat."

"Disgusting!" murmured Miss Cleeve. Evidently she had never suffered the exigencies of a coach journey. She must have arrived by balloon. They glanced coldly at my battered dress-cases and hat-boxes which stood piled by the door.

"All packed to the brim with absolute necessities," I said. "The post-cart regulations allowed one to carry exactly sixty-four pounds. Of course I carried far more, but they charged me eight pounds, six shillings, and fourpence excess. The transport-waggon people promised to have my trunks in Salisbury in four weeks' time, and I thought if I stayed about six weeks that would give me some fresh gowns to wear here, and an outfit to return in."

In the smile which greeted my words as I explained this to them I could not but recognise grimness as well as malice.

The horsewoman proffered some gloomy information.

“Your things will take six months to get up here—if they ever arrive at all.”

“Why, what is likely to happen to them?”

She shrugged, and spoke in jerks.

“Wet season coming on. Transport drivers take ten times longer than in dry season. Get stuck in mud-holes. Sit for weeks on river banks waiting for floods to go down. Roads sometimes so bad they abandon their loads. Leave them piled up by the roadside for next waggons to bring. Next waggons usually open them and help themselves to what they like best. Kaffirs also come and help themselves. Once when I was travelling with my husband amongst the kaffir kraals in Bechuanaland I came across a native girl wearing a pink satin ball-gown that I had last seen at my dressmaker’s in Kimberley and which had been dispatched by waggon with a lot of other things.”

I could not help wondering who would have looked funnier in the pink satin ball-gown—Mrs Brand or the black girl.

“Yes, and then there is the sad tale of Mrs Marriott,” chimed in Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, gazing at me with her striped eyes. “She came up here to be married, bringing her wedding-gown and a few things with her in the coach, while her *trousseau* and the other things for the house were sent by waggon in three enormous cases. Well, the coach had an accident crossing a river, and she lost everything she had with her, and arrived here in a grey skirt and a pink print shirt which she was married in. That was six months ago—but if you get up early-enough in the morning you will meet Mrs Marriott doing her shopping before any one is about, still wearing her grey skirt and pink print blouse.”

“Impossible!” I cried, petrified. “Well, there you are! Her three packing cases never arrived, that’s all.”

“But how frightful! Surely she could have been helped out with some kind of wardrobe. Surely you—” I looked from one to another of them.

“Oh, she’s not one of us,” said Judy carelessly. “She’s a Port George woman. We couldn’t very well offer to do anything. Besides, they say she is quite unapproachable. I believe the women here were ready to be friendly, but she rebuffed all advances.”

“She has other troubles, besides lack of a wardrobe,” said Miss Cleeve dryly.

“No one has ever been inside her house even,” said Mrs Skeffington-Smythe. “Very silly of her, I think. In my opinion it always does one good to tell one’s troubles to some one else.”

At this Mrs Valetta gave a dry laugh that drew my attention to her, but she still had her eyes closed.

“Ah, Porkie,” said Miss Cleeve, “we haven’t all your simple, confiding nature.” Porkie, otherwise Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, threw her a glance that was neither simple nor confiding.

“Dear Anna, thank Heaven I am exceptional in having nothing to confide,” she retorted with a sort of perky significance.

How tired I felt of them all, and how disappointed! They were full of petty malice and empty bitterness and were making me just the same. I already felt a blight on the joy that Africa had waked in me. As day by day I had sped across the wide, rolling plains and rivers, in the generous sunshine, I had seemed to feel my soul expand and be set free from the littlenesses of life. Now here, right up in the heart of the wide continent where I had dreamed of finding simple-hearted people living happy, sincere lives—here were the petty things of life once more—empty malice, small talk, and aching hearts caused by a lack of *poudre de riz*! And not a sign of Lobengula and his six wives!

I finished my tomato sandwiches and sighed for my disillusionment. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe spoke me kindly:

“My poor child! you must be terribly warm in your heavy coat. Why don’t you take it off?”

“Yes, I think I really must,” I said, glad of a reason to rise and depart. “I am so very tired, Judy. I hope you will forgive me if I ask to go to bed at once.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, and they all chorused “Of course,” and began to put on their wraps to go. “It was horrid of us to come in so soon,” they said, “but we simply *had* to welcome you. It is sweet having some one new; it is so sinfully dull up here. Of course, knowing that you had arrived so recently from home, we couldn’t resist coming straight away. *Do* forgive us. Goodnight. Do rest. You look *positively haggard* with fatigue.”

That was the last poisoned arrow they flung at me. But I received it heroically, for I observed that Judy and Mrs Valetta, who still remained seated, had discarded their languor and weariness for a moment and were sharing a malicious smile. I should have liked to take down one of the assegais from the wall to them, but I had to content myself with saying dryly:

“It is really too charming of you all to welcome me so warmly!”

Mrs Valetta continued to smile in her sleep, but Judy resumed her languor like a wrap as the door closed on the others.

“Ah! we all live in each others’ houses up here—and know each others’ secrets. You will get used to this happy state of things if you mean to stay long, Deirdre.”

This last somewhat enquiringly, I thought; but I had no intention of issuing a statement at that stage. I made no response, only nodded good-night to Mrs Valetta and followed Judy to my room.

While she was lighting candles on the dressing-table she said:

"Nina Skeffington-Smythe was simply dying for you to take off your coat, so that she might see what kind of figure you have, and was dreadfully disappointed when you didn't respond to her invitation."

I stared at my sister-in-law reflectively, thinking how she had changed, and what bad luck it was to have to stay here amongst all these unfriendly women instead of being able to go right into the wild, deep heart of Africa. For the first time in my life I regretted not being a man. I even regretted my lions that were hyenas!

"Are we likely to be here long?" I asked abruptly.

"Heaven knows! I have begged Colonel Blow, the Magistrate, to let you and me go on to Salisbury to-morrow in the coach, but he won't. He says that low we are here we must stay until the trouble with Lobengula is all over. You know, of course, that they are sending an expedition against him. Two columns are starting as soon as they have all the horses they want, and all the men from here are going to join them. I feel sure that Dick will go with the Salisbury Column if I don't get back in time to stop him."

"But you surely won't try to stop him, Judy? Poor old boy! Fighting is his profession, after all, and how he will love to get back to it. Just imagine how you would if you were a man. I know I should."

"That's all very well, Deirdre, but Dick might get killed. And it's so uncomfortable here, too," she continued. "Mrs Valetta, and I, and now you, all stuffed together in this tiny house not big enough for one." Her tone was frankly resentful.

"I'm awfully sorry, Judy. Of course, if I had known how uncomfortable I should make you I would not have come. But I had no idea until I was nearly here that this war business was so far advanced."

"Oh, they have been making preparations for some time, but very quietly, so as not to give the Matabele the advantage of knowing our plans. But the time is close at hand now. Mr Rhodes is up in Salisbury, and Dr Jim is backwards and forwards all the time between here and Victoria and Charter, and the men everywhere are as excited as they can be over the chance of war. They are only waiting for a last consignment of horses, then they'll go, and we wretched women will be left behind to be shut up in what they call a *laager*."

"Even that might be interesting if there were not such a lot of cross, catty women about," I thought, and was indiscreet enough to say something of the kind. Judy immediately fell upon me with a dagger.

"I always think it such a pity when girls don't like other women," she said, in a stuffy little voice. "It seems to me there is something lacking in a nature like that."

"I do like other women, Judy, but I don't think those who were here to-night liked me much. They made me feel like a newly arrived favourite in a harem."

It *was* rather a rude thing to say, but really they had been very annoying, and Judy as much as any of them. She answered me in an extremely bored voice.

"You mustn't fall into the mistake that women are jealous of you simply because they take an interest in your appearance, dear."

"Oh, I don't," I said wearily. "I am quite used to having an interest taken in my appearance."

This annoyed her very much, so she pretended not to hear, and continued:

"It would be rather absurd if you did, here, for all the Salisbury women are by way of being good looking, and really, dear, you are not looking your best. Of course, I *know* you must be very tired."

Tired! After a journey of fourteen days and nights and adventures enough to turn my hair white! After being nearly drowned in rivers and nearly eaten by lions, and getting blisters on my heels and mosquito bites on my hands, and grass-ticks all over me, and being left alone on the veldt all night with tigers and hyenas! Tired!

I thought of all my sufferings and my weariness, my ruined complexion, the sunburn on my nose and the blister on my heel, and I could openly and frankly have howled aloud. But I saw that the expression on Judy's face was neither of sympathy nor of sorrow. By an effort I controlled myself, and began to take my coat and hat and veil and things off. As I could see no pegs anywhere I hung them up on the floor, and as calmly as possible but very firmly I said:

"Do, please, let me go to bed."

"Certainly, dear."

How I wished she wouldn't "dear" me in that insincere and meaningless way.

Chapter Four.

The Sun Calls.

"I know not where the white road runs,
Nor what the blue hills are;
But a man can have the Sun for his friend,
And for his guide a Star."

I awoke to the far-off chink of china, a babble of native voices in the back regions of the house, and a glare of sunshine bursting through a small canvas window.

I closed my eyes again, and lay for a long time thinking of the soft, sweet-aired September mornings in Ireland, all grey and misty—trying to believe I was back there in my chintz-curtained bed in my chintz-covered room with the salt sting of the Atlantic coming in through the windows on the faint peat-scented breeze. I made myself believe that the chink of china was the chink of the morning tea-cup on Nora's tray, as she came in with my letters and a bunch of violets and a soft bright:

"Good-morning to you, Miss Deirdre! I hope it's not waking you I am."

At last I opened my eyes and stared about me. Ah! what a glare! Alas! how far off was Ireland, and what a different place this to my rose-chintz room! But what did that matter after all? I could go back when I chose, and in the meantime this was a new and strange land, with fascinations of its own that could not be disputed. Sleep had freed my heart from the paltry vexations of the night, and the spirit of the morning pervaded me once more. I felt nothing but glad to be alive in the gay and buoyant sunshine of which the room was full. It flickered on the bare white walls, and danced upon the pale shining mats that covered the floor. Afterwards I found these to be native mats made by the Mashonas. Every one uses them on their floors, and for verandah blinds. The natives bring them round to the door and one buys them for a shilling apiece. The walls of the room were bare and whitewashed, but they looked soft and powdery, and perhaps that was why there was nothing on them anywhere. The dressing-table was a draped affair, without legs, and so was the wash-hand-stand. A tall strip of unframed mirror stood on the former, leaning against the wall; on the top left-hand side it had a broken corner, over which a lace handkerchief had been arranged. At the foot of the mirror were some silver toilet articles and a *poudre de riz* box with a faded pink satin puff resting on it. There were no flowers, no pictures, no photographs. My dressing-case stood open on a chair, as I had left it the night before, and my clothes were still hung up on the floor. I sighed.

The little sigh I gave echoed back to me across the room, causing me to turn hastily towards a screen which was placed down the room, dividing it. It was a dull pink screen with golden storks meandering across it, and it might or might not have come from Japan, but seemed out of place in Mashonaland. It did not quite reach from wall to wall, and, to my astonishment, just beyond the top of it I could see Judy's face lying on a pillow. I had fallen asleep so swiftly the night before that I did not even know I was sharing the room with my sister-in-law.

She was in bed and still asleep. Her fair hair lay in two plaits down the folded sheet. Her lips were pale and slightly apart; her cheeks, faintly tinted, grew rosier towards the nostrils. She was still pretty, but she was losing her complexion, and the peevish lines I had noticed the night before showed more deeply round her babyish mouth. Her hands, resting before her on the quilt, had the calm, complacent look of hands that have grasped their fate and have got it safe. Her fingers were badly manicured, but her broad, gold wedding-ring shone with an assured, defiant glare.

She was a good deal changed from the Judy who had been the prettiest, daintiest girl in Wilts five or six years before. Dick's heart had been a house of many mansions until the hunting morn when he had first met Judy following the Duke of Beaufort's pack and had gone down before her grey eyes and pretty, appealing manners. Thereafter no more mansions in his heart, but only a chapel for adoration and prostration. Everything and every one else had gone by the board. I have seen that single-hearted devotion in husbands before, and always in the nicest kind of men; but I have noticed that it does not invariably make the marriage a wild success. The woman usually gets spoilt and selfish, and begins to think she is far too good for her husband. It is rather a sad sight then to see a fine man wasting his heart on some one who despises him for doing it.

For a year or two after their marriage it had been painful to those who loved him to watch Dick making ducks and drakes of his money and chances of a military career under the spell of his adoration for Judy. For her sake he resigned from his regiment when it was ordered abroad, and eventually left the army to have more time to be with her. For her sake he took a lovely house in Mayfair and lived with brilliant extravagance, throwing the dibs to the four winds as Aunt Betty (who has a respect for money) put it, until even his large income began to give out. But Judy (who, as the daughter of a poor baronet, had never been able to indulge her taste for the social life she adored) continued on her merry, expensive way until things got actually desperate with them, and one bright morning Dick was obliged to announce to her that unless he meant to live on his mother (which he didn't) they must pull stakes for some quiet little place in the country, where inducements to spend money would not be so pressing.

Judy was broken-hearted at the thought of going back to the life from which she hoped she had escaped for ever, but she consoled herself by choosing Surrey as her future home. In fact, she consoled herself so well that in a few months the financial position was worse than ever, and it really came at last to a question of Dick's taking the remains of his fortune to try for a fresh throw of the dice in some other country. Africa was chosen and they departed, Judy weeping and reproaching every one but herself. Dick had bought an ostrich-farm ready stocked, in the Free State, and for a time all went well; Judy said she adored the life of riding and driving and they made many friends in the capital which was close at hand. Then suddenly the ostriches, afflicted by some mysterious malady, began to die by scores. In a few months poor Dick was thousands of pounds to the bad, and the horizon scowled once more. Judy did her best to persuade him to let mother help him out of his difficulties, a course he had hitherto resisted with all his might, though my mother's heart and purse were always open to him. Judy wrote and begged me to use my influence with him, and I did, but while things were still unsettled my mother died suddenly, and almost directly afterwards came the American Bank crash, reducing us all to comparative poverty, and making poor Dick's horizon darker than ever.

But there was not much American respect for money in Dick. He was all Saurin and happy-go-lucky Celt, and I believe that except for Judy's sake he did not in the least mind being in deep waters. I gathered, too, that he was rather pleased if anything to break away from ostrich farming, which, he wrote me in confidence, was but a dull dog's life. The next I heard was that he had left Judy in Cape Town, and joined the pioneers who were to open up Mr Rhodes's new country in the north. Before many months Judy had joined him; and in love with the country and the men who had found it, he ventured the last of his capital in land near Salisbury. With the intention of making his permanent home there, he had started upon what promised to be a prosperous future in farming and horse-raising.

They had one little son, whom they had left in Durban, and who was to be brought up to them as soon as the trouble with the Matabele was finally adjusted.

I sighed once more as I looked at my own slim fingers. I had been too tired to take off my rings, and an opal and a diamond or two winked wickedly at me. I wondered if my hands would be like Judy's some day—calm and complacent and badly manicured! Just because some good man would come along and admire them and kiss them and think them the most beautiful hands in the world, and thereafter fold them in his breast while he himself took the wheel and did all the guiding through stormy seas, and all the hard work on land of fighting and gripping and parrying for place and position and money! It seemed to me that it would be rather hard on the good man if one didn't keep the hands just as fair and alive and beautiful as when they first attracted him: and rather mean to let them grow plump and complacent and gripless and neglected.

Of course, Dick was my brother, my wild, gay-hearted brother, and the handsomest boy in Ireland, and Judy was only my sister-in-law. And of course, no one ever thinks their sister-in-law *quite* nice enough for their brother. I wished to be quite just. Anyway, early morning reflections are always a mistake, so I gave them up.

I hopped softly out of bed, tipped up the canvas window, and peered out at the little township. Wattle-and-daub houses everywhere, some of them beehive shape, like kaffir huts, some of them barn-shape like the one I was in: but all with thatched roofs and some with verandahs, stuck here and there with apparent aimlessness, but not without a certain picturesque effect. Streets that were merely wide stretches of grass with a foot-path in the middle and wheel-ruts at the sides. A bush or a wild tree growing casually before a door. A porch made of packing-cases and clambered over by grenadilla, or a clematis-wreathed verandah, struck an individual note here and there. A plant with an enormous leaf and a floppy, sulphur-coloured flower seemed very popular and prolific. I afterwards discovered it to be the ubiquitous pumpkin.

There were many waggons about, all of them piled up with things, as though ready for departure.

I rather especially noticed a square-built hut, the walls of which rose no higher than about three feet, and from thence were open to the high-pitched thatched roof, except for native mats let down here and there in narrow rolls like blinds. It was rather like a primitive Japanese tea-house, and I thought how lovely it must be to sleep there at nights with all the mats rolled up and the stars peeping in. Evidently it belonged to a man, for just before its door sat a ring of black boys jabbering and cleaning a man's boots and a man's stirrups and other articles of riding-kit, whilst another boy was rubbing down a jolly chestnut mare with the same hissing noise grooms make at "home" when they are grooming. At a second glance I recognised the handsome head, the long graceful flanks, and the white hoofs of "Belle." So her master was here, and lived in this glorified tea-house!

A little wave of gladness trembled through me, I knew not why. A good way off I could see the glint of galvanised-iron roofs—evidently the shops; and in the centre of the township was a big brisk building with a tall conning-tower rising from it, and a high-walled yard beyond. I recognised the post-office where the coach had drawn up the night before.

A dear little ridiculous, consequential place, I said to myself, and laughed with a heart as light as a feather, for the air that came in at the window was like champagne. Nevertheless, I still had post-cart ache, and decided that a day in bed would be the only real cure for my utter bone weariness. I slipped back amongst my pillows.

Judy suddenly woke up, yawned, looked at her hands, drew one of them up to carefully examine a spot on it, then let her eyes travel round the room until in the course of time they encountered me. Then she gave a great start and put up her hands to her hair.

"Oh, Deirdre, how you startled me! I had quite forgotten about your arriving."

"*Merci, ma chérie*," I laughed, "but I hope your cook has not. One thing Africa has done for me is to provide me with a perpetual appetite. I don't know yet whether it is a good thing or not."

Having hidden her hands under the counterpane my sister-in-law regained her complacency.

"My dear child, it is a very bad thing; it is simply mockery, like all the other favours Africa bestows, for there is nothing here to appease your good appetite. I hope you will not expect buttered eggs and grilled ham, etc, or you will be terribly disappointed. Reimptje never gives us anything but mealie-meal porridge, and eggs boiled as hard as stones."

"I met those luxuries on the journey up."

"They are all any one ever has for breakfast in Mashonaland."

"In that case I shall go to sleep again for a week," I said, and turned my face to the wall.

"Oh! how unkind of you, Deirdre, when I am longing to hear all the news about everybody."

So we gossiped awhile, and I told her all the home news, and she explained to me how she came to be in Fort George

and away from Dick. It appeared that a slight epidemic of typhoid fever had broken out in Salisbury, and every one had become very much alarmed, as its origin could not be discovered. The hospital sisters were coping well with cases, but many men had decided to send their wives away for a while until the reason of the outbreak had been discovered. As several other ladies were starting for Fort George Dick had persuaded Judy that it might be a good thing for her also to get a little change.

“We came down by waggon with an escort of men, and it was awfully jolly and amusing at first,” said Judy. “But we are all rather sick of it, and would like to go back. At least I would. I don’t think Mrs Valetta cares very much, for she has an awful husband and is delighted to be away from him. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, though she pretends to adore her wretched little Monty, is not at all in a hurry to go back to *him*. She and Anna Cleeve are living in a tent together and affect to be enormous friends, calling each other by pet names, but they will have a terrible quarrel one of these days. Mrs Valetta lives in the hut next door, but there is an entrance from it into this, and she has her meals with me and is obliged to come in here to dress, as her hut has no looking-glass. I hope you won’t mind her coming. Of course she must see herself.”

I did not recognise any such necessity on the part of so wicked-looking a face, but I said nothing, and presently, after Judy had dressed and gone to make some inquiries on the subject of breakfast, Mrs Valetta, swathed in an ashen-blue kimono that matched her eyes, came wearily in and stood before the dressing-table. She began to take hold of some curls that were lying about on her forehead and to fluff them up with a hairpin. In the meantime she looked in the mirror at me, examining me carefully.

“Aren’t you going to get up?” she asked. “Your sister-in-law promised to take you round to the tennis-court this afternoon. Every one is very anxious to see you.”

“How kind of them,” I said, “but I really am too tired, Mrs Valetta. The thought of tennis in my present state makes my spirit faint.”

She considered me thoughtfully, still through the mirror.

“*I* think you will be foolish not to come. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe will tell all the men that it is because you are so burnt and blistered. They will get quite a wrong impression of you.”

I answered cheerfully: “They can get a fresh one when they see me. But do their impressions matter?”

This, for no earthly reason, annoyed her. She cast me a look of mingled irritation and curiosity which I received calmly. At twenty-one one can bear with a prepared heart the piercing scrutiny of “something over thirty.”

“Oh, yes: you will find that they matter. One has rather a bad time in this country if the men don’t like one.”

I could have told her that men always liked me, but it seemed brutal to inflict unnecessary pain.

“Really?”

“For one thing they have all the horses, and there is very little to do if one doesn’t ride. But, of course, that won’t affect you.”

“Oh, why?” said I, opening my eyes wide. “I’ve brought a habit with me and I adore riding.”

I thought of “Belle’s” white feet and my own tingled to be in the stirrups.

“Ah! but your vanity will take you much further than any Mashonaland horse,” said she, and loafed wearily from the room.

Really, that was *très drôle*! I couldn’t help laughing, first at her cross-patchiness and secondly at the idea of my being vain. For, of course, I am not vain at all, only these antagonistic women aroused my dormant cat, and made me want to say arrogant things. I felt sure that if I did not they would walk all over me, and that is a thing I never allow any one to do. It is bad for them.

The sense of disappointment I had felt the night before returned to me, but it was accompanied by the spirit of fight. If these women wanted battle, well they should have it, and I would fight them with their own weapons. However, it behooved me first to put mine in order. I presently arose and from my dressing-case secured a hand-glass and a pot of common or garden hazeline, which I had found to prove a more useful friend in time of need than all the Oriental creams that were ever buried with Persian princesses and rooted out again by the owners of beauty-parlours in Bond Street and Fifth Avenue. Having retired to my bed once more I fell to studying my appearance with an earnestness I had never before given the subject.

The old tragic look was peeping out of my gay face as usual. I jibed at it as always: but really I believe that without it I should not have been so charming and original looking.

My mother could never watch me long without tears coming into her eyes. She would say:

“Oh, Deirdre, what puts that look into the back of your eyes?”

And I would answer:

“Darling, what look? I was just thinking of a book, or a ride, or a new gown—nothing sad at all.”

“Well, it must mean something, Deirdre!” she would declare. “I fear for you. I believe you are predestined to some

terrible suffering or sorrow, and your soul knows about it and is afraid.”

“Nonsense, darling,” I always told her. “I’ll never let anything make me unhappy. No one shall turn me into a tragedy. I know too much about the joy of living.”

“Oh, Deirdre, don’t talk like that. It sounds as if you were daring Fate.”

So I was. I had always thought of Fate as she had been represented to me in a queer book of fancies and fables by a sardonic old French author.

“Fate is an old hag with a basket full of painted apples. She hands you out one, and you are so foolish as to take it, and when you bite it and find it rotten she smiles grimly and says, ‘I told you so’ (though she had not). And when you don’t like the taste of the paint she says, ‘But you must eat it to the core. Perhaps it will taste better there.’ (But it does not.)”

A Fate like that *ought* to be defied, and I felt sure that if every one did so she could never harm them. Tragedy is in us, and not in externals: Emerson says so. I refused to be a tragedy.

I laughed at Fate, and considered my complexion. Like everything about me it was unusual. It had a rich cream tint that blended perfectly with my wallflower eyes and hair. My mother arranged my colouring for me before I was born. She had a passion for reds and browns and ambers, and ardently desired to have a daughter with such colouring, so for all the months before I was born she used to have her rooms heaped with marigolds and wallflowers and nasturtiums and sit amongst them. People said she was a crazy American woman, full of eccentric ideas and notions, and perhaps she was; but she got what she wanted. For the velvet reds and browns and ambers of those simple but lovely flowers *did* reproduce themselves in my eyes and hair—at least every one said so—and the tint was in my skin, too, in an indescribable sort of way, and the effect was not at all unbecoming to my small, narrow, and extremely *retroussé* face. Did I ever say that every single thing about me turns upwards?—my chin, nose, cheekbones, lips—all have that curly, odd, rather fascinating upward tilt, and every single hair on my head turns up at the ends. Yes, I am very *retroussé*. Of course, I don’t say that it is pretty; but it is rather original I think.

After all, the sun had not done my skin so much harm as I thought. Indeed, I had often been in worse case after a week on the river, or a day’s hunting in hard weather, and thought nothing of it. As for my eyes and hair, “Time with her cold wing” might some day wither them, but Africa had certainly done them no harm so far. However, I decided to anoint myself in a royal manner with cold cream, and take a full day’s rest. Incidentally, I unpacked my war-paint and plumes, and shook the creases from my coats of mail.

Chapter Five.

The Heart Calls.

> “All charming people are spoiled. It is the secret of their attraction.”

On the second day after my arrival I descended upon my enemies in open field, or rather on open court. Judy, having reviewed my toilette before starting, was suddenly smitten with a violent headache, and said that Mrs Valetta would chaperon me to tennis.

In ordinary circumstances I should have felt distinctly mean about appearing amongst people who had for some time been cut off from shops and civilisation by about eight thousand miles of rolling land and sea, in a pale yellow muslin gown concerning which *Lucile* considered she had received special inspiration from Heaven, and a black chip Lentheric hat which no woman could look upon unmoved. However, I was not at that time considering the feelings of other women, but the ways of certain members of the family *felis*. It had come to my ears, through the kindly offices of my sister-in-law, that Mrs Skeffington-Smythe had informed the world at large that I was suffering from a *boil* on my nose and fifty-six mosquito bites variously distributed over the rest of my features. Miss Cleeve had contented herself with saying that she personally did not care for the new shade in hair—it had a pink tone in it that was *bizarre*. What Mrs Valetta said had not yet transpired, but looking at her as she slouched beside me in her tired coat and skirt, I felt sure that it was something equally malicious.

We arrived at the court in an hour of brazen heat. Four men were playing a sett, and several others were clustered round a tea-basket and Mrs Brand, who still wore her habit. On the other side of the court was a little group of women sitting in canvas chairs with white umbrellas over their heads and needlework in their hands. I was informed that these were the Fort George women—“frumps and dowds of the most hopeless order.” However, they appeared to be very happy and content in spite of this utter depravity on their part, and they had a number of nice, keen, clean-looking men with them. These did not stay for any time, having apparently business of their own to attend to.

“Husbands!” said Mrs Valetta scornfully, “and mostly shopkeepers and farmers at that.”

This naturally lessened my interest in them, for I did not suppose I should meet them if they belonged to the tradespeople class, and, in fact, I rather wondered what they were doing there at all. I had not at that time learned that in a new country like Mashonaland men can, and do, turn their hands to any trade or calling that is clean, without in the least prejudicing themselves or their future. Most of those nice, keen-looking men had left good professional livings to come adventuring to a new, sweet land full of radiant possibilities, but until some of the

possibilities materialised the main thing was to get a living in the best way that offered. But as I say, I did not at the time realise these things.

Mrs Valetta in her rôle of chaperon languorously introduced the Salisburian side of the court to me. Between that and the Fort George side was evidently a great gulf fixed. I did not, however, think any of the men on the *chic* side desperately engaging. There was an ancient doctor with baggy cheeks and the leer of a malicious wild goat in his left eye; a sepulchral-looking parson; a man with a beard, whose first cousin was a duke, but who wore dirty hands and an unspeakable shirt without a coat, and several boys of sorts (all scions, it transpired, of noble houses). But I never take the slightest notice of boys or beards.

The men on the court were better; a big, grave man with a frolicking laugh—Colonel Blow, the Magistrate; the Mining Commissioner, a sleek, fair man; a rather handsome, chivalrous-looking young fellow called Maurice Stair; and a man with turquoises set in his ears, and blue eyes that compelled me to look his way the moment I reached the court, and then to drop my lids with the old, strange weighted sensation on them. I did not look his way again until, all introductions over I was seated, when I put on my most cynical expression and let him see that I was not observing him, but the game.

He was not as tall as any of the others if you came to measure by inches, but his figure had a strong, careless air, and the distinction of his head appeared to give him an advantage of about thirty inches over every other man in sight. His hair was certainly getting thin, and I was delighted to observe it. It was really impossible to bother for a moment about a man who had such hair. The black hank of it hanging down was not beautiful. He looked about forty, too. Still, he couldn't have been that: no man who was old could have gone after the balls as he did. When I watched him I remembered the Bible words, “Like a swift ship upon the waters.” Of course, I knew all about sculpture, having lived with it and been brought up to it, so to speak, and I could not help knowing that only a beautifully built man could move like that. I could not help knowing it, but it did not interest me; in fact, it bored me, and I looked away from his careless glance when it came my way as carelessly as ever he looked in his life.

Presently the sett finished and the players came briskly towards the Salisburian side. But they were skilfully intercepted by Miss Cleeve and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, who chose this moment to arrive most gloriously arrayed.

“Yes, but why have you got on your best stars and stripes this afternoon?” the baggy doctor loudly demanded of them. He was evidently a person who said what he liked to every one. They turned away from him, disdaining to answer; but *I* knew why they were so glorious.

Miss Cleeve made haste to walk off with Colonel Blow to the end of the court, where there was a rustic seat evidently belonging to John Dewar and his sons, for their names were printed everywhere in black letters over the packing-case wood of which it was composed.

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe who had halted the blue-eyed man was reproaching him plaintively because he had not been to call on her since his return.

“But I haven't had a minute since I got back,” he protested.

“You've had time to call on Mrs Valetta. Why couldn't you have found a moment to come and see Anna and me?”

Mrs Valetta turned and bit at her:

“Kim and I have known each other for many years,—

> “Old friends are best—
> Old loves, old books, old songs.”

She broke off the quotation at that, smiling a little acrid smile. These things did not interest me in the least. I merely felt that I detested Mrs Valetta and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, and most of all the detestable man they were squabbling so crudely about. Mrs Valetta had returned to her business of introducing to me a large *queue* of freshly arrived men. She presented each with a brief biographical note, regardless of the protests of the victim.

“This is our disreputable postmaster, Mr Mark Bleksley. Plays the banjo divinely, but steals our letters.”

“Oh! I say—”

“Mr Maurice Stair—quite eligible—five hundred a year—Assistant Native Commissioner, and not bad-looking.”

“Handsome, Mrs Valetta—”

“These are Hunloke and Dennison. They keep a shop and rob us shamefully. Mr Hunloke is an American lawyer by profession, but he finds that overcharging us for bully beef pays better than law, and gives him more time for picnics.”

“I could take action on those statements. They are scandalous and libellous.”

“As for Tommy Dennison—”

“Please don't rob me of my good name, Mrs Valetta. It's all I have left. I'm as eligible as Stair, anyway.”

“No, Tommy. You are a younger son—and you have a past. Every one says you have.”

“Yes, but it’s past.”

“This is our only real Earl—Lord Gerald Deshon—Irish, penniless, and raving mad. You are a great friend of Miss Saurin’s brother, aren’t you, Gerry?”

“Yes, but I object to that biography. If you will listen to me, Miss Saurin—”

I did listen, but they all talked together, surrounding me and making a great deal of noise and saying the silliest, wildest things about themselves and each other; and a few yards away was that hateful voice, low and level, with the disturbing crake in it that suggested power and the habit of issuing orders. Whatsoever his orders were to Mrs Skeffington-Smythe she was evidently disinclined to carry them out.

“Nonsense!” she was protesting. “Let us go and talk to Anna. Don’t you think it is time you made up your quarrel with her? What did you fall out about, by the way?”

“You are mistaken. I’m sure Miss Cleeve has no quarrel with me.”

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe laughed gaily.

“You’re a fraud, Kim. Every woman has a quarrel with you.”

I hadn’t the faintest desire to hear these enigmatical sayings, but they all talked at the top of their voices, brandishing each others’ affairs. It appeared to be true that no one’s secrets were their own in this hateful country.

Mrs Valetta had broken up the crowd round me, ordering them to go and pick up sticks to boil the kettle for tea. They straggled away, complaining and abusing each other, to a patch of bush about five hundred yards from the court. The Earl was sent to Mrs Brand’s hut to fetch the milk which had been forgotten. I now saw myself menaced by the approach of the beard, and the thought of flight occurred to me, but at that moment the argument between the man and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe ceased.

“Oh, very well, since you are so very insistent,” she said crossly, and turning to me added sweetly, “Dear Miss Saurin, how is your poor nose? This is Major Kinsella. He is dying to inquire after it.”

If this was meant to cover us both with confusion it did not have the desired effect. At her words the smile suddenly left his face, and he bowed courteously; the steel-blue eyes looked into mine with a grave serenity. I could not but know that he was incapable of such gratuitous rudeness. Wherefore, instead of snubbing him, as I had intended to do, I bowed back to him and bestowed upon him the bright, cold smile of a frosty morning: I had the satisfaction of knowing that he recognised the quality of it, if Mrs Skeffington-Smythe did not. She changed her tactics.

“Major Kinsella, if you do not find me a seat I shall faint, I am so hot and tired. Do let us go over and sit in the shade with Annabel. It is much cooler there.”

Major Kinsella was something of a tactician himself it appeared.

“I hope you can have Miss Saurin’s seat in a moment. I am just going to ask her to play with me against Blow and Miss Cleeve.”

“I play terribly,” I said coldly. But he blithely announced that they all did, and no one cared a button; the main thing was to annoy your opponents as much as possible. As that rather appealed to my frame of mind at the moment, I eventually allowed myself to be beguiled to the court, where another sett had just broken up, Major Kinsella shouting unceremoniously to the others as we walked:

“Blow, come on. You and Miss Cleeve against Miss Saurin and me.”

The game was not uninteresting. My partner, whom Colonel Blow addressed as Tony, did all the work and only left me the slow balls, which I gracefully missed. The rest of the time we talked: at least he did. Secretly I preserved a bleak manner. He could not fail to plainly understand. But as I did not wish the whole world to know that I even cared to be cold to him, I filled in any prominent gaps in the conversation with a soft little laugh that he knew perfectly well was not meant for him, but that seemed to vex Miss Cleeve very much. For some reason not very apparent she lost her temper early in the sett, and said quite crossly that if we did not pay more attention to the game it was not worth while going on. That was *très drôle*, considering that we were winning all the time! I thought so, and Major Kinsella said it, laughing gaily. Her only answer was to slam the balls into *me* as hard as she could, and as I was out of practice and she a remarkably good player we should have come off badly in the end if it had not been for my partner’s speed and skill. I did not like him in the least, but I had to admit he could play tennis like a fiend.

Later, we approached the tea-table, which was a large packing-case presided over by Mrs Brand, and covered with a beautifully embroidered tea-cloth belonging to the postmaster, who kept bragging about it, and saying that it was the nicest cloth in South Africa, and how he had haggled for it at Madeira until the coolie was black in the face, and got it for half price.

Several of the men who had returned from the wood hunt with a few sticks in each hand lay upon the ground in an exhausted condition. The rest of us sat in a wide circle round the packing-case, and the men who had no seats took up a Yogi attitude upon the ground. The tea had a smoky flavour, but somehow it was the nicest tea I had ever tasted, and the smell of the dying fire of wood branches was fragrant in the air, seeming to remind me of some old sweet dream, until, glancing up, I saw Major Kinsella breathing it in too, like some lovely perfume, while he looked at me with a curious smile in his eyes. I knew then that we were both remembering the same thing; not a dream at all, but a real memory strangely poignant.

The sun had fallen to the horizon line and lay there like a great golden ball, sending long rays of fire into our very faces.

In those last searching beams, playing upon us so mercilessly it was revealed to me for the first time that though all were cheerful and merry every face about me wore some trace of stress or storm. For the first time I observed that men whose laughter was blithe enough had haggard eyes; that jests came gaily from lips that fell into desperate lines a moment later. On faces that were like tanned masks there were marks that dissipation might have made, or careless sins, or I know not what mischance of Fate. The women under their heavy veils and pretty hats had, to my suddenly sharpened vision, a pathetic disillusioned look, and some were careworn, and in the eyes of some there was the fateful expression of the losing gambler. Anthony Kinsella's dark countenance, too, was scored with deep lines between the eyes and about the mouth—hieroglyphics I had no gift to read, and his eyes were as inscrutable as the points of blue in his ears.

For the first time I forgot all the things that annoyed me in these people, and began to like them with pity in my heart.

Were these the claw-marks that the witch Africa put upon those who dwelt in her bosom? Were these the scars of her fierce embrace? Surely not. Surely a witch's cypher would be finer, more subtle, something secret yet plain as the sunlight to those who could read. What was it? Where was it? I sought it in the faces round me, and after a time I believed I found it, in the *nil desperandum* air that each flaunted like a flag. It was Hope. God knows what they hoped for—each for something different perhaps—but that was what woke the jest upon their haggard lips and brightened their disillusioned eyes; that was the secret gift the witch put into their hearts, the masonic sign she wrote across their brows. Hope!

> "Hope—the heroic form of despair!"

My heart strangely thrilled with the thought that if I had read aright the witch's symbol then I, too, was of the initiated. I was one of them—if only for a time!

While I thought and felt these things, I was vaguely aware that they watched me in a curious, searching way, as if I had for each of them some hidden message I had not yet delivered. Perhaps it was that coming from "home" and being quite new to the country I had a different look to the rest of them, I cannot tell; but there it was—they jested and laughed and gossiped with each other, but always their eyes came back to me with that wistful, searching glance. And my clothes seemed to have an extraordinary charm for them. One would have supposed I had dropped from some wonderful land from which they were life exiles, and that the glamour of that fair, lost country hung about me still. I saw men's eyes examining my shoes and the tucks in my gown; even the one great La France rose in my hat had some magic; and the women looked so wistful that I felt tears rising, and was miserably ashamed of myself for having put on my prettiest gown to annoy them. It seemed to me then that even if they *had* been cats, I had been the worst cat of all. Lord Gerald Deshon said to me boyishly:

"May I sit next to you, Miss Saurin? you smell so nice." And when the old doctor picked up my glove which had fallen, he gave it a little stroke with his hand before handing it back, as though it were something alive.

The sun sank out of sight at last, disappearing in a billowy sea of wild-rose clouds. Golden day departed, and silver eventide was born.

Gold for silver! I cannot tell why those three little words stole through my mind and settled in my heart, as we walked home under a great canopy of purple haze full of coolness and the scent of evening fires: but it seemed to me suddenly that they were the most beautiful words ever written and the meaning of them more beautiful still.

The entire party conducted Mrs Valetta and me to our doors. The women seemed loth to lose sight of us, and the men talked feverishly of commandeering all the horses in the town for a moonlight picnic. Unexpectedly to me, somehow, Major Kinsella killed this delightful plan by saying quietly: "No, the horses are not available." The crake in his voice had become suddenly most pronounced; perhaps that was why the men, who had been so keen for the picnic, accepted this dictum without a word, but I thought the fact rather curious. Mrs Brand and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe were the only people who did not abandon the idea immediately.

The latter petulantly demanded reasons and told him that he did not own all the horses in the town, any more than he owned all the hearts. Mrs Brand said sturdily:

"I don't know what you are up to, my dear Kim, but don't you lay your hands on either of *my* horses."

He smiled but made no promises, and instead of giving reasons to Mrs Skeffington-Smythe began to discuss the possession of hearts with her. I said good-bye hastily and went indoors.

Judy rid of her headache had cheered up and put on a pretty gown, but her hair was done anyhow and her manner unchangingly languid.

After dinner we spent the evening playing cards at Mrs Brand's. She had a really comfortable two-roomed brick house lent her by the postmaster, on the condition that he could drop in whenever he liked. However, some gay spirits had rigged up in the hall a toy Maxim belonging to a mining engineer, and this was trained on to the front door and loaded with "mealies" for the benefit of the postmaster, in case he should "drop in" at the wrong time. Really these were the silliest people!

Somehow the evening did not prove so interesting as the afternoon. Almost all the same people were there but to me there seemed a lack of fire about the proceedings, even when Mrs Brand had a supper of curried eggs sent in from Swears's to rouse us, and a delightful dessert consisting of the contents of grenadillas mixed with port wine, was served in champagne glasses.

The man called Stair attached himself to me in a quiet, unassuming way that I could not object to. He talked little but seemed to be content to sit near me and look at me with his rather romantic dark eyes. Neither Major Kinsella nor Colonel Blow appeared.

Incidentally, and without asking questions, I learned a great many things about the former. Off and on, he was the main topic of conversation during the evening. His name cropped up faithfully every five minutes. When Lord Gerry said that he had certain information that "Kim" was going to be in command of the Mounted Police that would be formed as soon as the trouble with Lobengula was over, Mrs Skeffington-Smythe said acidly:

"He behaves as if he were in command of the country now."

"It wouldn't be such a dusty thing for the country if he were," a boy cockily announced; but this was rank treason to the gods in charge, and he was hooted down and told to go to bed.

"I wish I had his future," said some one else.

"Even if you had to take his past with it?" a woman asked (Mrs Valetta).

"Certainly: that wouldn't hurt me."

"It might hurt a few women though," sneered Mrs Skeffington-Smythe.

"How unfair women are!" said Lord Gerry. "If a man said a thing like that he would have to back it up or take the consequences."

"Oh! I am quite ready to do both," she answered perkily, and glanced at her great friend Miss Cleeve, who merely stared at her cards.

"You can't blame a man because women are fools," said the Mining Commissioner, a slight man full of heavy philosophy. Judy, with a prim air, abruptly changed the subject, but in five minutes they were back to it again, like cats to cream.

It transpired that "Kim" was short for Kimberley, where he had dealt with diamond mines, and made and lost a fortune.

"But wasn't that a very long time ago?" I was surprised into asking. For I had passed through Kimberley and found that its day of glory had departed.

"Long? why, yes, it certainly wa-s," drawled Mr Hunloke, the lawyer, wagging his head. "But Kim is no newly-hatched birdling."

"Haven't you observed that there's no wool on his head where the wool ought to grow?" said one of the cheeky boys of whom I thought there were far too many about.

"No, I have not," I answered disdainfully.

"Well, it's getting mighty sparse," he proclaimed, with increased cheekiness.

"Oh! that's holy living," said the doctor, and leered his goat-like leer.

I thought what horrid people they all were. It appeared that Anthony Kinsella was not an army man as English people understand the term. His rank had been gained in various bodies of African Mounted Police which he had belonged to in the intervals of making and losing money in the gold and diamond capitals. He had a great head for finance they said, but in the midst of successful undertakings and deals he would break away and disappear, and the next heard of him would be that he was living with his boys in a lonely part of the veldt, or had rejoined for a time some old corps of his. He had come adventuring to South Africa when he was quite a boy, knew every inch of the country, and was looked upon as almost a colonial.

"*Almost*, but not quite," said Gerald Deshon, "he is one of us. Also, he is a born leader, and no colonial was ever that, though I daresay some will come along by-and-bye as the years roll on."

"But why does he wear turquoise ear-rings?" I asked involuntarily, thinking no one but Lord Gerry was listening.

I was mistaken.

"Some woman stuck them in his ears, I suppose," said Mrs Valetta fiercely; and she and Miss Cleeve glared at me across their cards. I stared at them in surprise for a moment, then laughed, though I was not greatly amused.

"I never thought of that."

"You would have if you had known Kim long," said Mrs Brand dryly.

"I've heard that there have been more men hurt than you can count on your fingers and toes through a too pressing curiosity about those ear-rings," some one remarked.

"Yes, a fellow on the Rand once nearly died of that complaint," added Tommy Dennison. "It is a subject that Kim will stand no ragging about."

"She must have been a very pretty woman," grinned the doctor.

I suddenly felt very tired and low-spirited and longed to go away from them. I was sick of their wretched card-party. I wondered what all the "frumps and dowds" were doing and their nice business-like men, and was inspired to make a remark.

"Do the Fort George men spend their evenings talking scandal also?"

There was absolute silence and then all the men began to grin.

"You can search *me*!" averred Mr Hunloke, but his partner answered blithely:

"Oh! *they're* getting ready to tackle Loben."

"There's a lot of dirty work attached to an expedition and some one's got to do it," Gerry Deshon said. "Blow and Kinsella are up to their eyes, and a lot of the other fellows here are experienced men in wars with niggers. None of us would be of much use at present."

"It takes all sorts of men to make a war. Perhaps if we are no good *now* we may be when the fighting comes along."

I was rather attracted by this quiet, modest little statement made by Maurice Stair.

Every one walked home with every one else as usual, and discussed what they should do the next day to kill time. In the absence of any authority some bold spirits reverted to the moonlight-picnic plan for the next evening, but a man said decidedly:

"No good! Kim has got down some inside information from headquarters, and won't let the horses a mile away from the town."

An important resolution that we should all meet at the tennis-court the following afternoon was passed, and my sister-in-law was invited to invite every one to supper and cards in the evening.

"Oh, very well," said she, swathed in languor as usual. "But I've no genius for entertainment. You'll have to fish for your supper."

"All right, we will," they blithely cried, and announced to me, "You can bank on us, Miss Saurin. We'll be there."

I did not doubt the fact, but it failed to interest me. I, too, was wrapped in weariness. Life in Africa seemed to me to be inconceivably petty.

Chapter Six.

Love Calls.

> "Ah, Love! there is no better thing than this,
> To have known love, how bitter a thing it is."

On the Fort George side of the court next day I noticed a woman I had not seen before. She was handsome and rather extraordinary looking, and had a number of men talking to her; but the did not join the Fort George ladies, and for their part they took no notice of her at all. I wondered why, for they had struck me as being pleasant, friendly souls, kindly disposed to all the world.

She had rather a sallow skin, that made her brilliant hair and bright red mouth all the more amazing; and there was an odd, defiant air about her, yet something curiously wistful in the glances she sent across the court at me from her murky brown eyes. She laughed a great deal with the men talking to her, but I thought her laugh a little too merry. In a tailor-made fashion she was exceedingly well dressed—quite the best turned out woman I had seen so far, though Anna Cleeve certainly knew how to put on her clothes if she only had any to put on. I wondered why this pretty woman was unhappy, for even in my limited experience I had discovered that it is generally the woman who has missed happiness, who tries to fill in the little round hole in her heart with clothes—the smartest and prettiest she can find. Happy women usually have too much in their lives to bother about making a fine art of dressing. Of course, with girls it is different; they naturally love pretty clothes and they have a right to them.

I wished she would come round to our side of the court and let me see her properly, but she did not. Later I observed that the rest of the women only looked at her when she was not looking; at other times they looked through her and past her and over her. At last I became aware that she was taboo. Even the men who stood about her were not the nicest men, and I observed that no one went from our side to speak to her, except Major Kinsella, who, as soon as he arrived, shook hands and stood talking for some little time, at which her pleasure was obvious; afterwards the looks she cast at the other women were more defiant than ever. Consumed with curiosity I addressed a query to Judy sitting next to me.

"That person?" said she, looking another way. "She calls herself Rookwood, I believe."

“What has she done?” I asked. It was so very evident that the poor wretch had done something.

“Oh, don’t ask *me*,” said Judy in a far-away voice. But Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, who sat on my other side, was not so reserved.

“Do you see that big fair man with her? That is Captain Rookwood. Handsome, isn’t he? *She lives with him*.”

“Do you mean she is married to him?”

“Married to him—not at all. She is married to a man called Geach, in Cape Town, but she ran away from him with George Rookwood, and they have been living together for six months now. Her husband by way of revenge refuses to divorce her. Isn’t it insolent of her to come here amongst *us*?”

“Of course she always has a dozen men round her,” Judy supplemented in a low voice; “they do so love a *déclassée* woman, don’t they?”

Afterwards I learnt that the man Geach was an enormous brute of a half-Dutch colonial, who drank, and had been in the habit of beating his wife constantly, and had once dragged her all through the streets of Claremont by her amazing hair. Another time he had dipped her in the sea before a crowd of people, and had afterwards been horsewhipped by the crowd.

Of course, both as a Catholic and as a *femme du monde* I was *agacée* at these things. I knew that none of Mrs Geach’s sufferings singly or together constituted any excuse for her running away with another man who happened to love her and would be good to her. It was to be supposed that she knew this, too, and that if she did such a terrible thing she would not only be committing a mortal sin, but must thereafter be struck off the rolls and disqualified for any kind of social life. However, she had chosen to do it; so now she had a merry laugh and a defiant mouth, and gave more attention to her clothes than most women.

In spite of her sins I could not help being thankful that there is no law, religious or worldly, that forbids one to feel sorry for wistful-eyed sinners. Also, I began to dislike Mrs Skeffington-Smythe very much indeed. It struck me that she arrogated altogether too much holiness to herself, and that a little charity and loving-kindness would not be out of place in her moral make-up. I was mentally arranging something polite with a bite in it to say to her, when Major Kinsella came and sat down beside me in the chair Judy had just left, and after that I was too busy arranging polite bites for *his* benefit to remember Mrs Skeffington-Smythe and her malice.

It had been raining all the morning, drenching, thudding rain that flooded the land with small lakes and rushing rivulets; the first taste of the “wet season,” every one said, though it was not really due until November. I had looked forward disconsolately to a dreary afternoon indoors. But by two o’clock every trace of wetness had disappeared with the extraordinary haste that distinguishes the drying up of the rain in the High Veldt. Only the freshly washed land gave up a ravishing odour tinder the hot sunshine, and the sky above was a turquoise plain, across which some giant hand had moved, sweeping all the billowy clouds into one great mass in the west. There they lay piled one above the other in snowy splendour. A blaze of hot light poured down on to the court, making the women droop and blench in their chairs. But my veins sang with delight. Never had I known such delicious heat, and I loved it, and felt like a marigold flaring and revelling in the golden shine. It seemed to me that I had never really been alive before I felt the heat of the African sun. I said so to Anthony Kinsella, and his blue eyes flashed at me.

“You will never be able to live away from it now.”

I laughed, but I suddenly felt the clutching thrill again.

“Oh, one could not live here always,” I said abruptly. “Away from music, and books, and great speakers, and sculpture, and pictures—”

“The veldt is full of pictures—look at that one.” He glanced at the turquoise plain and the billowy clouds. “And can you tell me you have never heard its music—on the banks of a river under the stars?”

I could tell him nothing. I could only look away from his eyes.

“Great speakers!” he mused. “You must hear Cecil Rhodes some day telling the boys to extend the Empire.”

I did not speak.

“Books and sculpture—they are good, but ‘has life nothing better to give than these’?”

“I don’t think so,” I said firmly, but found myself adding a moment later, “I am not sure.”

He answered, “Africa will make you sure. She has a way of making it worth one’s while to stay with her. And if she loves you she will just put you in bonds and keep you, whether you will or no.”

“She can never do that to me,” I said, almost vehemently. “I am too *exigeante*, and I do not like bonds. Let us pray that she will not love me.” I essayed to laugh lightly, but my heart was beating in my throat, and an unaccountable agitation shook me. It seemed ridiculous to be so moved about nothing, sitting out there in the steaming sunshine with all life smiling. We were both staring before us away across the court and its players to the amethystine hills on the edge of the world. He did not look at me, nor I at him, but in a low voice that none but I could hear he said a strange thing:

“For your sake I could go back to prayers—but do not ask me to pray that.”

Mrs Valetta came in to look at the mirror as I was hunting for something for dinner.

“You needn’t change,” she said. “Just turn in the collar of your dress and sling a fichu round your neck. I’ll lend you one if you haven’t got one.” She had something in her hand that looked like the tail of an old ball-gown.

“Oh, no, thank you,” I said fervently. “I have too much respect for a good gown to treat it in that fashion.”

I made haste to spread upon the bed a little black lace frock that I had brought for ordinary home use to wear in the evenings. Judy strolled in and gazed dejectedly at it.

“Every one will think it fearfully sidey of you to wear that,” she said at last, quite animatedly for her.

“Oh, but I am sidey,” I announced, laughing. For some reason I did not understand I felt as though I had a happy red robin in the place where my heart used to be. But Judy and Mrs Valetta met my gaiety with scowls. I tried to propitiate them, for I felt kindly disposed to all the world.

“It is not really an evening gown, only a little demi-toilette—long sleeves and a V; and I have nothing else. Still, I won’t wear it if you have any *real* objection, Judy.”

But already her interest in the matter was dead. As for Mrs Valetta, she had left the room utterly sick of life. I hardly recognised her for the same woman half an hour later, when I went in to dinner and found her seated there,—in a chrysanthemum-chiffon gown covered with Indian embroideries. Her corsage was composed of about three sequins, a piece of chiffon the size of a handkerchief, and a large diamond brooch.

Annabel Cleeve and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, who were dining with us, were also *en grande tenue*. My poor little black lace frock would have looked quite dowdy amongst them if it had not happened to be of such a distinguished cut. Even Judy had slung an evening gown of sorts upon her languid bones.

Unfortunately, the meal was not in keeping with our brilliant toilettes. The soup had a terrible flavour of tin, and was followed by floppy-looking shoulder of mutton which had the appearance of having been but recently slain. I remembered that I had seen Mafoota, the cook, leading a forlorn, predestined-looking goat by its horn that morning, and I could not but connect the two facts. The eyes of the potatoes, huge and black, glared at us dully from their dish, and a boiled ladybird reclined upon the infinitesimal helping of cabbage that was apportioned to me. No fish, no entrées, no wines; mountains of pumpkin. Every one except Anna Cleeve and I took a whiskey and soda, and that may have been some help. For dessert some woolly pudding, made of pale blue rice, with American canned peaches. I had eaten some lovely peaches at the Cape, but it takes American enterprise to penetrate into the wilds of Africa. Judy spake the thing that was when she said she had no genius for entertaining. I made no bones about bantering her on the subject.

“It is easy to see there is no man about the house, Judy. Such a dazzling banquet could only be served at a hen-party.”

“Nonsense,” said she, smiling idly. “I have trained Dick to live the simple life too. He doesn’t care a scrap what he gets now. What is the use of worrying about the menu? There is nothing to be got here in any case except tinned things and goat.”

“Yes, but they needn’t taste of the tin. And goat should be disguised. As it is I recognise this one. Hardly a decent interval has elapsed since I met it walking with Mafoota.”

They all laughed. There was something to be said for life in Mashonaland. It certainly induced a sort of gay tolerance for general discomfort. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe began to brag about a lovely goat curry she had had for lunch the day before, that no one had been able to tell from curried prawns.

“I daresay,” said Judy; “but you and Anna have Mrs Brand’s Adriana to cook for you. I have no one but the boys, and you know what they are. I’ve told them dozens of times about taking the eyes out of the potatoes, but there you are—just look at them.”

“They’re looking at us,” I objected.

“Why not have them roasted whole in their jackets?” suggested Mrs Valetta. “They’re much nicer that way, and it would obviate the peeling difficulty.”

“I never thought of it,” said Judy, looking surprised. “As for supper to-night, I haven’t the faintest notion of what people are going to eat. Let us hope they won’t be hungry.”

I reflected that if they had all dined as badly as we had they would be ravenous, and for the honour of the house I said so with such delicacy as I could command. But delicacy was wasted on my sister-in-law.

“It is no use their bringing sybaritic appetites here,” she said. “Cheese sandwiches and a whiskey and soda is the best I can do, and it ought to be good enough for any one—unless you will undertake the menu and serve something better, Deirdre.”

“Will you let me?”

“Certainly, I give you *carte blanche*. Do anything you like, dear, and begin on the coffee. Did any one ever taste such stuff as these boys make?”

So I went out into the kitchen, which was really a back verandah closed in with native matting, and was full of smoke

and jabbering boys. The utensils were all very inferior. The spout of the kettle was off, and the water had to be boiled in a large iron pot, while the boys crowded round me, staring solemnly and falling over each other and getting in the way. But the quality of the coffee was good, and when at last the water boiled I achieved. It took a long time, though, and while I was busy I could hear the knocks at the front door and the laughter of new arrivals. When I took in my coffee-pot the room was full of the smoke of cigarettes, and everybody wanted to taste my brew. Afterwards they raved about it, and complained bitterly that there was not enough to go round. So I went back to make more, but this time I brewed it in a big enamel jug. Just as I was dropping in a tiny pinch of salt to flavour it and make all the grounds settle at the bottom, a shadow fell across my hands, and looking up I found Anthony Kinsella leaning in the doorway and observing me with the deepest interest.

"I think that is what you have done to me," he observed solemnly.

"What?" said I in astonishment.

"Put a pinch of salt on me."

Our eyes met, and we both burst into laughter.

"I don't think you are very tame," I said.

"Tame! This is the first *soirée* I've been to in this country. They're quite out of my line."

"I know what brought you to-night," I said.

"So do I," he answered swiftly, with that glance of his eyes that made my lids fall.

My heart experienced an extraordinary contracted feeling, as though some one had taken hold of it and was holding it tightly. Then I remembered all the enigmatical sayings I had heard about this man, and his dangerous attraction for women, and in a moment I recovered myself and answered with a mocking smile:

"You have heard rumours of the great spread I am going to put before my sister-in-law's guests to-night. It has got about what an excellent cook I am."

He opened his lips, to make some further saying, but I gave him no time.

"Come and taste my Turkish coffee," I said, and walked out with my jug, colliding with Mrs Valetta, who was evidently coming to look for us.

"You are wanted to play poker, Kim," said she curtly. "Do play with me; you are always so lucky."

"Ah, but I am going to be *unlucky* at cards in future," he oddly answered as they followed me in.

I got more compliments for my coffee. Every one said it was delicious. Greedy people asked for second and even third cups. Colonel Blow was heard to state that he had never tasted anything like it since he was in Paris a hundred years ago.

"That is just where I learned to make it," I said gaily. "In my racketty student days in the *Quartier*."

Every one looked amazed and I suppose it was rather an amazing thing to say.

"In your what days?" asked Miss Cleeve faintly.

And Mrs Valetta said in a curious voice: "Can you possibly mean the Latin Quarter of Paris?"

"I can, indeed," quoth I affably. "I once had a studio there for six months, and all the art students used to come in the evening and make coffee and Welsh rarebit, and every delicious imaginable thing."

"My sister-in-law's guardian is an American artist with eccentric ideas about educating girls to see every phase of life," said Judy in the stuffiest, snuffiest kind of voice. "*Of course*, Deirdre had a chaperon."

"Yes, and she was far more racketty than I," said I with malice prepense. Elizabet von Stohl would have fallen down dead if she could have heard herself so traduced! But I was feeling very much annoyed with Judy for speaking in that way about dear Betty and her lovely liberal ideas. The men for some reason or other thought my remark very amusing, but the women all looked frightfully disdainful, except Mrs Brand, who spoke one of her brief, eloquent sentences:

"It must have been rippin'."

There were peals of laughter, and I looked at her in astonishment, and found that she had quite a friendly enthusiastic air.

"And so is this coffee rippin'," said Gerry Deshon. "You'll have to give us all lessons, Miss Saurin, or we'll never dare ask you to supper."

"Oh, that's nothing to what I can do," I bragged. "You should taste my cup—and I'm a frightful dab at rum-punch." I had all the women very cross by now, so I thought they might as well stay so. The men, on the contrary, were as gay as larks at heaven's gate singing. "And I'm going to give a *Quartier Latin* supper to-night," I told them; "Welsh rarebit, *les apôtres sur les bicyclettes*, devilled eggs—"

“There are no materials in the house for all these things,” protested Judy crossly.

“Then we must commandeer them,” said Major Kinsella. “We’ll make up a foraging party at once. Come on and open your *winkel*, Dennison. Hunloke, buck up.”

Tommy Dennison was the cheeky Oxford undergraduate whose father owned about forty thousand acres somewhere in Scotland and one of the smartest yachts to be seen at Cowes; but Tommy was a younger son and a black sheep, so he kept a shop in Fort George with Hunloke, the long-nosed barrister. They were always proclaiming bitterly that no one ever paid their bills and that they should shortly go bust.

A small but select party of buccaneers was formed, including Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, Mrs Brand, and myself. The others had their cards already dealt and their half-crowns staked on the table, so they had to continue the game whether they liked it or not. Anna Cleeve and Mrs Valetta did not appear pleased, and Judy gave me a chaperony sort of look of which I took not the slightest notice. She then remarked with great point and significance that the night air was very dangerous. But the others cried her down saying that it was balmy and healthy, and the only air, in fact, that was any good at all. Mrs Brand said she would chaperon me, but as soon as we got out of doors she went off with Gerry Deshon. Some of the others ran ahead with Mr Hunloke to get the keys of the shop, and I found myself walking alone with Anthony Kinsella.

It was a lovely night, full of a sort of veiled radiance, shed from a deep purple sky embroidered with silver stars. Strange insects in the grass were calling to each other shrilly, and heavy on the air hung the divine odour of wild clematis of which almost every little house had a drapery over walls or verandah.

Anthony Kinsella plucked a spray from a wall as we passed, and put it in my hand without speaking, but our hands touched and I saw his intent eyes for a moment. I fastened the flower into the front of my black gown, and the scent of it will stay with me all my life. I suddenly felt so happy I could have sung aloud. Africa seemed all at once to have turned into a land of fair dreams, in which I was a happy wanderer, travelling towards my heart’s desire. I did not analyse my feelings nor ask myself any questions. I only knew that my eyes were unsealed to the beauty and mystery of life.

In a few moments we had reached the shop—a galvanised-iron building with “Hunloke and Dennison” painted in huge black letters across its roof. The others had already arrived with the keys, and we were admitted into a perfect paradise of tinned goods. Candles were hastily burst from their packets and stuck in lighted rows along the counter, and the general public was invited by the owners of the shop to “pay their money and take their choice.” This, however, was a mere form of speech. Apparently no one paid for anything in happy-go-lucky Mashonaland.

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe was helped up on the counter and walked along it, inspecting the things on the top shelves and handing them down. The rest of us made dives at anything we liked the look of, and the *winkel* of Messrs Hunloke and Dennison resounded with shouts of glee and triumph.

“Olives!”

“This lovely pink curly bacon—just the thing to make bicycles for my apostles to ride on. *Banzai*!”

“Hooray! here are some anchovies!”

“Say! Six cans of oysters!” cried Mr Hunloke himself. “I didn’t know we had these left, Tommy. I’ll shew you fellows how to make clam chowder. I’ve *got* to show you.”

“Who says tinned pineapples?”

“Fids I gloat! *Sardines à l’tomate*. All we want now is the toast—*that’s* easy!”

“You’ve still a case of Pommery-and-Greno left, Tommy, my man. Trot it out!”

“Yes, and what about that Bass’s ale you and Hunloke keep all to your own cheek?”

“Oh, Miss Saurin, I’ve found some crystallised fruit! And hurrah! here’s a big bottle of eau-de-cologne!”

Every one howled with delight at this artless testimony from Mrs Skeffington-Smythe that in her at least the legitimate business of foraging for commissariat had become merged in the wild spirit of the filibuster. Some one began to softly sing,—

> “Loot! Loot! Loot!”

At last, after selecting about two waggon-loads of articles, including champagne and claret for “cup,” a large bottle of eau-de-cologne, a box of toilette soap, and several strings of blue beads, we stood and gazed with the eyes of conquerors upon the wondrous heaps. The question then arose as to who was to carry these things to the theatre of war. There was great argument about this. A peculiarity about African men is that they have a great objection to carrying anything. They would far rather argue about it for two hours and then spend another two looking for a boy. Eventually three wild men engaged to find boys for the task.

“Yes! even if we have to pull them out of kingdom come,” they averred. The rest of us started for home. How it came about that Anthony Kinsella and I were once more alone together I cannot tell. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe disappeared into the moonlight with Mr Hunloke and some others. Mrs Brand was ahead again with Gerry Deshon, though I could

not but observe that the direction of her march was not in the direction of home. Her voice came floating back to me:

“Don’t go in without me, will you? Remember that you are chaperoning me.”

“Will you mind if I call at the post-office?” asked my companion suddenly, out of the silence that encompassed us. “I expect an important wire from headquarters.”

Of course I did not mind. I minded nothing but that this enchanted hour must soon be over. Slowly we sauntered onwards through the silver night, and came at last, however much we loitered, to the post-office. It was closed, but a light shone in a window, and Major Kinsella rapped and hailed the mad postmaster by name:

“Bleksley, hullo!” Instantly the window was opened, and the divine performer upon banjos put out his blond rumpled head: “Wire come, Bleksley?”

“Not yet, but the mails from Victoria are just in by runner. If you could wait a few minutes until I unseal them and sort out the private letters—”

Major Kinsella hesitated, looking at me.

“Of course—certainly wait,” I said hastily. “I don’t mind.”

“Thank you,” he said. “If it were my own business it could rip—but it’s the country’s.”

“I shan’t be more than five or six minutes,” said the postmaster. “Would you like to go up into the watch-tower to wait?”

He handed out a key through the window. The watch-tower adjoined the post-office, and had been built for the double purpose of overlooking the prison-yard and for the wide outlook it afforded of the surrounding native kraals. The view from there was notoriously charming, and I had heard all about it from several people and been told that I should see it by moonlight. This seemed to be a good opportunity.

“Will you come?” said Anthony Kinsella abruptly. “The view is supposed to be very fine.”

Mr Bleksley had already closed the window and returned to his work.

“On such a night as this it should be perfect,” I said. So we climbed the dark, steep stair together.

The instant we put our feet on the first step he took my hand which hung at my side, interlacing his fingers through mine. Hands can tell each other so much. I suddenly knew things I had never dreamed of before with the feel of Anthony Kinsella’s warm, strong hand clasping mine, and from the close contact of his palm against mine some wonderful, strange message flew up my arm to my heart and brain, flooding me with a thrilling ecstasy I could hardly bear. When we reached the tower’s top I think we both knew all there was to say though no word had been spoken. We leaned against the low enclosing walls and looked down upon a land awash with silver moonlight and far-off ebony hills draped with scarves of mist.

“Deirdre!”

He spoke my name with all the crake gone from his voice, and again it was as if I heard the music of an old song I had known all my life. I could not answer him. Faintness stole over me and a strange trembling sweetness held me in thrall. My heart glowed like a red-hot coal with a cool wind blowing on it.

“Deirdre!—what a name for a man’s wife. Deirdre, I love you! I want your heart and body and soul. Look at me, darling.”

I turned to him, and our eyes met in a long glance. Then mine fell as always before his, as if weighted with little heavy stones.

“Give me your soul, Deirdre,” he said, and with my eyes still closed, unhesitatingly, unswervingly, I put out my two hands and laid them in his with all my heart and soul in them; and he kissed them, and my hair, and my lips. He took me in his arms and kissed my eyes.

“I have loved you from the moment I first saw you,” he said. “Haven’t you felt my kisses on your eyelids whenever I looked at you, Deirdre?”

So I knew at last what it was in his burning glance that had always closed my eyes.

“You are like an exquisite flower,” he muttered, “too beautiful to be worn in my soiled heart. But I *will* wear you,” he fiercely added.

“‘Who loves flowers loves sorrow.’” The old French proverb came uncalled to my lips.

“You and I cannot love without sorrow,” he said, branding the words on my lips with his.

Ah! God knows I was all woman then, throbbing, aching woman in the arms of the man I loved.

“Let me see your eyes,” he said, and his voice thrilled like a violin bow across the strings of my heart. “I shall go mad if you do not open your eyes.”

And I opened them to the beauty of his face.

Ah, yes, he was beautiful! He had the beauty of the gods. If I were half so beautiful at that moment it was no wonder that his lips were pale though they burnt like flame, that his hands shook and his voice stammered.

"Speak to me!" he cried. "Say that you love me!"

"I think I have always loved you, Anthony—ever since that night I first saw you, when you beguiled me with your sweet words to come to this strange land. Yes, I know now it was for you I came across the sea—for you—to you."

"Heart of my heart! For you I will go back to my boyhood's dreams—to the old sweet creeds! I will wipe my life clean of sins, and make it worth your beauty and purity—"

Ah! It is a most wonderful and exquisite thing to be alone in the empty, silent, moonlit world with the man you love and who loves you. But our gracious dream was soon interrupted. The postmaster called out at the foot of the stairs, and we distinguished the approaching voices of Mrs Brand and some others.

"Come, love," said Anthony to me simply and softly, and drew me down the stairway. In the kindly darkness he kissed me again in a strong, sweet, wonderful way, and for one more radiant moment I felt the almost anguished joy—half terror and half exquisite peace—that comes to a girl who, loving for the first time, finds herself in the arms of the one right man in all the world for her.

"Say you love me," he passionately whispered, and I as passionately whispered back:

"I love you—I love you. There is no one in the world like you."

"I believe there is a search-party out for us," said Gerry Deshon as soon as we came from the post-office. "We've spied about five couples all diligently looking the other way."

"Any excuse to get out into the moonlight," laughed Anthony. He had his careless-eyed, impassive mask on once more.

"And it is plain that some one has already begun to prepare the banquet," cried Mr Hunloke. "I smell a most outrageous smell of Welsh rarebit desecrating the night air."

I remember very little in detail of the rest of that enchanted night. I know that every one was very gay and merry, and none more so than I, with a heart singing like a bird in my breast. After scrambling in the kitchen for hours, laughing, blacking our hands and smearing our features, getting smoke in our eyes and ashes down our throats from three large fires out of doors, a banquet was served in the preparing of which at least fifty people had a hand and the like of which was never seen before or since in Mashonaland. The odour thereof permeated to every hut and home and lured men from their beds. People I had never seen before arrived upon the scene and joined in the proceedings—even the frumps and dowds and the business-like men. We were all—

> "Glad together in gladsome mood
> And joyful in joyous lustre."

Anthony brewed a bowl of punch flavoured with blue beads that ravished the hearts of all men who tasted it; and Gerry Deshon brewed an opposition bowl which he called "potheen" and engaged attention to by monotonously beating a kaffir tom-tom over it, the sound of which brought the remaining stragglers into camp.

By twelve o'clock, when the moon was low in the heavens but the campfires blazed high, almost every one in the town was seated round the white cloths spread upon the stubbly grass. I recognised the postmaster's beautifully embroidered tea-cloth among the rest. No one gave a thought to grass-ticks or mosquitoes. How should they when the feast was eaten to the strains of the postmaster's banjo and his charming tenor voice serenading us with some of the wild, sweet melodies of Ireland to which Moore has put words. But of course, with the innate melancholy of the Celt, he could not refrain from tempering our merriment with woe, and at our blithest he suddenly subdued us with the sad fierce Song of Fionnuala:

> "Silent, O Moyle, be the roar of thy water.
> Break not, ye breezes, your chain of repose,
> While murmuring mournfully Lir's lonely daughter
> Tells to the night stars the tale of her woes.
>
> "When shall the swan her death-song singing
> Sleep with wings in darkness furled?
> When will Heaven its sweet bell ringing
> Call my spirit from this stormy world?"

Did the Irish gift of foresight descend for a moment upon that one of Ireland's sons, I wonder? For it was strange, looking back long after, to reflect that never before had little Fort George indulged in such a gay and merry revel, nor ever did again. That was her swan-song. Afterwards she slept, with wings in darkness furled.

During the evening Anthony and I were side by side once more, and under cover of all the jesting and laughter around us we added another brief little chapter to the history of our love. The firelight was glinting on the points of

blue in his ears, and impulsively I put up a finger and touched one of them.

“Why do you wear them?”

He looked steadily into the fire and did not answer at once.

“If you object to them I will not wear them any longer,” he said at last. But there was a note in his voice that chilled my heart.

“Why did you ever wear them?” I asked, and almost choked on the words remembering what Mrs Valetta had said, “Is it true that some woman put them there?”

He turned and faced me quickly, looking into mine with those eyes of his which I knew could not lie.

“Not a woman, Deirdre, a girl—a little girl of ten. My sister put them in for a whim a few days before she died—and they’ve been there ever since. You are the only woman in the world I would take them out for.”

I remembered how they said he had almost killed a man for jeering at them, how much chaff he had stood from his friends on the subject. I knew that his sister had been dear to him.

“No, no,” I cried swiftly. “You must never take them out. Wear them always. I love them. To me they seem part of you.”

His passionate glance made me almost afraid as he whispered back under cover of the chatter and laughter around us:

“You shall kiss them in for me, my heart, and they shall never leave me again until I die.” When I looked away from him it was to see Maurice Stair’s pale, handsome face opposite, staring before him with moody eyes.

My last recollection before we went indoors, after good-nights all round and many handshakings, was the sight of Tommy Dennison seated at the summit of the glorified tea-house (which was Anthony Kinsella’s hut) performing on the flute in a most subtle manner while the mad Irishman, once more happy, sang:

> “Oh, did you ne’er hear of the Blarney?
> That’s found near the banks of Killarney.”

Alone in my room at last, I threw myself down on my knees and thanked God in broken words for my happiness. Joy enfolded my spirit like a misty veil of happiness through which the future was touched with the light of the eternal hills. With the rosary between my fingers and the lovely Latin words of the Angelical Salutation on my lips, I thought of my mother too and longed passionately for her to know of the wonderful thing that had come to me, so that even in my prayers my thoughts flew out from me across the rolling spaces of stars to the still place of peace where my faith told me her soul rested, waiting; and when at last I rose from my knees it was with a strange feeling that she *knew*, that her mother-spirit was with me, enfolding me, rejoicing with me that all was well, that not tragedy but wonderful, undreamed-of happiness had come to her Deirdre for whom she had feared so much.

Afterwards I thought to fall swiftly into the waves of silence and oblivion with my dream in my heart. But late as it was, Judy, who had just come in, lingered before the mirror brushing her hair, and she *would* talk. She had gone into Mrs Valetta’s hut and stayed for quite an hour, and now in her pink dressing-gown, her fair hair down her back, she was full of little endless languid words that had no meaning for me wrapped in my new found happiness. I closed my eyes and strove to sleep in spite of her, but she presently said something that dragged me back from sleep and in one moment blurred out the radiance of my dream.

“And I want to warn you of one thing, Deirdre. Don’t be beguiled into a flirtation with Anthony Kinsella. He’s the most dangerous man in the country.”

After an ice-cold moment I answered her in a voice that sounded to me like some one else’s.

“What do you mean, Judy? Why do you say that to me?”

She was plaiting her hair then, and had a hairpin between her lips so that her voice was a little indistinct, but her words fell like gunshots into my ears.

“Well, you seemed to like him, rather. You were a good deal together this evening, weren’t you? Of course I know that you are well able to take care of yourself, but a flirtation with Tony Kinsella should not be embarked upon even by the most experienced hand. For one thing, he is married.”

My heart stopped beating in my breast, and a pain that I thought would have choked me shot up from it to my throat. For a little time I was in such purely physical pain that I believed I was dying. My eyes blurred over, and dimly as through a great darkness I saw Judy’s face reflected in the glass, the gleam of her rings as her fingers moved in and out of her fair pale hair, while her voice went monotonously, relentlessly on.

“I always knew there was *something*, but until Mrs Valetta told me to-night I did not know what it was. She has known him for years in Kimberley and at the Cape. It appears that when he was twenty-five (a good many years ago I should say) he married a very lovely girl belonging to an old Cape family—she and Mrs Valetta were at school together. He was wildly in love with his wife, but she like most Cape girls was a desperate flirt, and no sooner were they married

than she began indulging in perhaps harmless flirtations, but extremely indiscreet ones, considering whom she had married. They began to be unhappy, and then suddenly came an awful climax when he almost killed some soldier man in Cape Town (the man's recovery was a miracle) and then separated from his wife, but first of all he sent her to England, and insisted on her staying there. He gave her a large income but he has never lived with her since, and she has never been out here, though every one knows she is still alive. The worst feature of the business is the way he has always carried on intrigues with women ever since, nearly always married women. His method is peculiar. He commences a friendship with a woman, becomes her devoted slave, and gets her well talked about, and when she is wildly in love with him and ready to throw her bonnet over the windmill he calmly backs out, tells the woman it was her friendship he wanted, not her love, and walks off. Did you ever hear of anything so horrible? Evidently the idea is to get revenge on all women for his own wife's infidelities, but it seems incredibly brutal, doesn't it?"

"I don't believe a word of it," I said, suffocating with pain and anger and distress. "He is incapable of such—" I sank among my pillows again but I could not shut out Judy's cruel words.

"I know—I felt like that too—he is so charming, and has such nice eyes. It is hard to believe he could be such a brute—but you would have had to believe Nonie Valetta to-night. It is clear that she is one of his victims. Of course her husband is a dreadful cad and they say kicks her, and that no doubt makes her the bitter and wretched woman she is, but every one knows she is desperate about Kinsella. She as good as admitted it to-night though she knows how I detest that kind of thing and that she would get no sympathy—but she told me, looking as white as a ghost, that I ought to warn you as she had warned Anna Cleeve some months ago, that he is married. It was really too bad of him to start a flirtation with Anna Cleeve. They were always riding together and so on and every one thought it would come to an engagement, and then suddenly the whole thing came to a full stop, and now they never speak to each other. The only people who knew the real reason were he and Anna Cleeve, but now it appears that Mrs Valetta told Anna that he was a married man and that she should tax him with it, and Anna did. She asked him point blank and instead of answering he laughed in her face and said, 'It is women like you and Mrs Valetta who kick a man's soul into hell.' Then he walked off and has never spoken to her since. One would think that her brother would have risen in arms against such treatment, but no! The curious thing is that men are always ready to believe in Tony Kinsella. Anna Cleeve is practically engaged to Herbert Stanfield now, a Salisbury man, but she is frightfully unhappy, and every one says it was nothing but pique made her do it. Mr Stanfield is very nice but Tony Kinsella would spoil any woman's taste for a merely nice man—he is so alive and vivid and extraordinarily bigger than most men about—don't you think so? Anyway, I thought I'd just warn you, dear. As I told Mrs Valetta, I was sure there was not the slightest necessity—that you've had heaps of good offers and threw over one of the best matches in England because you were so hard to please (too hard, I think, but that's neither here nor there). Anyway, I let her know that it was very unlikely you would consider any man out here good enough for you. All the same, I know how fascinating Anthony Kinsella is and it is just as well that you should know these things—so there you are. And now good-night. I'm so dead tired, aren't you? What a crazy night!"

A crazy night indeed! I don't know how I lived through what was left of it. My body lay still and anguished, but my mind wandered in a wilderness of wretchedness and misery where it sometimes seemed no gleam of hope or happiness could ever penetrate again. I had said that I believed no word of it all, but left alone with Judy's haunting tale ringing in my head, how was it possible to dismiss the whole thing as a tissue of lies from beginning to end? Facts, such as his marriage, must be true. No woman would invent a thing that could be so easily disproved. He must have been married at some time (oh, God! that thought was hard to bear even if she had died since). If she hadn't died—ah! that was too terrible to think of. Then what of Anna Cleeve? and Mrs Valetta? Blind as I wished to be I knew there was some truth in both these tales. Deaf as I had tried to be, had I not heard everywhere round me hints of his intimacies with women? Had he not said to me with exceeding bitterness: "You will hear my name blown back upon the breeze of fame—of a kind"? And then: "You cannot love me without sorrow, Deirdre."

Oh! was it all true? Could it be true? Darkness engulfed me. I know not how I passed the terrible year-long hours. But at last my little silver travelling-clock struck five and I found myself staring at the first red stripes of dawn upon the walls.

Chapter Seven.

War Calls.

> "Off thro' the dark with the stare to rely on,
> (Alpha, Centauri, and something Orion)."

When we met at the breakfast table the bloom of the dawn was on none of us. Mrs Valetta was pale and haggard as a murderess. Judy, cross and dishevelled, had a black smudge on her nose and was utterly out of tune with life because the boys had all mysteriously disappeared during the night, and she had been obliged to get the breakfast herself. I was not left long in ignorance of my own worn and unlovely appearance.

"You look like a ghost, Deirdre," said my sister-in-law. "No more midnight revels for you! Really, dear, you are dreadfully white and your lips have quite a blue tint. What on earth is the matter?"

"I should think Miss Saurin's heart must be seriously affected," said Mrs Valetta dryly, but though she smiled her eyes gave me a look like a flash of lightning—so blue and angry and burning it was. I knew at last why she hated me. Judy glanced at me again with a shade of anxiety.

"Oh, I hope not. Do you think you ought to see a doctor, Deirdre? Dr Abingdon here is quite clever they say, though

he does look such an old *roué*. But Jand, in Salisbury, is the best man. Even Dr Jim goes to him when he is ill."

"I am quite well, Judy." I got up from the table and looked out of the window. I felt as if I could die of weariness and the sick blankness of life. Across the square near Anthony Kinsella's hut a group of men stood talking animatedly. I turned away with my hand to my head. I wished I might never see any more men for a thousand years—and yet—

"I am quite well, Judy, but my head aches. I think I will go for a long walk. Perhaps that will do me good."

"Well, I can't offer to come with you, my dear. Apparently I am to have the pleasure of doing my own housework to-day—but I shall go out first and see if Colonel Blow can't spare me one of the Government boys. It is ridiculous to be left like this."

Mrs Valetta was still standing in the dining-room with that dry smile on her lips when I passed through with my hat on, but she did not offer to accompany me.

I walked and walked and walked—over the stubbly bleached grass, through the township, past the outermost huts, across the rutted dusty main road to the river that wound itself halfway round the town. When the freshness of the morning was long past, and the fierce heat of midday was beating down on me from above, and surging up through the soles of my shoes from the earth, I found at last a place of shelter on the sweeping sunlit plain. Between two upright boulders almost on the river bank there was a little cleft of shadow lined with moss and small, harsh-leaved fern, and there I flung myself down and unburdened my heart of its weight of tears. I wept until I had no more tears, until it seemed that last night's moonlit madness must be washed away, all Anthony Kinsella's scorching kisses from my lips, all his treachery from my memory. Only the young know the exquisite tragedy and solace of tears: of broken sobs that come shuddering up from the soul to the lips; that are of the body and yet most terribly of the spirit; that rack and choke and blur out the beauty of life; that afterwards bring a brief but exquisite peace.

Yes, afterwards a certain peace stole over my wretched spirit; I could watch in an impersonal way a tiny purple lizard which lay flat upon a near stone searching me with beady, curious eyes; and I could feel my unprotected feet and ankles which had not found the shade aching and burning in the sun's heat.

But I knew it to be only the peace of utter weariness—the peace of a twilight hour after the first black, bitter rain of a stormy season that must be faced. The struggle, the pain, the strain would reassert themselves later. Still, I was glad of the respite. It gave me time to think, at least; to consider desperately what I should do, how I should bear myself, how I could best hide my pain from the world.

It seemed to me then that I was very friendless and alone in that wide sun-scorched land of pale grasses and turquoise skies—far from my dead mother and my brother and the friends of my life. Fate had dumped me on the African veldt and suffering had overtaken me. All the things I had known and loved—pictures, books, marbles, dim churches, and magnificent music—seemed useless to help or comfort me. These things do not matter to Africa; and when one is dumped on a burning African plain they do not seem to matter to life.

After long, painful thought I fell to trying to form some decision, some wretched plan by which to spare myself more wretchedness. First, I knew that I must see Anthony Kinsella at once. I must find out how deep the wound was he had dealt me before I could burn it out. I must meet him calmly, and calmly demand the truth from him. If these things I had heard were false then he must instantly proclaim the truth to every one, for I would not bear for myself or for him the sneers and suspicions of the world.

If they were true, these things—true that he was married, true that he had been the lover of married women, that he had mocked me with false words—if it were true—ah! God, if it were true! I searched my heart for scorn and contempt to pour upon Anthony Kinsella from my eyes and at least from the expression of my lips, *if it were true*—and I could find none! I could not find scorn and hatred anywhere in me for the man to whom I had given my heart and soul a few hours before. I could not remember anything that I had ever seen him do or heard him say that merited my scorn. I had nothing against him but women's scandalous tales. And surely, I thought, a man who was bad to the core as they said he was must have betrayed himself to me by some look or deed. But never, never! I could remember nothing but kind words, wise words, just words, quiet, deliberate, courageous actions (even his punishment of the driver I knew to be just), fearless smiles, straight, intent glances. And then, his burning, passionate words on my lips. Surely no lover's words were ever more knightly than his. Swearing with our love to cleanse his heart of old sins—vowing by old creeds and lost dreams!

Remembering these things, living them over and over again, I knew at last that I could never scorn Anthony Kinsella. It was not only that I loved as a lover. There was a look in his eyes that pulled at the mother-spirit in me and made my spirit croon a song over him and forgive him for the sake of his boyhood all the sins he had ever committed. There was a look about his mouth that made my spirit kneel to him. There was a note in his voice that when I remembered it saying "Deirdre, I love you!" drove spirit out altogether and left me only a flaming, glowing woman in the arms of the man I loved. I could never scorn him. But I could still doubt, and doubting, scorn myself. That was a new form of torture that assailed me; scorning myself for his easy triumph over my heart and lips. Then I could have torn the heart out of my breast and flung it into the river close by—it hurt so; then I could have crushed beneath the boulders that towered over me the hands that had flown so readily to his clasp—I hated them so; then I could have laid my proud head in the dust for the feet of women to trample over.

Ah! I suffered through the terrible hours of that long day, lying there in the sunshine, my face to the hard brown bosom of the old witch who had already clawed and torn my heart. Over and over the dreary round of words and facts and doubts and fears my mind travelled, until it was sick and numbed and knew only one thing clearly, that I must see Anthony Kinsella. I had a wound that would kill me if it were not treated at once. It could not be covered over with the thin skin of indifference; there was poison in it; it must be seared out with a red-hot iron. Afterwards, perhaps it would heal.

Slowly and vaguely I retraced my steps to the town. It was late in the afternoon. The sun was sinking, but the heat still came up overwhelmingly from under foot, and I felt faint for want of food. I had gone farther than I knew into the veldt, and I was almost fainting with exhaustion when at last I reached the first huts of the township. The sun had gone then, leaving the skies primrose coloured—a pale, lovely light, that yet had something ominous and sinister in it.

To my vague astonishment I found the place humming like a beehive and alive with moving figures. Horses were being walked up and down the streets, saddled and loaded with rolls of blankets and provisions. Waggons stood before the doors of shops and hotels being loaded with boxes and cases of things. Men were rushing in and out of their huts, cleaning straps, shouting to each other and behaving in an odd way. They seemed to be doing everything for themselves. There was not a black boy to be seen. I never thought little Fort George could wear such an air of business, either. What could have happened? Even in my misery of mind I found room for curiosity at these things. Several men we had entertained the night before passed me, but they barely noticed me—merely lifted their hats and passed hastily on. I did not feel annoyed, but I knew there must be something very important in the wind to make them behave so indifferently, and, with such strength as I had left, I quickened my steps and arrived home in a few minutes.

Mrs Valetta met me at the door. Her face was composed and cold as a stone, but very white.

“What is it?” I asked fearfully. “What is the matter?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, and smiled with a ghostly, bitter smile. “Only the war at last! The final batch of horses have arrived and the men are off to Matabeleland.”

I stood speechless. A vision of Anthony Kinsella’s face flashed across my mind. Now I knew why Mrs Valetta looked like that. I turned away from her, but she followed me into the house.

“Where is Judy?”

I could scarcely believe my ears at her answer:

“She left for Salisbury this morning with Mrs Brand. As soon as you had gone she went out to look for house-boys, and met Mrs Brand, who was rushing to tell us the news and that she had determined to make a dash for Salisbury in her Cape cart before any one commandeered her horses. Mrs Saurin being in a great state of mind about her husband of course begged to go with her, and they set off just after eleven while all the men were at the Court House attending a defence meeting called by Colonel Blow. It is rather daring of them to go off like that, but Constance Brand is a dauntless creature and they’ll be all right.”

“But have they gone alone?”

“They have Jim with them—one of George Brand’s Cape boys—quite trustworthy. All the Mashona boys ran away during the night; there’s not one left in the town. It is supposed that they got messages from their chiefs to return to their kraals. But it is not they who have risen, you know. They are poor friendly things without any fight in them. It is the Matabele whom we have to fear—cruel, ferocious brutes—”

“Did Judy leave no message for me?” I quite understood that Judy should want to get back to Dick, but it seemed to me a cold-blooded thing to leave me to my fate like this, and in the hands of Mrs Valetta!

“Oh, yes! She left a number of messages for you which I can’t remember. However, the gist of them all is that you must abide under my wing until you can rejoin her—I am to be your chaperon,” she finished, with her dry-lipped smile.

“I should think she and Mrs Brand are more in need of one than I.” My tone was glacial.

“Oh! they’ll be all right. The danger doesn’t lie in their direction but over to the north. Then there are a lot of Salisbury men leaving here tonight to join the Salisbury Column for the front, and Colonel Blow anticipates that they will pick up Mrs Brand’s cart very soon and see them safely in. The Port George men leave here to-morrow to join the Salisbury and Victoria Columns at the Iron Mine Hill.”

“All of them?” I asked dully. As a matter of course I knew that Anthony would be the first to go.

“All but the lame and the halt and the blind, who will stay behind to protect us,” said she.

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe and Anna Cleeve now arrived. The latter’s striped grey eyes were blurred with tears, and her lips were pale, but the soft pink bloom on her cheeks was stationary.

“Isn’t it terrible!” she cried. “Anthony Kinsella’s just ridden off with ten men.”

Mrs Valetta stood up abruptly.

“Where to?”

“To Linkwater. It appears there are three men and some Dutch women there who were warned long ago to come in, but would not.”

“But Linkwater is about seventy miles away.”

“I know,” wailed Mrs Skeffington-Smythe. “They will be gone four or five days, if they ever get back at all. It is in the

direction of Buluwayo, you know, right in the danger zone. Isn't it awful? They may easily get cut off and killed—just for the sake of two or three dirty Dutch people. To take off our best men like that! Tony Kinsella called for volunteers, and Gerry Deshon has gone, and young Dennison, Mr Hunloke, Mr Stair, and all the nicest men—utterly ridiculous, I call it, and so unkind. Don't *we* need defending, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, we'll be all right and so will they," said Anna Cleeve, in an indifferent sort of way, but her eyes had a strained look. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, who had seated herself on the sofa, carefully took from the front of her gown a little lace-edged handkerchief and a tiny hand-glass, and holding it up in front of her began to push back the tears into her eyes as fast as they came out. I never saw such an odd proceeding before, and I watched it with the greatest fascination. A big tear would gather and form on the lower eye-lashes, but before it had time to get through she would receive half of it on her handkerchief and push the rest of it back into her eyes, going from one to the other with the greatest speed. She never allowed any to escape and stain her cheeks—perhaps because there was a great deal of what looked like shoe-black mingled with the tears. All the time she was whimpering in a dismal voice:

"My poor Monty! I wired to him this morning that he is *not* to go to the front—he is not strong enough—but they said the wire was so busy my wire couldn't go through to-day, and I *know* he'll go—he's so brave—he's sure to do something frightfully distinguished and daring and get killed doing it. What will be the use of the Victoria Cross to me, I'd like to know, if I lose him?"

"Now, Porkie," said Anna Cleeve, "I shall have to spank you if you don't stop that. Monty won't come to any harm—he's just as well able to look after himself as any other selfish brute of a man. You are nothing but a little fretful porcupine. Don't cry any more now, else I shan't love you. Come back to the tent and lie down. What's the matter with you is that you want rest."

When they had gone Mrs Valetta said impatiently to me:

"Monty Skeffington-Smythe is a little drunken wretch, and the very best thing he could do would be to get killed decently. It would be the first fine act he ever performed and Nina Skeffington-Smythe knows it."

"Then surely she has reason enough to weep," said I, and to myself could only drearily repeat the words, "They will be gone four or five days, if they ever get back at all."

The hour for the march into Matabeleland had struck. For months the British South Africa Company had, with the sanction of the English Government, been preparing to take the field against Lobengula, but the preparations had moved slowly for the waggons and horses needed for such an expedition had to be brought hundreds of miles, arms and stores had to be provided, and men who were not soldiers by profession got into fighting shape by those who were. I made the startling discovery that every man in Fort George had for months been rising in the cool hours of dawn to engage in drill, gun-practice, shooting, and manoeuvring with ox-waggons, the last quite an important feature of warfare with natives, the waggons being used to form forts or *laagers* in which to take shelter from native attacks and from which to attack in turn.

A convoy of waggons on the march can in two or three minutes be transformed into an almost impregnable *laager*. When the waggons are out-spanned it takes not more than ten to fifteen minutes to form a *laager*, bush it, and get all the horses inside.

So the men I had despised for idlers and loiterers were not so idle after all, it seemed! It is true that they had amused themselves in the afternoons and evenings, but they had been hard at it for many hours in the morning while I was still sleeping. Most of them, in fact, were not Fort George men at all, but came from camps and farms in the outlying districts, because on account of the offensive attitude of the Matabele it was no longer safe to be there. They had left all their regular occupations to come into town to get ready for war. Every one who was not a trooper commanded a troop. Every one had a part and place in the Government plan for invading Matabeleland, putting an end to an impossible situation, and making the country a safe and clean one for a white race. Having newly come to Mashonaland I did not know of all these internal workings and doings. Therefore I was more surprised than any one else to see the splendidly mounted and equipped body of men who were ready to start for Matabeleland the day after the orders to march came down.

Though it was as early as four o'clock in the morning every one in the town was up to see the men leave, and I, too, at the sound of the bugle, had risen from my sleepless bed, dressed hastily, and joined the crowd round the post-office. In the crush I found myself standing next to a woman in a grey skirt and pink cotton blouse, and recognised her as that Mrs Marriott of whom the astounding story of unarrived boxes had been told. After a little while I spoke to her about the men, making one or two ordinary remarks,—what fine fellows they were, and how happy they seemed to be off,—but she had a desperate look and answered me in a dull way, like a woman who only heard dimly what was being said to her. It occurred to me then that her husband was one of those about to ride away.

Most of the men who composed the Column had their wives and families in the place and business to attend to; in fact a great many of them were leaving behind everything they possessed in the world. Yet I never saw a merrier, jollier crowd, and the wives looked equally dauntless. Some of them had white lips but they smiled with them, and the children were prancing about everywhere, hooting with excitement. The only downcast faces to be seen were those of the men who were being left behind, our defenders, of whom Mrs Valetta had spoken so mockingly. I cast my eye round upon them. It was not true that they were the maimed and the halt and the blind, but certainly they were not the most attractive-looking men I had ever seen. Most of them wore unshaven faces and no coats, while their nether garments were what is known as hitched around them on a leather strap—some of them frankly repeating the process of hitching while they stood scowling enviously upon the lucky men who had horses and had been pronounced fit.

Colonel Blow had neither forgotten to shave nor to put on his collar, but the orders that had come down to him to

stay at his post and look after the town of Fort George had changed him from a charming, nice man into a bear of the most unsociable kind. He looked capable of falling with fang and claw upon any one who ventured to speak to him. Among the rest of our defenders were the bearded pard, the parson, the postmaster whose genial face was also trimmed with scowls, and the doctor, whose gout prevented him from being a warrior but who frankly informed every one who was interested enough to listen that nothing would have induced him to go, gout or no gout. He was not looking for any Lobengulas, he said. *He* had not lost any Matabele *impis*, so why should he go and search for them?

There were other odds and ends of human relics who were not for the front. I noticed one man, a tall fellow with a stoop in his broad shoulders and a ravaged face that still bore traces of rather extraordinary good looks, but his skin was a terrible yellow colour and his eyes were sunken pits in his face. He was such a striking tragedy that I could not refrain from putting a question about him to the woman at my side.

“What a splendid piece of wreckage!” I said in a low voice. “Why didn’t some one save him from the rocks, I wonder? Who is he, Mrs Marriott?”

In her dull quiet voice she answered two words:

“My husband.”

My face went hot with shame for my thoughtless cruelty.

“Oh, forgive me!” I stammered, remembering the tale that I had been told of the terrible tragedy of her finding after marriage that her husband was a slave to the morphia habit. I did not know what to say: the thing was so unpardonable, so irremediable. But her face showed no more than its usual expression of dull sadness.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied, and continued to stare blankly before her.

At that moment my attention was wrenched away from her by the sound of a charming and musical voice. Some one was speaking—a rather short, thickset man, sitting heavily on his horse. He had a reddish face, large, bright, dark eyes, and an abnormally big forehead; and under his cocked-up-at-one-side hat he held his head bent forward in a curiously concentrated way as he spoke to the men, who all turned to him, listening like men in a trance. He had not spoken two words before I knew the American name for this ordinary-looking man with the magnetic presence and the charming and musical woman’s voice. He was a spell-binder.

“Men, I have to thank you, from Mr Rhodes, for the British South Africa Company, and for the British Empire, for the way in which you and the men all over Mashonaland have come forward to tackle this job. It is going to be a tough job—and not at all pretty—but we will stick to it, and I am confident of our ultimate success. We have right on our side. ‘Thrice-armed is he who hath his quarrel just’ you know and we have given Lobengula every opportunity to make good his promise to the Chartered Company, but over and over again he has betrayed our trust and broken his compact. He has crossed our boundaries, cut our telegraph wires, raided the chiefs under our protection, and lately, as you are aware, not content with wallowing in blood in his own kraals, he has been here to our very doors murdering the wretched natives who as our servants for the first time in their lives knew the sweet taste of liberty that is the right of every man that breathes. It has come to this—that our women and children are in danger; our mining and agricultural interests, dearly bought by fever and privation, are threatened; none of us can ever be safe away on a lonely farm or mine; we have proved the treachery of Lobengula, and we know that his people mean mischief. Well, it has got to end! We must either once and for all put down the power of the Matabele, or get out. I don’t think we mean to get out. This is too good a country to leave—and we have paid too dearly for our share in it. It is too fine a country to be nothing but the shambles of a bloody butcher; this wide, lovely land calls for some nobler destiny than to be the necropolis of the wretched Mashona nation. It is a white man’s country—a fit heritage for the children of British men and women—*your* children, and the children of the women who have not disdained to come up here and feel the rough edge of life; who do not grudge their men to the service of the Empire; who are here this morning not to weep, but to cheer you forth to victory. Goodbye, boys! I’ll meet you again at Buluwayo. In the name of Cecil Rhodes I give you Godspeed!”

He took the hat from his fine head and waved it to them smiling, then swiftly turned his horse’s head and rode away followed by his staff, amidst wild bursts of cheering.

A moment later, the children had broken into wild hurrahs, whips were cracking, and waggons streaking down the road in clouds of dust. Every one was waving hands and handkerchiefs to the men who rode away laughing in the morning sunshine.

> “We cheered them forth,
> Brilliant and gallant and brave.”

When all was over I saw Mrs Marriott walking listlessly away in the wake of her husband, who, now that the last groups were breaking up, had turned and was going towards his home. Some one near me remarked:

“It is too bad about poor Marriott—he almost begged on his knees to go, but Fitzgerald didn’t make any bones about telling him he would be no good. Of course it was quite true, but it doubled Marriott up like a knife between the ribs. I didn’t think he could feel like that still. Fitz might have been a little tenderer about it.”

The doctor slapped the speaker on the shoulders.

“My boy, there is nothing tender about war. That is why I am staying at home.”

Chapter Eight.

Faith Calls.

> “We cannot grieve as they that have no hope.”

A cloud of dark and brooding melancholy settled upon Fort George after the departure of the troops. The streets were silent. Many of the huts had their doors padlocked and rough plank shutters nailed over the windows. Never the familiar sound of a native voice was heard, nor the clatter of a horse’s hoof on the roads. The place had an indescribable air of loneliness and desertion. The men who were left behind were busy all day helping to build sand-bag barricades in front of the post-office, which was to be turned into a fort for our safety in case the town should be attacked later on if the fighting went against our men. All the Mashona boys had run away to their kraals, and there were no domestics or boys for public work, so the convicts, who were mostly Cape natives, were let out under a strong guard of white men and told off in gangs to do the work of digging earth to fill the sand-bags.

The Fort George women who had their homes and their children to mind were busier than ever, having no servants; but the wretched Salisbury women, of whom whether I liked it or not I was obliged to consider myself part and parcel, had nothing whatsoever to do from morning to night. Fortunately or unfortunately for us, Mrs Brand in giving Judy a seat in her cart had been obliged to leave her Cape maid Adriana behind, and she had given the woman instructions to divide her services amongst us. On this account we did not feel the loss of servants much, but perhaps it might have been better if we had had something to do, even housework, for a more wretched quartette of idle people it would have been hard to find anywhere. Three of us at least had a secret that we desperately desired to hide from the others, and the fourth—Mrs Skeffington-Smythe—was quite the most maliciously curious woman ever born.

Adriana, a big bustling creature well able to do the work of our small household, came and cooked in our kitchen and served the meals for all four of us in our little hut, and so there we were, everlastingly together, Mrs Valetta and I rarely speaking to each other, and Miss Cleeve and her friend always on the verge of a quarrel.

The latter two professed a great and eternal attachment to each other, but Mrs Valetta disposed of their friendship thus:

“Mrs Skeffy and Anna Cleeve make me tired. They simply stick together because they know so much about each other they daren’t quarrel, but a quarrel is bound to come one of these days and then their secrets will be flying about all over the place and we’ll have something to amuse us. Anna. Cleeve is far too clever a girl not to tire of Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, who is the silliest woman I have ever met. She thinks of nothing all day but polishing her nails and soaking her soul in Swinburne.”

It usually rained heavily all the mornings and cleared up in the afternoons, and the first time we went round to the tennis-court in desperation for something to do we found that every sign of the markings had been washed away. No one had the heart to paint them on again even if the brush and whitewash could have been discovered, so we left it as we found it with the wind sweeping leaves and pieces of stick and paper across it and turning it into the most desolate spot in the town. We went home again and sat sullenly round the tea-table—four idle, wretched women! And I believed myself to be the most wretched of all. I don’t know how I bore the passing of the days. My heart was “a thing of stone in a valley lone.” To the pain of the blow Judy had dealt me, which still benumbed my spirit, was added the strain of waiting for Anthony Kinsella’s return from Linkwater. My tongue did me the service of saying all the everyday necessary things, and I ate and took part in life like the rest of them, but I could not sleep and I could not think, and it seemed to me that life would never be the same again.

> “I could never again be friends with the roses—
> I should hate sweet music.”

I found myself listening to a conversation about Mrs Geach, which reminded me of nothing so much as an attack by three savage Indian squaws on some helpless victim fastened to the stake. It transpired that no one had seen her since the day before the departure of the Column, and though every one turned their eyes away from her in the street, or looked through her as if die were a spirit, here were three people very much annoyed because she now preferred to stay indoors and not be seen. The most charitable thing to be heard was a remark of Anna Cleeve’s:

“Poor wretch! Life can’t be very interesting for her now George Rookwood has gone.”

“What can she expect?” said Mrs Skeffington-Smythe with an air of the utmost virtue. “If a woman deliberately runs off the rails she must expect a smash-up.”

“The smash-up is not the worst part of it, I imagine,” remarked Mrs Valetta. “No doubt there is plenty of compensating excitement about *that*. It is in the cold grey years that come after that the full tale of misery is told. However, I don’t think she has reached that point yet.”

“No, wait; some day George Rookwood will meet a girl and fall in love.”

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe spoke in a pleasant gentle tone and her eyes took on the rapt look of one contemplating the tenderest kind of romance. Just about this time the doctor paid his daily visit, and one of his items of news concerned

Mrs Rookwood. The men were charitable enough not to grudge her the name of the man for whom she had staked her all on the great chess-board of life.

“As no one had seen anything of her since the departure of Rookwood,” said Dr Abingdon, “and the house showed no sign of being occupied, Blow thought it his business to call there this morning, and when he couldn’t make any one hear he proceeded to break in, and—what do you think?”

Every one had put on a frozen face at the first mention of Mrs Rookwood, giving the doctor to understand that they considered it insufferable impertinence on his part to speak of such a person in their presence at all; but at his dramatic pause curiosity could not be restrained.

“Well? What?” said Miss Cleeve.

“Has she committed suicide?” cried Mrs Skeffington-Smythe.

Mrs Valetta had the decency to curl her lip at them.

“Not at all,” chuckled the doctor, delighted with his effect. “She’s simply *not there*. Everything was found in tip-top order, and a note on the table addressed to Blow telling him not to bother or make any search as she was perfectly all right but had made up her mind to go on a journey. What do you think of that?”

“But where can she be gone to?”

“That’s the question! No one saw her go, but it now turns out that her horse was not commandeered because Rookwood reported that it had a sore foot. Well, sore foot or no sore foot it’s gone, and she’s gone with it.”

“Well, she’s both clever and lucky to be out of this desolate hole,” commented Mrs Valetta.

And she was right. For us the days grew greyer, emptier, and more forlorn. Walks outside the town were forbidden by the Commandant, who was Colonel Blow grown unrecognisably cross and surly. There were no walks inside the town except from house to house, and as we had never been on calling terms with the Fort George women there were no houses for us to go to.

Mrs Skeffington-Smythe used to lie on the sofa most of the day, either polishing her already over-polished nails with a silver polisher or reading Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*, a copy of which she carried about with her eternally.

Anna Cleeve would sit by her embroidering on linen, or writing up her journal, which she kept faithfully, saying she would some day write a history of the war. It should have made interesting reading if her pen was half as biting as her tongue.

I wrote letters, and sometimes sketched—anything to appear to take in life the interest I had ceased to feel, and to get through the days until the patrol came back from Linkwater. Mrs Valetta sat always in Mrs-Pat-Campbellish attitudes, biting her lips and watching the world stand still, through half-closed eyes. When the others were not there I was sometimes obliged to listen to her acrid comments on them, and the world in general, and life grew a little greyer and drearier in the listening.

I learned that Anna Cleeve was staying on a visit with some rather well-off cousins in Salisbury. Her uncle was an official of the Company. She had come out to Africa, said Mrs Valetta, with the pure and simple purpose all women have from their cradles up. She purposed to marry—and to marry well—some one with money enough to take her back to the country she loved.

“A London girl! You know what that means. They never see any beauty away from Bond Street or outside of the Royal Academy. However, she is going to marry Herbert Stanfield, and he is well off enough to take her back. But she had better hurry up. She is twenty-five now, and looks thirty when things go wrong. I dare say you know she imagines herself in love with Anthony Kinsella.”

Her oddly-coloured eyes flashed like a searchlight over me; but though my heart came into my throat in a suffocating way, I had my mask on and I think she could read nothing.

“Do you think it quite fair to discuss other people’s private and rather sacred affairs, Mrs Valetta?”

“Oh, fair? Perhaps not, but it will always be done while there are men and women in the world, and if you think that anything can be kept private and sacred in this country, my dear girl, you are greatly deluded. Every one knows and has discussed the matter of Anna Cleeve’s infatuation for Anthony Kinsella. Some people will even supply you with the conversation that occurred when she taxed him with being already married.”

I felt the blood leaving my face. I dared not speak for fear of betraying to this cruel woman how much I was suffering.

“Of course friendships between men and women are everyday affairs in this country. We are nearly all married and bored and trying to find some interest in life. But the married women don’t care about the girls annexing their privileges. And then there are some men with whom friendship is forbidden; Anthony Kinsella is one of them. However, Anna Cleeve’s friendship with him came to a wise end, and she is now engaged to her rich man. But I haven’t the slightest doubt as to where her heart is.”

“How can you say such things?” I said, quivering with indignation. “What has it to do with you or me? You are probably doing Miss Cleeve a great injustice.”

She answered in her usual dry and weary manner:

“I may or I may not be. But I think it would be easier to fall in love with Tony Kinsella than out of it, don’t you?”

I advanced no opinion. I had learned to expect her thrusts and to receive them without testifying. Nevertheless they added to my pain which was already more than I could bear.

After four days the relief column returned from Linkwater.

A watcher stationed in the tower told of its approach one afternoon, and in less than ten minutes the whole community was out too, watching and waiting. I went with the rest; it was impossible to do otherwise without making myself conspicuous, but I tied a big veil round my face for fear my mask should fail me at the moment I saw Anthony. Mrs Valetta came too and Anna Cleeve, pale as a bone, the former with her teeth dug into her lip in a way that was painful to watch. Not that I watched her. One look was enough to tell me not to look again, and I was occupied with my own misery.

Anthony Kinsella riding carelessly with his right arm turned in on his hip was all I saw. A dark face with two blue points in it under a slouched felt hat: eyes that with one swift look dragged my glance to his over the heads of everybody, long before he rode in amongst us with his little band. In the midst of them was an untented cart drawn by oxen containing several women and children and a sick man. Every one crowded round the riders shaking hands, questioning, welcoming. The Commandant without delay had his arm round Anthony Kinsella’s shoulders and drew him into his office, closing the door. They were officials and had to attend to the business of the country. We were left to welcome the poor people in the cart—two sullen, sunburnt, colonial women, very Dutch and disagreeable, and a tribe of small brats. Huts had been prepared for them and the doctor had the sick man carried off to the hospital.

Gerry Deshon and the rest of them hailed us cheerfully and dismounting proceeded to recount their adventures, which it transpired had not been of a wildly exciting order. They had seen nothing of the enemy, and instead of being pleased thereat were full of weariness and wrath.

“Devil an *impi*!” they bitterly announced. “Not the scrag end of one. All we got for our pains was the pleasure of being chewed up by flies and skeeters, Dennison’s horse gone dead lame, and Stair with a sprained arm.”

“Yes, and those blessed Dutchmen didn’t want to be rescued. They kicked at being taken away from their farms. Kinsella had his work cut out making them quit. The women cursed and the brats howled. Oh, it was dreamful!”

“The most awful flat frosty business you ever saw!”

“Never mind,” said the American, who had been called away to join the conclave in the office and now reappeared. “Never mind, my dears. We’re away off to the woods to-night.”

“To-night!” Disgust and fatigue departed from the tea-coloured, begrimed visages.

“To-night?”

“Yea-bu, verily, verily, this very night. Kim has said it. If we get a big move on us we’ll be in time for the shine at Buluwayo yet. If we can’t catch up with the other column maybe we can cut across country and do a little stunt of our own. Kim knows this old map like the palm of his hand. Excuse *me*—I must go and look after the commissariat.”

“And I must go and get some sleep or else I’ll freck.”

“Me too.”

Every one began to disappear in a great hurry.

“Aren’t we going to get a word with Major Kinsella?” said Mrs Skeffington-Smythe to the postmaster, who stood sulking in the verandah. “I want to ask him to look after my husband and see that he is not too reckless.”

“He has a forty-foot pile of letters and telegrams to go through with the Commandant. *He* won’t get much sleep before they start tonight.”

Every one returned home, except Dr Marriott, who after listening to all that had been said went and leaned against the door of the office which enclosed Anthony and Colonel Blow. I would have liked to go and lean there with him.

It was the custom for Anna Cleeve and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe to spend the early part of the afternoon resting in their tent, rejoining us later for tea, and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe was for this plan now for the heat was intense and one longed for shade and rest, but Miss Cleeve turned on her irritably.

“Don’t talk to me about lying down, Nina, when every one else is standing up doing something. Let us go back to the hut. I suppose you’ll give us some tea, Nonie?”

“Yes. Thank God for Adriana!” said Mrs Valetta fervently. “We may as well make use of her while we have her. Perhaps she too will scoot off in the night soon.”

So we went back and sat down in the old sweet way—Mrs Skeffington-Smythe on the sofa, Anna on the stool by her side embroidering, and Mrs Valetta rocking herself in the rocking-chair. I with my everlasting sketch-book sketched a figure that sat carelessly on horseback with one hand turned in on the hip. But I kept my book out of the reach of other eyes.

Adriana laid tea. There was a tense feeling in the room and expectation hung in the air. Anna Cleeve and I avoided

each other's glance, and when Mrs Skeffington-Smythe began to whine about her Monty once more, her friend gave her a look that was like the flash of a knife in the air.

"Don't begin that, Nina, for God's sake—wait till you're hurt." Surprise dried Nina Skeffington-Smythe's tears, and at the moment a man's step was heard approaching. Anna Cleeve's teeth dug into her lip again and I put my hand to my throat, for it seemed to have suddenly grown a great pulse there that was suffocating me. Mrs Valetta rushed to the door, and Dr Abingdon walked in bestowing a surprised leer upon her for this unusually ardent welcome. She would not or could not conceal her disappointment.

"Oh! it's only *you*," said she brutally, and even such a hardened old sinner was dashed for a moment. But I invited him to sit by me and have some tea, and he immediately regained his *aplomb*. Nonie Valetta turned her back on us and stood by the window staring out. I poured the tea, and flat expressionless small talk circulated for a moment or two, but the doctor had some news for us.

"From what Kinsella reports, Blow has given orders for the barricades to be finished to-night, and every one is to sleep in *laager*."

"What! Leave our beds?" screamed Mrs Skeffington-Smythe rolling her striped eyes.

"No, take them with you," said the doctor.

Mrs Valetta turned angrily on him.

"Ridiculous! I don't believe there is the faintest chance of an attack."

"It's what they're doing in Salisbury and Victoria. We're very lucky if we don't have to be shut up all day as well as all night. Pickets have been thrown out round the township, and at the first alarm every one is to sprint for *laager*. Upon such an occasion I shall be the first man in."

He was interrupted by the footsteps of a new arrival—a boy called Curry this time—with an official document from which he read us the information that we had just received *viva voce*. We were instructed that the place was now under martial law, and that every one must explicitly obey the word of the Commandant or take the consequences. Furthermore, we were all to be in *laager* before sundown every evening. After reading his document very grandly Mr Curry invited himself to a cup of tea, which he swallowed hastily. He then departed in a bustling manner and the doctor followed in his wake. We were left to cogitate upon the charms of *laager*.

"Frightfully jolly!" said Anna Cleeve. "To be penned in every night with a lot of women and old men and screaming babies. I wish I had hung on to the back of Connie Brand's cart."

We had heard that morning of the latter's safe arrival with Judy in Salisbury.

"It'll be just as bad in Salisbury," said Mrs Valetta gloomily. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe was rapidly making a calculation of the likely accommodation in the *laager*.

"There's the court-house room, and the R.M.'s office, and the postmaster's den behind the post-office—yes, and the Mining Commissioner's room and that other little den behind the Magistrate's office—the N.C.'s room. I suppose every one will crowd into the big court-room—thank Heaven I brought down my tent; we'll have it pegged out in the yard, Anna, and lace ourselves in at night and be perfectly cool and comfy."

"E'um!" agreed Anna, whose thoughts were obviously elsewhere.

"And if you secure the N.C.'s office, Mrs Valetta, we shall have a retiring-room as well for the evenings. I don't see why we should have such a bad time after all."

"It's six o'clock now," said Mrs Valetta. "I should think we had better begin to collect our things and make arrangements, shouldn't you, Miss Saurin?"

I agreed, and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe stirred, but Anna Cleeve pushed her back into her place.

"Oh, not yet, not yet. What's the use of rushing? There's tons of time. Let's talk things over."

For a reason which we all very well knew, she was determined not to go.

"I expect some one else will be in directly with more instructions—we might just as well wait and see." She suddenly turned to Mrs Valetta. "You and Miss Saurin get ready, Nonie—never mind us."

Mrs Valetta made no move, but I presently rose and with an indifferent smile left them. What did it matter? If he did come I was only in the next room. I could hear his voice, at least, and perhaps it would be best so. Could I after all bear to meet him there, casually, under all those women's eyes—Anna Cleeve's searching glance, Nonie Valetta's ice-cold stare?

Perhaps it would be best after all, I thought, only to hear his voice; an opportunity would come later to speak to him. Surely he would make one!

Even while I faltered, standing before the broken mirror and staring at my own pale reflection there, his hand was on the door, and he came in amongst them with a gay greeting for every one. Afterwards it seemed to my aching ears there was a moment of expectation, an almost imperceptible pause—as though he had glanced round the room looking for some one else. His words seemed to verify my thought.

“I thought I should find every one here,” he said, and my heart leapt. Was there a curious inflection on the word *everyone*, or did I only imagine it? I could hear him stirring the tea they had given him, and the jingle of his spoon in the saucer afterwards, and the showers of questions and exclamations that fell upon him as he stood drinking. Very clearly I heard Mrs Valetta’s question, though it was in a soft and entreating voice I had never heard her use before:

“Why are you going, Kim? Surely it is your duty to stay here and mind us.”

“Yes, *do* stay,” implored Mrs Skeffington-Smythe. “It will make such a difference. How safe we’ll all feel!”

Anna Cleeve said nothing, but I could feel her *looking*. He laughed at their fears and fancies, waved off their compliments, and made light of everything.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, only do as Blow tells you. I don’t for a moment suppose there’s to be any fighting here or I wouldn’t go; there won’t be any fighting anywhere; the brutes are sure to run as soon as we come up with them; we shall be back in a week or two—you’ll see. I must go now. This is ‘Hail and Farewell!’ for the time being. We leave in about an hour’s time and I’ve a power of work to do yet.”

Still he did not go. Still I stood staring into the mirror.

“Oh, of course we shall come out and see you off,” they said.

There was a little pause. He appeared to be on the point of leaving; a chain jingled and the creak of some leather strap he wore about him could be plainly heard. He struck his riding-boot with something he held in his hand. I stood rooted to the ground, staring—staring—at the pale passionate waiting face in the glass before me. What was I waiting for so passionately?

“Where is Miss Saurin?” he said.

At this a wave of pure happiness seemed to sweep over me and recede again, leaving me as weak and faint as if a real great wave of the sea had dashed itself against me. I leaned upon the dressing-table, trembling and helpless to move, and dimly in my throbbing head I heard the answers carelessly given that I was about somewhere, getting my things ready to go into *laager*—busy doing something or other.

A moment later he was gone, with I know not what thought in his heart. Those women had the wisdom not to come and look for me afterwards. I think my eyes would have struck them dead as they entered the room.

In a little while I had recovered myself and went calmly on with my preparations. Judy’s rouge box, forgotten, stood open on the table. I had never used paint in my life, but at the sight of my white face in the mirror I dipped my finger into the red powder and made two little smears on my face before I re-entered the sitting room. Nonie Valetta was at the window again; the other two had gone.

At seven o’clock ten horses were standing saddled and bridled in the square, and speculation was rife as to who the tenth was for. Maurice Stair had been put out of business by his sprained arm, so it had been decided that he could not go to the front, evidently some one had been chosen in his place. Wrath and envy mingled with curiosity was written upon the face of every stay-behind.

Was it possible that Clinton (the man most unwillingly left in charge of our guns) was breaking away after all? they fiercely asked. Had Stair’s arm miraculously recovered? Was Bleksley an open rebel? Had the doctor suddenly become inspired with a lust for war?—but that was too far-fetched a supposition even for Mashonaland!

The horse was gravely examined: an ancient beast with gnarled hocks, no tail, and a dappling of tiny dark blue pits on his grey hide, as though he had suffered with small-pox in some long-past year. But there was spirit in his eye, and some one murmured over him the mystic word “salted.”

“*He* won’t die of *dik-kop* this journey!” was prophetically announced.

The men were “riding light”; all that was on the horses was a blanket, a mackintosh sheet, and a wallet with food enough for two or three days.

It was popularly stated that this little crowd had an excellent chance of meeting a Matabele *impi*, and being cut off before they had gone twenty miles. However, they came out of Swears’s, where most of them had been snatching a last hasty meal, laughing like schoolboys, and all the stay-behinds hung and clamoured after them, eyeing the horses wistfully, giving grandiloquent advice about everything, and complaining bitterly of their lot.

To every one’s amazement it was seen that the tenth man was no other than Dr Marriott. Suddenly appearing he shambled on to the grey horse, mounted awkwardly and sat there, a moody drooping figure, looking as though he belonged to some other world than that of the gay jesting crowd around him; possibly he did; probably he was lost in strange dreams of the strange lands of which De Quincey has told us.

Swift enquiries were as swiftly answered, and the whispered news flew round that, obsessed by his desire to go to the front, he had pleaded with Anthony Kinsella and not pleaded in vain. Anthony, against all advice, had consented to take him in the place of Stair. There was no lack of criticism on the mistaken weakness of Kim.

“The fellow’s a waster—”

“He will only be a drag—he’s a good-for-nothing!”

“He’s dopey now—lost in pipe dreams.”

“And he rides fourteen stone—his horse will freck by the way.”

“No, that’s a mistake—he only rides eight and a half—he’s all leather and bones since he took to the juice of the poppy.”

I looked round for Mrs Marriott, fearing she might overhear some of these frank comments, low-spoken as they were, but she was nowhere to be seen and at that moment Anthony Kinsella came on to the court-house verandah with Colonel Blow and another man. He was smiling at some remark of the latter, but as he ran down the steps the smile fell from him and his face took on the hard, dark, hawk-like look habitual to it. He strode in amongst the horses and seized his own. Laughter and good-byes still hung on the air, but he bade good-bye to no one; abruptly in that rough voice with a crake in it that thrilled and filled me with longing to be a man too, to spring upon a horse, and ride with him into the night, he terminated their laughter and farewells.

“Cut this short, you fellows!”

A moment later every one was in the saddle ready to start. He was the only one left standing. He stood there amongst them, suddenly still as though he had forgotten something and was trying to remember what it was; and he was staring, staring, over heads, past faces, through the scarlet rays of the sinking sun, straight into my eyes; and I was staring back into his.

We took a long, long look at one another, and I think he read all that was in my heart for him; while what I saw told me that if all the world said otherwise I was to know that Anthony Kinsella was a true man and no knave. Those straight steady eyes were never the windows of a false soul. I had given myself to no traitor and liar, but to a brave and upright man, gentle and strong and fine.

And he was going from me: only God and the old blind hag Fate knew if I should ever see him again. Mayhap this was our farewell, this passing of hearts through the eyes; and it was not enough. Body and spirit cried out for more—a touching of hands at least. His eyes called me, dragged me; it was as though he thrust his hand into my breast and laid hold of my bare heart drawing it out towards himself, and with it me. For I felt my feet moving—moving, and swiftly and straight I walked to him, into his open arms, and he kissed me on the lips, there before every one.

“God keep you, my heart! Wait for me—and believe in me,” he said, and though his voice was low the words rang out clear and strong on the still air, for all to hear who listed. In that moment misery and distrust was wiped from my heart and from my life, as though it had never been.

An instant later all was over, he was riding ahead of his little band, away into the sunset: and the men and the children were cheering, hands were waving, hats and handkerchiefs fluttering. Cheer upon cheer rang through the air, and voices came ringing back, until they grew fainter and fainter, and at last only the far-off thud of the horses’ feet was heard.

Later I became aware that I was standing alone. The women I had come with had disappeared, and the few men left were looking at me curiously. None of them were men I knew. Suddenly I heard a woman laugh in a strange fashion. It was one of the sullen Dutch women Anthony had brought back from Linkwater. She stood amongst her Dutch friends and made a remark, speaking coarsely and pronouncing her words in a strangely raucous way:

“*Yah vot*!... he’s very faskinating, darie Kinsella... Too bad he’s married already!”

Again she laughed that coarse, rankling laugh, and this time one or two of her men friends joined her. I stood perfectly still as though I had heard nothing, as though I had been turned to stone. I was realising with a terrible coldness at my heart that the look of truth and honour I had read in Anthony Kinsella’s eyes had not been so plain to others. A message had come to me from his very soul; but it was to me only. I knew that all was well between us, that the way was open and fair before us, that I could believe and trust him to the death. But these others did not. They thought I had been kissed by some other woman’s husband!

Well! It had to be so. They only thought—I knew. And I could afford to wait and prove my faith. He would be back soon. At that thought colour came back into my cheeks and blood to my heart. I lifted my head proudly and walked from them all.

One of the Dutchmen made a remark in a loud, astonished voice:

“*Maar! ek ser for yoh*! these *Engelsch* women have a damned cheek.”

Before the next hour was out I was face to face with the fact that all the women I knew in the place meant to cut me. Mrs Valetta did not leave me long in doubt as to her intentions. On my return to the house, to collect my things for the night in *laager*, she came to the door with a tempestuous face and over her head the eyes of Annabel Cleeve, with the gleam of a knife in them, met mine.

“As your most unwilling chaperon,” Mrs Valetta burst out, “I have some right to ask you, Miss Saurin, for an explanation of your scandalous behaviour.”

Tempest began to rage in me also, but I answered her civilly.

“I do not for a moment admit that I have behaved scandalously, Mrs Valetta, but as you say that you have a right to an explanation will you kindly tell me what it is you want explained?”

“Explained!” she cried violently. “You can never explain away your infamous conduct of the last half-hour—not if you live to be a hundred. Kissing a married man in that open and shameless manner! Your reputation is gone for ever.”

“You think it would have been more pardonable if I had done it secretly?” I was driven to saying. She glared at me with the utmost fury.

“You can’t jest it away, so don’t mislead yourself. You are done for forever in Mashonaland.”

“I’m frightfully sorry for your poor sister-in-law,” Mrs Skeffington-Smythe chimed in pleasantly from her seat on the sofa. “She is so peculiarly sensitive about scandal.”

Annabel Cleeve now contributed her little damnatory verse to the commination service.

“It must be admitted that we live in a free and easy fashion up here: but neither the manners or morals of the *Quartier Latin* are ever likely to become popular.”

I surveyed them with such calmness as I could for the moment command, this three-cornered attack being quite unexpected.

“You are all exceedingly kind and charitable,” I said, “and your solicitude for my reputation is quite touching—”

“Don’t talk of what you have not,” broke in Mrs Valetta vindictively. “If you ever had a reputation it is gone. You can’t kiss Tony Kinsella with impunity.”

“I never do anything with impunity,” I said with burning cheeks but making a great effort to control my anger. “I kissed Anthony Kinsella as any girl may kiss the man she is going to many.”

Anna Cleeve gasped as though she had received a blow, then she laughed and Mrs Valetta joined her, but their laughter made a jarring and unlovely jangle.

“A man may not have two wives—even in the *Quartier Latin*, I believe,” sneered Miss Cleeve with her mouth awry, and Mrs Valetta broke in harshly:

“It is ridiculous to pretend to be unenlightened on that point. I warned you that he was married and I shall let every one know that you were not in ignorance of the fact.”

“I do not believe what you told me. It is not true,” I said, my anger breaking out at last. “And I refuse to discuss the matter further. There is not a grain of generosity amongst the three of you. You prefer to believe the worst; do so.” As I turned to leave the room and the house I stopped for an instant and faced them. My passionate words seemed to have stricken them dumb. “But do not believe that I do not know what my real crime is.”

Nonie Valetta sat down suddenly on a chair and passed her handkerchief across her dry mouth. She looked like a haunted thing, and I was sorry for her. But Anna Cleeve faced me with sneering lips. Malice and some other bitter passion stared from her eyes, and she half whispered, half hissed, a word at me across the darkening room.

“What?”

“That Anthony Kinsella loves me.” The words had formed on my lips and I was ready to fling them at her: but I did not. I left the words unsaid and anger died down within me, for I could recognise despair when I saw it. It was not hard for me to imagine the torment of a woman who loved Anthony Kinsella and was passed by. I could afford to be generous: generosity was demanded of me.

“Let it all pass,” I said gently, and turning from them opened the door and went out of the house.

Chapter Nine.

Despair Calls.

> “It is not the perfect but the imperfect that have need of love.”

As I followed the little pathway which led from the house to the post-office buildings, where we were all to be shut in for the night, some one came running towards me and I presently recognised Mr Maurice Stair.

“Where are the other ladies?” he cried. “Is that you, Miss Saurin? Colonel Blow is fearfully annoyed that you aren’t all in long ago. There has been a warning sent in from the patrol and it’s quite on the cards that we may be attacked to-night.”

As he reached me I saw that there was another man behind him. The light was not good but I was able to distinguish a short, thick figure, and a puffy, fiery face. Upon the evening air I also recognised that faint sickening aroma of spirits I had already learned to associate with complexions of such radiant hue.

“This is Mr Skeffington-Smythe. He was so anxious about his wife that he left the column at Charter and has come down here to stay in *laager* and look after her.” Mr Stair was at no pains to conceal the note of irony in his voice, but

it appeared to be quite lost upon his companion.

So this was the gallant dare-devil Monty!

“Where is the poor little woman?” he confidentially enquired, lurching towards me. But I withdrew hastily beyond his radius, and moved on, waving my hand towards the house I had just left.

“You’ll find them all there—and Mr Stair, bring my dressing-case will you? I’ve come without it.”

I had indeed come without anything, and without an idea of where I was to sleep or spend the night. It is true that I had seen Adriana piling up rugs and mattresses, mine amongst them, and carrying them out, but I could not suppose that Mrs Valetta had given any special directions for my comfort.

The post-office was humming like a beehive. Men were hastily finishing the barricades, and Colonel Blow was shouting instructions with a sandwich in one hand and a sand-bag in the other. Evidently he had had no time to dine. Lanterns flickered everywhere, and a group of men were getting a Hotchkiss into position on top of a piece of raised ground. One man was hopping about, groaning and swearing because the wheel of the carriage had gone over his toe. Others were struggling with barbed wire of which an entanglement was being made for an outer defence.

I passed through the doors of the building, and going along a wide passage came out into a verandah which gave on to a large court-yard. This was the prison yard, and away at the other end of it were the cells—a line of strong doors and barred windows. A fire near by had a three-legged pot upon it which gave up a smell of stew; and another fire had a large kettle boiling over it from a tripod.

All round the inside of the walls ran a wooden balcony. This had been roughly erected during the past week, but it was sufficiently strong to support the men who would have to stand to the walls, and fire over them in case of an attack at close quarters.

In the centre of the yard tents had been pegged out. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe’s, a red-and-white-striped affair dominated the situation, and struck a gay sort of sea-side note; several children were frolicking in and out of it, diving under the flaps and showering laughter. The Dutch women had slung all their things against the wall and were sitting on the heap, one of them nursing a baby, the other feeding a small child with bits cut off a strip of *biltong*. Many piles of rugs and blankets were lying about on the gravelled ground, and by the dim light of several paraffin lamps suspended from the verandah I recognised Mrs Marriott turning over pile after pile, evidently in search of her own. Near me in the verandah a little group of Fort George women were standing. They had the quiet air of sensible, self-possessed women, prepared for any emergency, and there was no fuss or excitement about them at all. They behaved as though sleeping in *laager* was an everyday affair. I heard Mrs Grant say that Colonel Blow had just told her that the alarm had been a false one occasioned by some stray oxen which had approached the outlying picket; and Mrs Burney said casually that she had felt sure it was something of the kind and that there was no likelihood of an attack until the main *impis* had been engaged with some of our men. They dismissed the subject carelessly. Another woman said:

“My Cliffie and your boy Dick are rather big to put in among the little ones, so I’ve fixed them up in a little dormitory by themselves behind the prisoners’ dock.”

“My chicks are fast asleep already, and now that we’ve got that curtain up don’t you think it would be as well if we all went off to bed?”

“It will certainly leave the coast clear for the other women.”

“Yes: that is what I mean.”

“Oh, and Mrs Grant have you got those biscuits for your little Allie?”

“Everything belonging to us is in there, and I’ve brought my spirit-lamp to make tea in the morning. I expect we shall have to turn out early.”

“At seven thirty Colonel Blow told me. Three of those tents are for the hospital sisters—they are coming into *laager* too—but not until the last thing at night, and they’re to go first thing in the morning; there will be a strong guard round the hospital all night.”

As I listened to these gentle, simple souls how I wished it had been to their set I belonged instead of to the set that looked over their heads and called them frumps and dowds. With their families of young children round them most of them had parted with a husband whom she might never see again. Yet here they were with cheerful faces making their plans and fixing up their children to take up as small amount of room and be as little nuisance as possible. I realised that as Dr Jameson had said, these were the real pioneers and patriots. These were the people Mr Rhodes needed for his new bit of Empire!

As they were leaving the verandah one of them gave a glance down the yard and stopped.

“There’s poor Mrs Marriott! I wonder if—couldn’t we ask her to come in with us?”

They discussed the matter softly amongst themselves.

“I’m afraid she wouldn’t, Mrs Burney. Poor thing, she is so frightfully sensitive—she might think we were pitying her.”

“We’ll chance that. I’ll go and ask her—shall I?”

She went quickly to where Mrs Marriott was now sitting with her hands in her lap, on an unshapely roll of blankets.

“Mrs Marriott—do let me help you get your things in,” she said. “And have you settled on a place yet? Won’t you come in with Mrs Grant and Mrs Shannon and me? We’re packed like sardines, with the children, but I’m sure we can make room for one sardine more—”

“Oh! no. No, thank you,” stammered the other woman. “I prefer being alone. It doesn’t matter where I am. I can manage without any one’s help.”

She had begun by being emotional and ended by being rude: but Mrs Burney did not take offence.

“Well, be sure and come to us if you find that you’re not comfortable,” she said cheerily as she hurried away.

A Dutch woman’s husband presently appeared and helped to sort out the children and various utensils from the Dutch domestic heap. It became plain that they were to be bestowed *en bloc* for the night in one of the prison cells. Whilst I was watching them make a *trek* to the end of the yard, a large stately woman, who looked like a dowager duchess, staggered in under the weight of many bundles, followed by a haughty satellite with a Wellington nose, who might have been at least a princess of the blood, so scornful was her air and the swish of her petticoat. I had never seen these imposing people before and wondered who they could possibly be, but they evidently had the advantage of me in this matter, for I distinctly heard my name whispered between them. They surveyed me curiously as if glad to have an opportunity of inspecting me so closely. I returned their gaze tranquilly and at last they went away.

Eventually there was no one left in the yard but Mrs Marriott and myself. I looked at her. She sat absolutely still on her untidy heap of clothes, her body slightly bent forward, both hands tucked down in her lap. A straw sailor-hat was pulled over her face, and her lank, heavy, dark hair lay in a dreary sort of knot far down the nape of her neck, shewing, between hat and hair, a long, unbeautiful line that had a kind of despair in it. Her thin figure in a well-fitting gown might have been pretty and temperamental, but in the faded pink blouse, and now historical grey skirt, soiled and shapeless and frayed at the edges, she was merely thin and shabby and utterly unattractive. I never saw a more hopeless look worn by any woman. It was not only that she was shabby—she was as spiritless as a dead crow. Her clothes drooped upon her as the leaves of a withering pumpkin flower droop in the sun. Her face wore the terrible look of uninteresting, unloved middle-age that even despair cannot mark with distinction. Yet she must once have had good looks far above the average. The traces of them were on her still—but they were only traces.

Presently Mrs Valetta and her party arrived. Adriana, loaded like a beast of burden, brought my dressing-case to me immediately, but the others when they saw me turned and fled as if from the yellow peril. Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, extraordinarily pale and subdued, made her way to her striped tent, followed by her husband who talked vivaciously and fondly to the back of her gown. He had a very thick-lipped mouth with a tiny straw-coloured moustache perched upon it, whilst around it a smile hovered unceasingly. He seemed to breathe the spirit of good-will and *camaraderie* (mingled with other spirits) towards all the world: but it was evident that Mrs Skeffington-Smythe was not under his spell. She kept on, saying nothing. Only, as she went to pull down the flap of the tent I saw her eyes snapping, and she pulled so hard that the tent flapped over on her and her devoted husband, whereupon a number of strange words issued in muffled tones from under the billowing canvas; and they were not all uttered in a man’s voice. Later, whilst they were at the business of pegging it out again, Mrs Valetta came on to the verandah and called out that she and Miss Cleeve had found a small room for themselves. Mr Skeffington-Smythe blithely responded:

“Ah! Good—That is good.—very good. I will come and see what I can do for you presently when I have fixed up my dear little woman.”

But Mr Skeffington-Smythe uttered never a word. Only, when next her Monty addressed a fond remark to her she very briefly and violently replied:

“Oh, shut up!”

It was plain that I was to be left to my fate. Adriana had brought some rugs and thrown them on to my dressing-case, and I seated myself upon them to consider the matter of accommodation for the night. A slight drizzle of rain began to fall, making the fires hiss softly, and throwing a sad little veil over everything.

Perhaps I looked nearly as hopeless and forlorn as Mrs Marriott, but I was far from feeling so. I had the light heart of the woman who loves and is beloved again, with the whole of life stretching out beautifully before me, and it would have taken more than all the rain out of heaven to drench the joy out of me that night. All the same it behoved me to be up and doing. There was no sense in getting wet and it also seemed indicated that I should rescue Mrs Marriott from a watery fate.

Certainly, I had heard her refuse to have anything to do with that nice, kind little Mrs Burney, but Mrs Burney had not had a passionate flame of love and faith re-lit in her heart that very night as I had. I felt loving-kind to all the world, and as though I could simply feed on snubs if only they came from some one who was really unhappy—not merely cross or spiteful.

And surely this poor woman sitting on the rugs was unhappy, and had cause to be. I remembered Dr Marriott’s face as he turned to the west, and the new light that had been lit in his doomed eyes by the strong, kind action of Anthony Kinsella—*my* Anthony Kinsella.

We were alone in the big yard now—Mrs Marriott and I; and silence reigned, except for the murmur of Mr Skeffington-Smythe’s voice inside the closed tent. Perhaps he was explaining to his dear little woman why he was the only man in the town not out on patrol or helping with the barricades.

I moved stealthily in the direction of my premeditated attack.

“Mrs Marriott!” I said in a pathetic way I have. “I do wish you would take care of me and let me stay with you to-night. I’ve been left out in the cold by the other women.”

She turned a pair of utterly tragic eyes upon me. Her mouth was the mouth of a woman with whom things had always gone wrong.

“I would rather be alone,” she said in her cold, dull way. This was not encouraging but I persisted, and my voice became very wistful indeed.

“Oh, *do* be friendly. I am a stranger here and I feel utterly lost. What does one do in *laager*?”

She looked at me vaguely.

“I don’t know. It is a new kind of misery to me, too.”

“Well, let’s beat it out together, shall we? We ought to be able to find a corner somewhere. Will you come with me to search?”

She stared at me for a moment, then stood up hesitatingly. I made haste to lead the way. After making a tour of the verandah and looking into every window we came to, we went inside and tried all the doors. Most of them were locked, signifying that the room was full-up. At last there was no place left except to try the room where the sorting and storing of mails went on. The main part of this was a wide passage with a door at each end—an impossible place to camp out in. However, there was a counter with a wooden partition above it, and going behind this I discovered quite a cosey little retreat. It had rather a mail-baggy smell, but that was a trifle to be ignored in such times of stress as these.

“We can make ourselves quite comfy here,” I said. “When we have locked both doors in case the postmaster unexpectedly returns. Now let us get our mattresses and rugs, shall we?”

She had no mattress: only a few striped coloured blankets of the kind that the natives drape around themselves. However, I had plenty of rugs, and my mattress though narrow was wide enough for two at a pinch. But she jibbed at sharing it.

“Why should I make you uncomfortable?” she said.

I stared at her and laughed. “Dear Mrs Marriott, I shall be ever so much more uncomfortable if you don’t. Now be a brick and do as I ask you.”

For some unknown reason her eyes filled with tears and her mouth began to quiver in a queer way. I turned away hastily, and having bolted the outside door began to barricade it with a heap of empty mail-bags. Whilst I was rummaging I came quite by accident upon the postmaster’s little private supply of stores, and in the spirit of martial-law I immediately commandeered them for the public benefit. There were sugar, tea, candles, some tins of “bully beef” and a canister of delicious-smelling coffee.

“*Banzai*! We’ll be able to make some coffee to keep their spirits up—they must be jolly tired. Come along, Mrs Marriott, let’s go and commandeer some of that crockery and the kettle of water in the yard.”

She seemed quite keen, so we unbarred and unbolted again and went out to the yard-fire where the kettle was still lustily boiling, and in five minutes we had two large jugs full of excellent coffee ready. There is a saying that Boers come to coffee as the *asvogels* come to dead ox. Very disgusting, but evidently true, for the smell of our coffee woke up the Boer family in their prison cell and they came meandering forth, sat down in a ring round the fire, and looked so wistfully and eloquently at the big jug that we had to give them some all round, especially as we were using their crockery. Afterwards they lent us their beakers and enamel cups and we made a forced march to the barricades. When the barricaders also smelt the *arôme de Java* on the breeze and saw the big jugs we were carrying they raised a cheer, and the postmaster said:

“By the Lord, that’s my coffee, or I’m a Boer!”

We gave him a cup for forgiveness’ sake, and Colonel Blow too, and afterwards the rest of them came up in parties and we ministered to them, washing the cups after each lot in a pail of water. When all the white men had finished, we served the black constables and convicts a beakerful apiece, Colonel Blow having sent to their quarters for their own beakers. The convicts, melancholy-looking fellows, surveyed me with a shy curiosity, I suppose because I was a newcomer. But Colonel Blow for some reason seemed to resent their looking at me, for as soon as he noticed it he gave a rough order in the native tongue that made them all look hurriedly in another direction.

I told the postmaster that we had invaded his sanctum, but he was quite charming about it, and at once bestowed upon us the freedom of the post-office. He said we could even use the postage stamps if they were of any use to us.

Later Mrs Marriott and I returned to our lettery retreat. When we were at last tucked in under our rugs with the candle out I asked her to give me her advice about what I should do next day.

“But I don’t understand, quite,” she said. “Aren’t you staying with the Salisbury ladies?”

“I was,” said I. “Mrs Valetta is supposed to be chaperoning me in the absence of my sister-in-law, but she has thrown up the position.”

“But—what have—what could you have done to offend her?”

"She has offended *me*."

"But—can't it be patched up? Can't you overlook her offences? I don't see how a young girl like you can live alone here."

"I'm quite willing to patch up," said I. "She and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe and Miss Cleeve were all very rude to me, but—because of certain circumstances I can *almost* forgive them. However, I'm afraid they mean to declare war."

"Well, but—forgive me for asking—what could you have done?"

"Weren't you out seeing the patrol go off to-night?" I ventured.

"No!" she said in an abrupt kind of way, and I remembered then that I had not seen her in the crowd. She had of course said good-bye to her husband at home.

"I hardly know any of the men here," she presently continued, "except Major Kinsella, and he came in during the afternoon to say good-bye. I thought it particularly nice of him to remember me—but then he is always kind."

"It is about Major Kinsella that all the trouble is," I said in a low voice. I thought I had better tell her the real story instead of letting her hear an embroidered version from some one else. She was silent.

"Anthony Kinsella and I love each other," I said. "Before he rode away I kissed him good-bye before every one,"—I could not go on. The thought of that wonderful moment, and then, the sadness and bitterness of losing my lover overwhelmed me; my voice trembled and broke. A thin nervous hand grasped mine and held it tightly under the rugs. Yet her voice sounded doubtful when she spoke.

"He is a splendid fellow—any girl would be proud and happy to get him; but isn't he—? I seem to have heard somewhere that he is—"

"Oh, don't!" I cried. "Don't! I'm sick of hearing it. *That* is what they all say. *That* is my offence against the manners and morals of this place—kissing a married man—" My hand was suddenly loosed and I could feel her draw away from me in the darkness. "But I don't believe it for one moment!" I cried almost violently. "And I refuse to let these odious people poison my heart with their lies. I know he is a free man. He is incapable of lying."

"Oh!" she said quickly and warmly, "if he told you he is free it is surely true. I do not believe either that he would lie." She took my hand again and squeezed it.

"He did not tell me in words," I said. "But his eyes could not lie to me. Oh, Mrs Marriott, he has such brave true eyes—"

"I know—" she began, and then fell silent again.

"Ah! you are like the rest," I burst out bitterly, throwing her hand away from me, "ready to believe evil of a man whom you admit you have never known to be anything but kind and generous."

"Don't say that—it is not that I wish to believe evil, but I know men—a little, and my experience is that the best of them are terribly weak—and you are a very lovely girl. It is not impossible to think that he may have lost his head—"

"No, no, no!" I cried, "it is not so. I tell you I saw his eyes when he said good-bye to me. I will believe them against all the world."

I felt that I had convinced her, too, even against her will—that was something. She never again chilled me with unbelief in my man.

But as to getting any advice out of her about my immediate course of action—it was simply hopeless. The poor woman's unhappiness seemed to have dimmed her perception of what was going on round her in a place where she had lived for eight months. She knew of no place where I could stay. Did not even know if there were any hotels, or how many! I had to give her up as a guide and preceptor; but I was glad of the nervous pressure of her thin hand again before we slept, and something she said left my heart thrilling with happiness even while it ached for her.

"The men up here are all kind—but Major Kinsella's kindness to me has been so different—there has never been any *pity* in it—you don't know what that has meant to me—and his way with Rupert! He treats him as though he is still—Oh! perhaps you can understand?"

"As though he is still a man!"—that is what she would have said but her lips would not say it.

Poor soul! hers was the fag-end of a romance indeed!

Chapter Ten.

Charity Calls.

"To know anything about one's self one must know all about others."

The big main doors of the post-office were thrown open at an early hour of morning but the inmates of *laager* did not rise with the lark. They trickled forth at intervals, according to their use in life and the duties to be performed by them. When I came out on the verandah facing the barricades I found it strewn with the sleeping forms of men.

I stood for a moment looking at the landscape glowing and scintillating under the sparkling morning sunlight. Across the veldt a small body of horsemen came cantering towards the town; the men who had been out all night on picket duty.

I had slipped away from Mrs Marriott, for having long ago heard how sensitive she was about her tiny, barely-furnished hut, I did not want to cause her the embarrassment of offering to share it with me. I was looking at the mounting of one of the big guns and pondering the question of which hotel I should try, when Mrs Valetta swept past, her face coldly averted, and just the faintest suspicion of an intention to hold her skirt away from me. I flushed, then smiled disdainfully at the uplifted nose of Anna Cleeve who followed in her wake. Neither of them spoke a word. I had a childish inclination to whistle a time just to show them I didn't care a button, but I conquered it, and started instead to pick my way through the wet grassy paths towards the Imperial Hotel—I had suddenly remembered that Hendricks had said the Imperial was kept by a woman.

Half-way across the township I was caught up by the doctor, and when I told him where I was bound for he very agreeably offered to escort me. But he peered at me curiously as if to know the reason of this odd departure. Arrived at the long, galvanised-iron building which glared and blinked in the morning sun, he left me in the verandah with the assurance that he would send Mrs Baynes out to me. A few minutes later I made the discovery that Mrs Baynes was the dropsical duchess with whom I had shared a staring acquaintance the night before. She immediately resumed her observations, but she was professionally civil and obsequious until she found that I wished to engage a room; her manner then underwent a series of rapid changes—from curiosity to amazement, to hauteur, to familiarity. She began to "my dear" me! I swallowed my indignation as best I might and assumed not to notice her impertinence, for I was beginning to fear that she would not take me in and there would be nothing for me but Swears's.

"Aoah!" she said at last. (She had a peculiarly irritating way of pronouncing "oh!") "Aoah! I thought you were staying with Mrs Valetta and all that swagger lot."

She examined me intently from my hat to my shoes as though she had not done the same thing thoroughly the night before.

"Have you no rooms to let?" I repeated politely.

"Well—I don't know—it depends." She paused, tapping some dark blue teeth reflectively with her finger-nail whilst apparently counting the number of tucks in my skirt. She then closely inspected the gathers round my waist, and my belt-buckle.

"What does it depend upon?" I asked with deadly calm.

"Aoah! a lot of things." She threw her head sideways revealing a generous splendour of double chin, and shouted over her shoulder in a tremendous voice. "Fanny! Come yerea minit."

Fanny arriving was revealed as the tall and Junoesque girl with the swishing petticoat and the Wellington nose.

"This lady wants a room. What do *you* think, Fan?"

Fanny gazed at me in a queenly way over her military nose; but when *she* proceeded to count the tucks in my skirt and examine my belt-buckle I felt fury rising in me like a tidal wave.

"Madam!" I said, freezing the landlady with my eyes. "Will you be good enough to answer my question definitely? Can I or can I not engage a room in this hotel—and have my meals served to me there?"

"Aoah! meals served in bedroom! I never heard of such a thing."

I turned away hot with wrath and met the eyes of Colonel Blow and Maurice Stair who had just come round the corner of the hotel and entered the verandah. They looked amazed at finding me there, so I explained hastily and haughtily to the former whilst Mr Stair and the doctor listened frankly, and the eyes of Mrs Baynes and "Fanny" seared the back of my frock and hat. Afterwards Colonel Blow said quietly and emphatically:

"Of course you have a room for this lady, Mrs Baynes—the best in the house. You can put me anywhere you like." He added deliberately, "It would be a good thing to take Miss Saurin to her room at once and give her some breakfast." There was no mistaking the "I-am-the-Commandant-and-mean-to-be-obeyed" tone of his voice.

He was probably Mrs Baynes's best boarder in any case. Without a word she led the way, while "Fanny" dwindled from the scene like a bad dream. We walked through the dining-room, bare of anything but a long table and some dissipated-looking chairs, down a passage, and into a back verandah which had a row of doors facing the sunrise. At the third door she stopped and flung it wide:

"There you are!" she snapped. "Four pounds a week with board—*paid in advance*. Take it or leave it—I don't care."

She flounced away and left me. I went in and gazed about me. I had never been in a more hopelessly impossible room in my life.

One night just as we were straggling into *laager*, the look-out reported a small party of persons on the horizon, riding very slowly towards the town. It was not time for a change of pickets, neither could it be a patrol returning for there

was no patrol out. When these two facts were thoroughly digested every one pranced for their field glasses, and the *laager* verandah became crowded with very busy people full of curiosity and excitement at the thought of news from the front. Later, as the little group came nearer to us out of the glamour of evening shadows it was seen to consist of three persons, and presently there materialised under our watching eyes two battered-looking troopers, coatless and (of course) extremely dirty, riding one on each side of a dandified slim young man in a suit of khaki of sulphurous shade but of the most precise and fashionable cut. His putties were put on beautifully: not a false fold or a bad line anywhere. His rifle-fittings shone brightly in the sunset glow, and the bandolier slung with debonair carelessness across his breast had not a cartridge missing!

All these details were noted and beheld with breathless interest before we could even see the face of this mysterious Brummel in khaki, for his police hat—the only inartistic thing about him—was pulled well down over his eyes. I think I was the first to see the glint of an amazing shade of golden hair, and the line of a defiant mouth. Some notion of the truth dawned upon me then and a moment after every one knew. Colonel Blow stepped forward and spoke to the troopers, and one of them, who was a sergeant, answered him briefly and to the point:

"The C.O. ordered me to escort this lady back to Fort George, sir."

At this the slouch hat was pushed back, and Mrs Rookwood's murky eyes stared defiantly at us all. Then her pretty mirthless laugh rang out.

"It was all that brute Anthony Kinsella's fault," she said, addressing herself exclusively to the Commandant. "When he joined the others and found me in his troop with George he immediately told the Doctor and had me sent back. Wasn't it horrid of him, Colonel? I'm sure I should have made as good a soldier as any one else of them. I'm a first-class shot. You have said so yourself now, haven't you?"

She was trying to carry her defeat off bravely under the remorseless stare of a number of feminine eyes. Her own were so bright that it was plain she was on the verge of tears, and as she left off speaking her mouth began to quiver. She hadn't an atom of make-up on and looked almost middle-aged, but nevertheless extremely handsome. It was a difficult moment but Colonel Blow was true blue, and knew the right thing to do. He laughed cheerily and went forward to help her from her saddle.

"Well, you've had quite an adventure, Mrs Rookwood! But George will probably be put in the cells when he comes back for aiding and abetting you."

"He didn't," she said, speaking more naturally. "I did it all on my own, but he was awfully glad to see me when I turned up."

"Where did you leave them, Sergeant?"

"About thirty miles from Sigala, sir. Major Kinsella knew the way back was safe as he had just come along it and found it perfectly clear. But we had to ride hard."

"Yes; you must all be fagged out. Mrs Rookwood, the best thing you can do is to get to bed at once. But finding a bed for you is another matter."

He turned round in a half-appealing way to the group of women who had been standing behind him, but at the very suspicion of being asked to do anything for such a person as Mrs Rookwood almost every skirt disappeared like magic. In the twinkling of an eye there was no one to be seen but the spiteful Dutch woman and me, the tabooed of all tabooees.

"Miss Saurin"—he began in a persuasive voice.

"Of course," I said, smiling at his distress, "I shall be delighted to do anything I can for Mrs Rookwood if she will let me. I'm afraid all the cosiest corners are gone, though," I said to her, "and nothing but desks and mail-bags left to sleep on. But you're welcome to share all we've got—and I'm sure Mrs Marriott will say so too."

At this casual information she for some occult reason burst into tears, and stood there sobbing with her hands over her face. Poor Colonel Blow stared at her in dismay.

"She's tired," I said, "and hungry, too, I expect. Come along, Mrs Rookwood. I'll serve you up one of my famous French suppers before you go to bed. Colonel, will you have the kit from her horse sent in, please?"

I put my arm round the slim trim khaki waist, and half led, half dragged her to the den behind the post-office counter. Mrs Marriott was there already reading a book by candle-light, and she looked absolutely aghast at seeing me with my arm round a man's waist, for with her usual knack of missing any excitement that was going on she knew nothing of the event that had just taken place. From her nervous, horrified expression she evidently concluded that this was a fresh escapade on my part and that I was hopelessly incorrigible. When I explained the situation she was so much relieved that she did not show as I feared any coolness to the luckless Mrs Rookwood; but instead began in her absent-minded fashion to move her things so that there would be more room for the latter who was forlornly drying her tears.

"We've only one small mattress and that is stuffed with nails," I said apologetically.

"I've slept on the ground ever since I left here, you know—and been fearfully cold at night, too. I don't mind anything now. It is awfully good of you to bother with me at all."

She looked as if she was going to howl again.

“Nonsense!” I said briskly. “Do you like coffee *à la turc*?—because I’m just going to make some. It picks you up like a balloon. You’ll feel like a roaring lion afterwards.” She began to smile. “And a Welsh rarebit,” I beguiled her. “Oh, don’t say you are one of those cowards who daren’t eat Welsh rarebits for fear of what dreams may come.”

“No; I love them.” I had her laughing at last. “And I’m so hungry, Miss Saurin.”

“Well! there will be Welsh rarebit and some cold Mashona hen I stole from the hotel—and let me see. Where is the box of sharks you had, Mrs Marriott?”

She produced the sardines, also two boiled eggs and a lettuce. It had become our pleasant custom to ask either Colonel Blow or Mr Stair or Mr Bleksley to come in to supper before the night watches began. Hence these luxurious stores.

“Good,” I said. “That will provide for three courses; chicken mayonnaise, Welsh rarebit, and a sardine savoury. Lie down and rest, Mrs Rookwood, while we prepare supper.”

She did as I told her without a word, and Mrs Marriott and I busied ourselves with the postmaster’s oil-stove and a pan and pot I had secured from Hunloke and Dennison’s. Mrs Marriott actually rose to the point of going out to the yard-fire by herself to make three slices of toast for the savoury.

“She’s coming along,” I boasted to Mrs Rookwood. “The first few nights she was in *laager* she had no more initiative than a dead duck, but she’s getting quite bright now. I really believe it is doing her good to come into *laager* and see society.”

“Your society would do any one good,” remarked my companion so warmly that I really felt she was sincere and I coloured all over with pleasure, for I always think a compliment from a woman is worth half-a-dozen from a man. I still had it in my heart against her that she had called my Anthony a brute, but her next words dissolved all my resentment and gave her my gratitude for ever.

“I never met any one more kind and generous—except Anthony Kinsella. I called him a brute this evening but that was only to cover my embarrassment and anger with all those cats staring at me. As a matter of fact he was perfectly sweet to me and at no one else’s command in the whole of this country—Mr Rhodes or Dr Jim or an Archangel—would I have left George and come back here to be laughed at. Not that you laughed—and I’ll never forget how good you’ve been, and Mrs Marriott too. And oh, Miss Saurin, you should see her husband. You wouldn’t know him, he has brightened and changed so much. He looks like a man again.”

“Oh, you must tell her,” I said. “Tell her as soon as she comes in. Did he speak to you?”

“Yes, they were all crowding round my horse cheering me at the last. I must tell you that though the Doctor was very cross with me, both he and Major Kinsella said things that made every one think I was a very brave woman indeed, instead of a silly little fool who thought she was doing something rather clever and found out that she was simply making extra difficulties for the men. Of course I know it disorganised things awfully—and then to have to send off two good men with me—and how they hated coming, poor fellows! Oh, I was awfully ashamed of myself, but I can assure you Tony Kinsella had every one of them cheering and kissing my hands as though I were a Joan of Arc—and all the time my heart was a wretched little speck of misery in me.”

She paused, staring wretchedly at the ceiling with her lovely murky eyes, and considering God knows what sad pages of her unhappy history. I was sorry for her, but my heart was glowing with joy to have heard tidings of the man I loved, and I could not be unhappy.

“Tell me about Mrs Marriott’s husband,” I presently said, when I could drag my thoughts away from Anthony.

“He was one of the last to take my hand and wish me good-bye and good-luck, and he said, ‘When you see my wife, Mrs Rookwood, will you tell her that I am feeling like another man, and give her—’ That was all, but he said it with such intensity that I’m sure he meant her to understand that he *is* another man, and he must have overcome his dreadful habit to a great extent to look as he does—quite bright-eyed and holding himself alert. I am sure that he was going to say ‘Give her my love,’ but a sudden shyness came over him in front of all those men, knowing, too, that every one knew how sad it had been for her.”

“You must tell her,” I said swiftly, for I heard her coming along the verandah. “Tell her everything, just as you’ve told me, and put in the love too—*of course* he meant to send it. You’ll be doing a fine action, Mrs Rookwood. That woman is half dead with despair.”

At this point we nimbly turned the conversation to the subject of supper, and having examined the toast which Mrs Marriott held out for my approval, I a few minutes later made it my business to go in turn to the yard-fire.

As I went along the side verandah, kettle in hand, I passed the window of the office in which Mrs Valetta and her party had their quarters. The room was brightly lighted with the N.C.’s rose-red lamp, round which a dozen woolly moths were buzzing, seeking destruction. The whole party was seated at the table playing cards. And Mrs Skeffington-Smythe was staring at her husband with a look of positive hatred in her eyes.

“I *don’t* cheat,” she was furiously asserting.

“Yes, you do; you always do; you think it’s funny. And all the time everybody else is hating you for it,” responded the warlike Monty amiably. Mrs Valetta and Miss Cleeve exchanged glances of the utmost boredom and disgust. Indeed, if there is anything more desperate in the way of *ennui* than to listen to a husband and wife quarrelling over cards, I don’t know it.

When I got back to our peaceful little den I felt inclined to decorate Mrs Rookwood with a gold medal with “Hurrah” on it in diamonds. Mrs Marriott had turned into another woman. To look at her one could almost believe that it was she who was emancipating herself from the drug habit. All her droopiness had gone. She looked like a flower upon which dew had fallen after long drought. She was not middle-aged any more. The Frenchman who wrote that age never comes to a woman who is loved, knew something about women and life!

My bed was not very comfortable that night, but I wrapped myself to sleep in a new dream of joy in my Anthony, who by his action in taking Dr Marriott in the face of all opposition had brought back fresh hope to two souls that bad seemed doomed to defeat and despair.

Chapter Eleven.

The Children Call.

“Linger longer, *laager*,
Linger longer loo.
If we have no *laager*,
What will Col. Blow do?

“Stair will ne’er desert him,
‘Monty’ will be true.
Then linger longer, *laager*,
Linger longer, loo.”

Laager Ballads.

There followed many blank days. Week after week went by without news of any kind coming in. We only knew that our men were all together now, and marching on to Matabeleland. The question with us was to kill time and fearsome thought, and to kill time was a nearly impossible thing to do. Amusements there were none, of course, and occupations had to be invented. An interest in life had to be borne within, for in the external life of the town nothing happened to excite interest. The men, it is true, were kept always on the *qui vive* by the indefatigable Commandant, and when they were not drilling on the square or practising with the Hotchkiss they were away on patrol and picket duty. Even if they had not been so busy they were not a very interesting crowd; I imagine the men left behind to look after the women seldom are. They may be the real heroes; but they don’t look like it; and I don’t fancy they feel like it. The cause of their being left behind in the first place is generally physical unfitness or some domestic or official reason that puts them out of conceit with themselves, and out of love with life in general. Even a man like Colonel Blow, left in charge of a town in a position of great responsibility and trust, grew morose and surly, thinking of the excitement he was missing at the front and the fighting he was hopelessly out of. It was said that on its being decided that he was to be left behind he spent a whole day wiring appeals to Dr Jim and Mr Rhodes, and in the intervals walking round and round his office shouting bad words about “a lot of women and children any one could look after!” Not very flattering to the women and children, of course, but one could quite understand the attitude of mind and believe that in the same case one would say the same thing. There must be something gloriously exciting in riding through starry nights and sunlit days to fight for your country and your rights. There is nothing at all glorious in sitting safe and snug at home killing time until good news comes in.

I was very sorry for pale, handsome Maurice Stair with his crippled arm. He could not even go out on patrol or picket duty, because it was impossible for him to carry a gun. He always sought me when he had a spare half-hour, and afterwards I used to feel quite exhausted from the prolonged effort of trying to cheer him up. It was like trying to pull a heavy bucket up a well and never quite succeeding in getting it to the top. He often said:

“Thank God for you, anyway; the only sound, sweet spot in the rottenest apple I’ve ever put my teeth into.”

I would laugh at this exaggeration of my usefulness in trying to jeer him out of the blues: but I felt I deserved some praise for such work.

“Absurd! You know very well you adore this country, like all the rest of the men, and would never be happy in a ‘boiled’ shirt again.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I? Try me! If it were not for one person I would leave Fort George to-day and show Africa the cleanest pair of heels she ever saw step on to a Cape liner.”

He looked at me so embarrassingly on this occasion that I did not care to ask him who the person was. I said:

“Yes, and you would be back within a year, trying to sneak in by the East Coast route, hoping no one would notice you’d been away.”

But he would deny the Witch unceasingly, saying that she had no lure for him—all because he was longing to be in the thick of things with the other men, and because of the tormenting thought that he was staying behind like a woman while history was being made within a few hundred miles.

Certainly it was hard on a high-spirited boy, ambitious, with fighting blood in his veins. All his people had been soldiers for generations, he told me, but for some reason his uncle had not wished him to enter the army, and so he had sought life in places where at least there were always chances of irregular fighting. And now that a chance had

come along—here he was! It really *was* bad luck, and I comforted him as best I might. But I had my own troubles to bear.

The Salisbury women made things as difficult as they could for me. Mrs Valetta and Miss Cleeve began to cultivate the acquaintance of the Fort George women, and the result became directly apparent to my mental skin, always extremely susceptible to change of atmosphere. Where I had before met pleasant southerly breezes I now encountered chilly winds and frost.

At first I felt rather bitterly about it, and inclined to resent this injustice on the part of the domesticated little Fort George bevy. But I lived that mood down. Having plenty of leisure and solitude in which to think things out, those first few weeks I got round in time to their point of view, and saw the situation through their eyes. From what they had been told by my recent chaperon and had observed for themselves on the sight of Anthony's departure, they were bound to suppose that I was, to put it in the mildest way, lax about things conventional; and of course a woman who is that must expect to be looked upon as a sort of pirate, and the direct enemy of gentle, simple-hearted women who are devoting their lives to the task of being good wives and mothers.

In the homes of such women, who by quiet, ceaseless, uncomplaining toil and task were forming the backbone of the country in which they lived, patriotism is born, and fine ideals, and the love of everything that is "strong and quiet like the hills." What right had I to hate them if, hearing that I was a traitor to their cause, they looked sideways at me? Naturally, if they believed it true that I loved a married man and gloried in it, they saw in me a conspirator against their own peace and happiness. What was to save their own husbands from my lures and wiles when they came back? Perhaps that was how they looked at it.

It was only by the aid of these reflections and my sure conviction of being in the right that I freed myself from bitterness against them. Later I grew quite tolerant; but it was some time before I could begin to think of offering my good gold for such silver as they grudged me. However, as the blank days went by and Anthony's words and wishes came to be more than ever the only things in my world, I began to glance about me with hungry eyes for a little of the silver they were so greedy about. I had not far to look, once my eyes were opened. Everywhere about me were children; restless, constrained, confined, and hopelessly bored children. Some one once said (I think it was Kipling, who knows all about children as well as about everything else under the sun) that grown-up people do not always realise that boredom to children means acute and active misery.

Well, the Fort George children were bored, and acutely, actively miserable. They had nowhere to go and nothing to do. Their favourite haunt, a line of little low kopjes just outside the town, was out of bounds and forbidden. The shallow river with its pools and flat rocks and silver-sanded bottom, the scene of many old delights, was likewise beyond safe precincts. Everything was forbidden but to prowl about in the small town with never a rock or a tree to play on: only locked and silent huts, and their own homes from which they were constantly chased by busy mothers, who in the general dearth of servants had all the washing acid cooking to do.

Oh! the little sulky, dissatisfied faces that I met, not only sulky but peaked and pale; for when children do not get exercise that interests and amuses them they soon begin to look unhealthy. My duty seemed to be plainly marked out for me.

I thanked Heaven they were mostly boys. I don't think I could have organised sewing classes and spelling bees.

But I love children and therefore I know something about them, so I did not go headlong into the business, looking for snubs. Snubs are not pleasant fare at the best of times, and I think children's snubs are the most unswallowable; they are so sincere and to the point. I began my campaign by loafing about idly every morning just after breakfast, meeting them in the bypaths, and dropping a word here and there just to shew that I too was bored to madness. Gradually they recognised in me a fellow-martyr, and after a day or two they began to gravitate naturally in my direction as a centre where they could come and record their complaints. I allowed myself to be treated as a sort of slot-machine, where any one could come and drop a serious grievance instead of a penny, and sometimes get something back. However, I did not give much back. Children distrust grown-ups who give too much, or talk too much—especially in the first critical stages of friendship. They prefer to do all the talking themselves.

In time they wanted to know what they should call me. I told them "Goldie," a pet name of mine, and somehow that clinched the matter. Afterwards they gave me their full confidence, and I took firm hold and immediately began to impose upon it. The transition from favourite to tyrant can be swift and very simple, and I soon had an Empire which I ruled over like a Caesar.

Games were the order of the day. First of all we took the tennis-court in hand—the tennis-court where I had dreamed bits of my beautiful dream and which lay now like a desolate and accursed spot covered with dead leaves, old papers, and rubbish! In one day it was swept and garnished, and in two it was rolled and marked to a degree of perfection it had never known before. On the third day I divided the children up into quartettes and taught them tennis in batches. They had never been allowed to so much as glance in the direction of the court before, it being considered solely and sacredly the property of the grown-ups. Now they bounced upon it like balls, and yells of delight and victory woke the dull echoes and rang through the town. We had some glorious days. But to all fine things an end must be, and just as everything had been got into splendid working order, with two clubs formed for the purpose of competition, a popular arrangement made for the scouting of balls, and an entertainment committee selected, down swooped the grown-ups, headed by Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, and wrested the court away from us.

"Surely the only recreation in the place is not going to be taken away from us by these brats!" was their plaintive cry, and in my absence one morning, minding Mrs Marriott who was ill, my little crowd was intimidated and dismissed crestfallen. Like all Irish-Americans I have a "drop of the tiger" in me, and I fought for our rights. But when Mrs Skeffington-Smythe went round and got the mothers on their side I had to give in. It was no use encouraging insubordination to mothers; that I very well knew would end in my defeat as well as the children's.

“Oh, let them have their old court,” I said. “Soldiering is ever so much greater fun. But we must make a parade ground first, or Colonel Blow will be mad if we use the square except for very special occasions.”

So we made a parade ground for ourselves with very great labour and the joy that comes with toil or the world would work no more. Then, Heavens! how I drilled them! Every exercise and manoeuvre known to the mind of man and gymnasium mistresses was brought into force, and every atom of information acquired or inherited from a family that had always produced soliders came to my aid and was brought into active use. Not the least of my accomplishments was that at this juncture I roped in Mrs Marriott and Mrs Rookwood to make uniforms for my regiment.

At various shops in the town I found plenty of red twill. It is called “limbo” in Mashonaland and used for “swapping” with the natives in return for hens and rice and eggs and things. This I commandeered in large quantities and carried off to Mrs Rookwood. Like all colonial women she was clever with her hands, and could cut out and make anything, from a ball-gown to a suit of clothes. Indeed, she told me that she had actually without any help made the ravishing suit of khaki in which she started for the front, having cut it out and set to work at the first rumour of trouble with the natives.

She now at my instigation designed a most fascinating uniform, in which the boys looked as gallant as French Zouaves, and the girls, with their skirts tucked into the baggy bloomers, like incipient, rather fat, Turks. The first full-dress parade, held in the market square, was an entrancing spectacle. In the first flush of admiration Colonel Blow was moved to permit the convicts to erect cross-bars and a trapeze, make us some rough dumb-bells and put up a great strong pole for a giant’s stride in the centre of our recreation ground. Mr Stair contributed a mile or two of stout rope, and lo! we had a stride that was the crowning delight of life, but that I am fain to say was not confined to the children; for between patrols and picket duties many grown-up khaki legs might have been seen flying round amongst the scarlet bloomers.

Cricket also became one of the serious affairs of life. And I taught them handball against the jail wall which appeared to have been built expressly for the purpose of the Irish national game. Of course I am half Irish and that must be taken into account when I say that next to baseball it is the greatest game in the world for exercising both body and brain. Played at its best it is a splendid swift panorama of rippling muscles, dancing feet, sparkling eyes, and racing thoughts. You can actually, by the player’s intent, eye, tell how he is going to smash that ball, which will come two strokes later, into the middle of next week.

I should have liked to get up a baseball team too; but there was a difficulty about “bats” and the mothers were afraid of eyes being put out and noses broken. Perhaps they were right. Anyway, we had games enough to keep us alive and busy and young. I was not very ancient myself, but felt myself growing younger every day amongst those fascinating Fort George children, and I began to swagger and brag about them as if they were my own.

Four weeks after our first going into *laager* no one would have recognised them for the gang of discontented reprobates they had been. Bright cheeks, serene eyes, and lumps of muscle like young cocoanuts on their legs and arms were now their most distinguishing features.

I had pride also in their changed demeanour. Of course they were still noisy and often naughty—what child worth its salt is not? But drill and discipline had done a great deal for them, and though they were gay and rowdy-dowdy they were no longer the melancholy, meaningless, and rather malicious monkeys to whom I had first made advances.

And at night in *laager* they really behaved well. It is true that they did not go to bed like lambs, and sometimes on a hot stuffy night there would be a row in the dormitories that called for my special intervention. A mother would come to our post-office den and say:

“Oh, Miss Saurin, would you come and speak to Jimmy?” or Cliffie or Sally—or some one or other. And I would be obliged to confront the criminal wearing the air of a Caesar reproaching his Brutus with a last “*Et tu*?”

Nearly always that would suffice, but sometimes I had to ring a change and in dramatic tones threaten the offender with the prospect of running the gauntlet or the extreme penalty of having his honours stripped from his breast before the eyes of the world. Jimmy Grant wore my Bisley medal: for highest cricket score. Cliffie Shannon had a miniature of President Grover Cleveland set in amethysts strung round his wiry neck: for measuring biggest round the calf. Claude Macdonald (an Aberdeen Presbyterian) proudly displayed a Pius IX bronze medal, and I believe secretly considered the “*super nos spiritus de excelso*” as being specially applicable to his prowess in running. Various members of the brigade wore twisted silver bangles of which I fortunately had a number. It would have been a serious matter to have been deprived of these decorations, and a threat of such a tragedy was usually quite enough to ensure good conduct.

But on the whole the nice things behaved with a reasonableness that would have become many of the older people in *laager*. Among the Dutch folk many disagreeable incidents occurred. Neither were some of our guardians and defenders above reproach. The men who were off duty often made merry in their own quarters, and in dull times it is supposed that they essayed to keep their spirits up by pouring spirits down. Colonel Blow and his staff kept good order, but there were some incorrigibles and one of the worst was Mr Skeffington-Smythe. Often on hot nights we were obliged to close our tiny porthole window which overlooked the main yard and do without air rather than be disturbed by the thrilling conversations which occurred between Mrs Skeffington-Smythe, safely and exclusively tied inside her tent, and Monty, returned late from a convivial gathering, clamouring piteously without:

“Porkie! Porkie! Let me in... Darling! Let me in! How am I to sleep out in this infernal yard?”

“Go away!”

“Porkie!” in a yearning, heart-searing tone.

“Go away! Wretch! Pig!”

“Nina, was it for this I came down through deadly danger to mind you, instead of going off with all the fellows to have a good time at the front?”

Exclamations of disgust, quite indescribable, from inside the tent.

“I bet they’re having a better time than I am now, Porkie!”

“Oh, you wretched little worm! *Will* you go away!”

Thus it was between Porkie Skeffington-Smythe and the gallant Monty, who was at one time thought to be on his way to the Victoria Cross!

Chapter Twelve.

Duty Calls.

> “Take up the White Man’s burden
> And reap his old reward,
> The blame of those ye better
> The hate of those ye guard.”

“No news from the front yet!” That was always the answer to our daily inquiries, and there was nothing to do but feed our anxious, hungry hearts with the old supposition that no news is good news. After the forces had once left Sigala there was no way of getting into telegraphic communication with them and the last direct news we had from our men was when they made a junction with the Salisbury and Victoria Columns, becoming merged in them and thereafter proceeding on the march for Buluwayo.

Afterwards there was a long silence. A silence full of foreboding and fear for us, realising that our men were at last in the wild, unbroken, little known country of the Matabele, where a savage and bloodthirsty enemy lay in wait for them—an enemy that mustered twenty thousand fighting men strongly armed with rifles and assegai, while our troops all told mustered only six hundred and seventy (not including colonial boys and friendly natives).

There was reason enough in the little township for pale faces and haggard eyes, and they were plainly in evidence, but hardly ever without the accompaniment of the old gay *nil desperandum* smile which seems to be a peculiar attribute of British people when they find themselves in tight corners and unsmiling circumstances.

About the end of October two men with despatches brought in the first news. There had been a big fight with the Matabele on the 25th October near the Shangani River, when our people had been engaged by a number of the most important of Lobengula’s *impis*, including the Insukameni regiment, the third best of the King’s crack companies. This battle was afterwards officially described as the Battle of Shangani, and the Matabele losses were about five hundred whilst our forces had lost one man, with six wounded. Two horses had been killed—a very serious matter, for the columns were already short of mounts.

After the Battle of the Shangani our troops had resumed their march to Buluwayo, going slowly, as they were subject to constant small attacks burning kraals as they went, and collecting cattle left behind by the fleeing Matabele.

After this we had no more news until the second week in November, when suddenly one morning the wires were humming with the tidings that Dr Jameson had occupied Buluwayo. The Union Jack strung to a great mimosa tree floated out over the ruined and burning kraal of a dethroned tyrant!

The news came to us from Palapye, the capital of Khama’s country, away down south. It had been brought there by Burnham, that brave and intrepid American, whose name will live for ever in the annals of early Rhodesia and in the history of all scouts. He and his mate Ingram (also an American) had ridden with a Zulu boy who knew the road, one hundred and twenty miles to Tati, hoping to find there a telegraph office from which they could telegraph the news to Mr Rhodes. But at Tati they found no wire—it had not yet reached that place. There was only a heliograph station that because of the cloudy weather was of no use to them. Burnham then, though wearied out by the terrible ride they had already accomplished, decided to push on to Palapye, another ninety miles, and there, on the morning of November 9th, he gave to the world the news that civilisation had advanced another great stride, in the subjugating of a savage and cruel nation; while to the map had been added one more of those little pink stains that stand for Empire and Progress.

Oh! how we stood around the telegraph office that day, and many days after, and drank in details of the victory! In thrilling scraps it all came in.

We heard of the Battle of the Imbembesi, which had taken place on the first of November when the very flower of the Matabele army had come forth in all their glory of native war-dress and waving ostrich plumes, shaking the earth beneath their dancing feet, holding their red-and-white ox-skin shields before them and making *jia* at the white men with their gleaming assegais. They had fought there and died in hundreds at the very gates of the royal kraal; and the old King, desperate at last at the tidings of defeat brought in by his scouts, had fled, taking with him his wives and children and such of his warriors as remained faithful to him in his adversity. But before he went he gave orders for the burning and utter destruction of the kraal of Buluwayo, that scene of savage splendours and innumerable

cruelties now for ever past.

A just fate had overtaken Lobengula, but even while we realised it there seemed to us at that time something terribly pathetic in the thought of the old monarch, swollen and tortured with gout and the madness of defeat, full of fierce spleen against those whose friendship he had himself estranged by treachery and false dealing, fleeing now before the winds of adversity and despair. It seemed that some prophetic thought must have lain in the mind of his mother when she named him Lobengula—"*Driven by the wind*."

When our men at last arrived at the royal kraal, pitched high on the brow of a great plateau commanding a view of the whole country, they found that like Jericho of old its walls were down to the feet of the invader, but for a time they could see nothing clearly for the smoke that arose in black-and-grey spirals and suffused the landscape, blotting out the sunlight, while a disgusting and indescribable odour of burning refuse stung their throats and terribly assailed their nostrils. Besides firing the mean dwellings of his tribe, Lobengula had caused huts full of splendid ivory and furs and karosses to be given to the flames, and grain enough to feed a nation had been ruthlessly destroyed. While in the centre of a huge open space surrounded by rings a hundred feet wide of smouldering huts, were the ruins of what had lately been the King's palace.

This great space had been the place of the King's privacy and at the same time his Throne-room and the arena of justice and state. There had been times when its white dust lay shimmering in an almost terrible peace, while the King sat before his door in the morning sunlight watching his magnificent peacocks as they strutted and scratched, preening their jewelled feathers and crying their sinister unmusical cries. In those hours many eyes secretly watched the tyrant through holes bored in the walls of their huts, but none except the peacocks dared break the silence when the Lion of Matabeleland sat considering his savage politics and arranging the affairs of his nation.

There were other times when the court-yard witnessed scenes of barbaric glory and ferocity unparalleled since the time of Bloody Tchaka of Zululand. It was there that the King would come forth in state to receive the royal salute —"*Bayete*!"—from the brazen throats of his *impis* drawn up in countless splendid lines—lines of rippling muscular bodies, black as polished ebony and as bare, save for the *moocha* of leopard skin and the bands and bangles of brass. There when the spirit moved them to slay and they wished for permission to go forth and plunge their assegais into the bosoms of the hapless Mashonas, his warriors danced before Lobengula, making the ground tremble and thunder beneath their leaping feet. There the great *indabas* had taken place and the bloody "smelling out" ceremonies of the witch-doctors. Many a time had the wide level space been stained with hot gushing life-blood, and strewn with dead men, while the old King, great in stature as in cruelty, sat upon his three-legged stool of state, laughing in his thick throat, his small keen eyes like knife-points in his grossly featured face.

Now all lay in ruins. Everything was broken and devastated and wrecked by the tremendous explosion of eighty thousand rounds of ammunition which had been fired at the last moment as the King's commands.

On top of the heaps of *débris*, forlorn and overturned, was found the silver elephant which had been given to Lobengula by the Tati Company to whom he had granted concessions. He had greatly prized this silver model, seeing in it a flattering reference to his own might and greatness. Now it lay amidst the ruins of his glory, a symbol of power broken and despotism thrown down.

Our men had done splendidly. There had been deaths and casualties, but they were deaths bravely met—facing fearful odds—and the casualties were few, considering the enormous difference in numbers between the conflicting forces.

Later in the month we got more news from men who had arrived in Salisbury with despatches, having left Buluwayo some little time after its occupation by our forces. They said that Dr Jameson was "sitting" there, waiting for an answer from the King whom he had sent after and told to come in. There had been some delay and difficulty in getting boys to go with this message, as unless they were Matabele they stood a very good chance of being killed before they could reach the presence of the King. However, eventually three colonial boys had volunteered to go, and the Doctor had given them a letter written in English, Dutch, and Zulu, telling the King that the nation was beaten and that to avoid further bloodshed he must come in. His personal safety was guaranteed, and he was further told that after the return of the messengers two days would be given him in which to return. The Doctor had also despatched some native spies—Zambesi boys—to find out all they could concerning the whereabouts and doings of the King. These returned a couple of days later and reported that the Matabele were massed in large numbers about thirty or forty miles to the north of Buluwayo. They were extended in camps across the country with the idea of protecting the King, who lay at a place called Intaba-gi-konga, a small hill surrounded by thick bush about fifty miles away from Buluwayo. The spies had been in the camps and talked to the enemy (pretending to be in search of some of their own people who had left their kraals) and they reported the Matabele very cowed and depressed by their recent reverses. The men of the Imbezu regiment who had bragged to the King that they would walk through the *laagers* of the white men, killing the elder men and bringing back the rest for slaves, had lost at the Imbembezi fight about five hundred out of seven hundred men, and were so much demoralised by their beating that the Zambesi boys had actually gone in amongst them and spoken to them like equals, whereas in days not long past it meant death to an inferior native who addressed himself to an Imbezu.

This news lifted a burden from our hearts, and we realised at last that our vigil with anxiety was at an end. The war was over! Our men would soon be home, all but those who meant to stay and occupy Matabeleland, of whom it was said there would be many, especially amongst the mining men. Rumours had already arrived that the country round Buluwayo showed signs of gold-bearing reef.

It was certain at any rate that Lobengula must come in and surrender himself before long. He might linger for a while and try to make favourable terms, of course; or he might be persuaded by some of his younger warriors who had not had enough fighting, to hold out a little longer. But it was now known that the King was a very sick man, and for that

reason alone it seemed most unlikely he would wish to continue a struggle that would keep him out for some months longer in a wild and uncultivated part of the country without proper shelter for himself and his queens and children. It is supposed by many people that natives can live anywhere and in any state of wildness as long as they are in their own country; but this is a mistake. The Matabele, for instance, had left their kraals and their growing crops behind them to go into the bush where there was nothing for them to eat except the cattle they had brought with them, and the small amount of grain they had been able to carry away. In the meantime the wet season was advancing rapidly, and there would be no shelter for them from the heavy flooding rains that fall in November, December, and early January. It surprised me to hear that natives cannot stand exposure to the furious elements any more than white people can. They sicken and die just as we should do. Furthermore, they cannot live on a perpetual meat diet; they need meal, and grain, and green mealies, and rice; and if they cannot get these things they cannot live.

It was known too that small-pox was rife amongst the Matabele. This was one of the reasons that our native allies from Bechuanaland—the Bamangwatoos—had deserted us early in the campaign, and returned to their kraals. A thousand of them under their Chief Khama had started for Mashonaland to fight under Colonel Gould-Adams, who was bringing up a flying column of Bechuanaland Border Police to reinforce our men; but when they heard of small-pox, and further realised that the campaign was likely to last some months, they calmly gave notice to quit, and returning to their own country set about reaping their crops. Their attitude was the attitude of Dr Abingdon. They had not lost any Matabele, neither any small-pox; why should they seek for these things?

Fortunately, there proved to be no need for the services of such valorous allies. The Southern Column was quite able to account for itself without native assistance, and had already arrived within fifty miles of Buluwayo, having met and ignominiously dispersed about eight thousand Matebele under the command of Gambo, the son-in-law of the King.

The country south of Buluwayo was now quite clear of the enemy and the whole road to Tati and Tuli was reported to be crowded with transport-waggons bringing up loads of things to Mashonaland, and also hurrying with stores and provisions to the capital of the newly opened country.

Odds and ends of private letters began to reach us from the front: some were brought in by native carriers—Maholi and Mashona boys who, now that the danger was all past were glad to return to the service of the white men (full of soft words of explanation and apology for having left so abruptly)—and some by despatch riders with official news. Mrs Grant got a long letter from her husband and Mr Stair a few lines from Gerry Deshon, and several other people received belated documents, which were thumbed and passed under many more eyes than they were originally intended for, within a few hours of their arrival. Mrs Marriott had a letter from her husband which changed the face of life for her and turned her into a laughing, weeping child. No one asked to see *her* letter.

Every one was able to glean some scrap of information to apply like a healing ointment to an aching wound, and every one seemed to have something to weep or smile over, except me. Neither letter nor message came for me! It is true that I gathered from others that Anthony Kinsella was well and had done splendid work, and incidentally I heard that he had despatched private letters to Fort George by carrier. But that carrier never came. If there was a letter for me, then like many another it never reached its destination. Often in the months that came after, sodden native pouches containing white pulp which had once been letters were found lying on the veldt—in one or two instances with a skull near by to tell a little tragic, eloquent tale.

Every one wrote that they would be back very shortly—as soon as Lobengula came in and gave himself up. He had sent a specious letter to Dr Jameson to say that he was coming, and the Doctor was still waiting for the promise to be fulfilled. But the days went by and the King of the Matabele did not materialise. As a matter of fact, he was hastening to put as great a distance as possible between himself and Buluwayo. He was for the North. It seemed to him that the high fertile country beyond the Zambesi would be a good place to get out of the white man's range and found a new dynasty, and thither he was hurrying with such speed as his fat and enormous body would permit. He was far too unwieldy to walk even if he had not been nicked with gout; so his warriors carried him, and at other times dragged him along in a Bath-chair. When that broke down at last, and his oxen died from lack of food and rest, he commanded his men to span themselves to the waggon and pull him along, and they did so; whilst close upon the spoor of the waggons came trooping crowds of women and children and boys driving cattle; all making for the new land of despotism that was to be founded beyond the waters of the Zambesi.

In the meantime a feeling of insecurity and impatience began once more to prevail in the rest of the country. It was realised that no progress of any consequence could be made, no real advancement furthered until the question of the Matabele powers was settled for ever. Lobengula, if he would not surrender, must be laid by the heels, and there were men "sitting" in Buluwayo who were eager enough and able enough to do the laying.

It was no use letting him settle and grow powerful on the other side of the Zambesi, ready to swoop down and give more trouble some day. There could be no security until every belligerent native had laid down his arms and returned to peaceable occupation.

It was a great relief to the whole country when the news came that a column had started out after the King. Then indeed we knew that the beginning of the end had come, and that we might thereafter possess our souls in peace and security.

Laager was broken in Fort George, and we slept in real beds once more. The coaches from "up" and "down" country began to pass through again, and we got regular mails and were no longer cut off from the civilised world. I was soon reminded of this fact by letters from Salisbury urging me to take coach and rejoin my sister-in-law there. My brother Dick was one of those who were remaining in Buluwayo to see things finally "fixed up." However, it did not seem to me to be urgently indicated that I should join Judy just then. Instead, I left my hotel and at the invitation of Mrs Marriott took up my residence with her in her little series of huts.

It was round about Christmas time and a sprightly air began to prevail in the township. One day some waggons

arrived with machinery for a neighbouring mine and when they had off-loaded at the Mining Company's stores in the town some one said:

"Why should not we borrow one of these nice waggons and go for a picnic somewhere away from this old town in which we have lived too long and wearily?"

And some one else said:

"Good idea! Why not, indeed?"

And before any one knew how or where it was done it had been definitely decided that we should have a Christmas picnic in a lovely spot called Green Streams ten miles away.

Personally I was not very keen on this plan, and I knew that a great many others felt the same way about it. There seemed to be a certain heartlessness in celebrating Christmas so pleasantly while our men were still away at the front, even though we were assured that all was well with them—that they were not fighting, but merely making a triumphal march on the retreating enemy, in order to bring back the legal trophies of war. However, so many people seemed eager for the picnic, and really physically to need a change of air and scene from Fort George, and the children were so wistful about it, that it seemed selfish to protest against the plan. And I am sure that it was mainly for the children's sake that many of us resisted the desire to remain at home, instead of picnicking on the veldt.

Once the thing was settled, though, every one threw themselves with a zest into preparations. Cooking went on at a great rate, and the whole town smelt of belated plum-puddings, and hams bubbling in three-legged pots. And outside every house were to be seen half-a-dozen Mashona hens with their necks wrung. I may mention that there is about three mouthfuls of flesh on each of these birds.

Every one was frightfully busy filling empty packing-cases with crockery and pots and pans, and late into the night people were still carrying things to be piled into the waggon. It was like the preparations of the Israelites for their departure to the promised land.

The next day, at six o'clock of a blue-and-gold morning, we set out. Some of the women-folk, and the smaller children, rode in the waggon, but most of us cheerfully padded the hoof, glad of the opportunity to stretch our limbs over the short, burnt grass, regardless of such trifles as stick-grass and ticks.

The children begged to wear their scarlet uniforms, and they danced along yelling and prancing, like a band of red Indians let loose.

We reached Green Streams at about nine o'clock and found it a lovely open glade with clumps of trees scattered everywhere, and huge cliffy rocks standing alone, and a slender little fringed river curling like a silver caterpillar through the middle of the scene. Soon the lovely smell of wood fires was on the air, and every climbable rock had a scarlet spot decorating its summit.

"I think it was an excellent idea of yours, Miss Saurin, to let the children wear their uniforms," said Mrs Burney. "We can't possibly lose sight of them now, can we?"

"It was their own idea," I said. "They adore that get-up of theirs."

"Yes, and they adore you, too. I'd like to know who doesn't," she said so unexpectedly that I was quite overwhelmed. Of course I was frightfully pleased at such a remark coming from her so warmly and spontaneously, and I really could not help believing that they did like me a little better than in the beginning of *laager*; but of course it was absurd to talk of any one adoring me. It was only necessary to watch the faces of the Salisbury women when I was in their vicinity to see how cordially I was detested by them at least. As soon as we arrived they had ensconced themselves under the shadiest bunch of trees (not too far from the commissariat department) and were ordering Monty Skeffington-Smythe and another man about like dogs, to look for cushions and rugs and make them comfortable in the shade. They still clung together, but not from love, I think. I never saw three women more *ennuié* with each other. They were absolutely drooping with boredom, and I believe the only active feeling any of them possessed was dislike of me. It was really a wonder that they had found the energy to come to the picnic, but the Fort George women laughingly and perhaps a little maliciously suggested that their probable reason for coming was that they thought it the easiest and simplest way of securing an excellent Christmas dinner without any personal exertion. Adriana had for sometime past been professing herself to be precariously ill. The mysterious malady she was suffering from did not affect her appetite or prevent her from looking extremely robust; and rumour unkindly put it that she was in reality jibbing at last at having to do simply everything for three well-grown, able-bodied women who were perfectly capable of looking after themselves. However, she had recovered her health and strength for that day at least, and was at the moment assisting Monty Skeffington-Smythe and the Doctor to carry coffee and *roaster-cookies* to the languid party under the trees.

"What are you going to do, Miss Saurin?" Mrs Rookwood asked me in her wistful way. Now that *laager* was over she had grown very tragic about the eyes again, and her mirthless laugh with its defiant note began to be frequently heard. She always stayed as near me as possible, perhaps because I made it my business to repay in kind everything in the shape of a snub that came her way.

The Fort George women it is true were always kind to her, and forgot her sins in the remembrance of all her kindness and humble helpfulness to them and the children. The intimacy of *laager* life had broken down barriers that would otherwise never have been overcome. Moreover, the objectionable Mr Geach had been so extremely obliging as to break his neck somewhere in the Cape Colony, so that as soon as George came back from the front all would be well with the Rookwoods. But the Salisburyites showed by the expression of their noses that they considered the air more than ever polluted when "the Geach person" was anywhere near.

"I'm going to fix up Mrs Marriott under that tree with books and cushions, and then I suppose we'd better help get the dinner ready."

"Well, let me help, won't you?" she begged.

"Of course."

Mrs Marriott had really become most alarmingly fragile of late. She had grown amazingly young and pretty, it is true, but her clear skin looked almost too transparent, and there were big dark shadows under her eyes that threw them up and made them look perfectly lovely—but shadows *are* shadows, and the fact remains that however becoming, they are not at all necessary to health. Secretly I was anxious about her; but no one else seemed to have noticed any change except the wonderful one in her spirits and looks. To-day, it might have been the consciousness that she was looking extremely pretty in a white dress Mrs Rookwood had made for her, but she was actually humming a little tune, and she remonstrated laughingly when I insisted that she should rest out of the heat and not think of coming to help get the dinner.

"You're just trying to make a molly-coddle of me," she said, "and yourself so indispensable that I shan't be able to do without you ever again. I know your little arts."

However, she was finally beguiled to do as I told her, and when she was comfortably fixed up Mrs Rookwood and I waited on her with breakfast—a cup of delicious coffee, and a hot buttered rusk.

Afterwards enormous preparations for dinner began to go forward. The hour of three thirty in the afternoon having been fixed upon, such boys as were available were *inspanned* to the task of collecting fuel and making big fires at a certain distance from the camp on account of the smoke. Others were set to work to scoop out ant-heaps and turn them into red-hot ovens for the reception of pastry and roast meats. These impromptu Dutch ovens turn out wonderfully light bread and are splendid for pastry.

Plenty of cold delicacies had been provided for the picnic, but the Port George women had vowed that after so long a fast from nice meals every one should have a real hot Christmas dinner. So the ovens were prepared for rounds of beef, many chickens, mince pies, custards, and cakes. We found that they had arranged and allotted all the tasks among themselves, but they had included Mrs Rookwood amongst them, at which she could not conceal her pride and gratitude. But me they told to go away and play and incidentally to mind Mrs Marriott and keep an eye on the children. So we romped with the children first, then roamed about exploring the rocky kopjes, digging out fern roots for home planting, gathering flowers and looking at the Bushmen drawings of which there were several under the overhanging ledges of the biggest rock. Queer looking things they were—the men drawn like skeletons with all their ribs and bones showing, driving long, lean cattle that had the bodies of cows and the heads of horses, or shooting wild buck with bows and arrows. They say these drawings which are often seen in Mashonaland have been there for centuries, preserved and kept fresh because they are sheltered under the eaves of the rocks from sun and rain.

Chapter Thirteen.

Defeat Calls.

> "Do we think Victory great? And so it is.
> But now it seems to me, when it cannot be helped,
> That Defeat is great, and Death and Dismay are great!"

At twelve o'clock Colonel Blow and Maurice Stair and a number of men who had not been able to get away any earlier arrived, and the children went off to hail them and help get them some refreshment.

Mrs Marriott and I sat down under one of the great rocks on a lounge of cool moss, glad to get out of the grilling sunshine for a while. It was not long before we began to speak of what was uppermost in our minds—our men at the front. I said:

"I don't know what your husband will say to you looking so fragile. I shall have to feed you up and make you plump before he arrives."

Impulsively she leaned towards me and took hold of my hands. Her face was suffused with colour.

"Deirdre, you have been so good to me, and I must tell you, though I meant to keep it a secret. This looking fragile doesn't really matter—it is natural." She paused, then added softly, "It is part of the state of my coming motherhood."

"Oh!" I cried at last. "How beautiful and wonderful for you, dear! And how glad I am!"

She looked at me shyly and gravely.

"Yes: it *is* beautiful, Deirdre. But I did not always think so. I knew it long ago, before Rupert went, and it seemed to me then like the last bitter drop in a most bitter cup. Now everything is altered. You and Anthony Kinsella have changed the face of life for him and for me."

"No, no! You have done it yourselves, dear. Your husband's fine effort had to be made by himself; no one but one's self can do these things. One must fight for one's own soul. You know:

"'Ye have no friend but Resolution!'"

"Yes, but if Anthony Kinsella had not given him his chance he would never have broken away from—Don't I know? Oh, God! Did not I pray and watch and fight for him?—and afterwards *watch him drop back*? Oh, Deirdre, no one can ever know the awful things that passed before hope died in me—that frightful drug rearing its hideous head between us like a great beast! You cannot imagine what it means to a woman to see not only the body but the soul of the man she loves being devoured before her eyes, while she stands looking on—helpless! And then after a time—it is all part of the hideous enslavement—he began to hate me for looking on at his degradation!"

Her face became anguished even at the recollection. I held her hands tightly, but I looked away from her eyes, and we were silent for a while, but presently she went on:

"And your share in it has been great, Deirdre. Without your help I could never have pulled myself out of the pit of despair and desolation into which I had fallen. My spirit was in fetters: but you have helped me to break them—and now I feel strong enough and brave enough for whatever comes. I have a heart for any fate. We have a big fight before us still, I know. Rupert has gone back in his profession all this time that he has done nothing, thought nothing. It will be uphill work getting back to where he was before—and we've only a tiny income—and he may be tempted again. But, oh! how I mean to fight for my happiness, Deirdre. And I *know* that I shall win."

I could only press her hand tightly, and keep back my own tears. She looked such a delicate little thing to put up such a big fight. It seemed to me at that moment that the battle-field of life was a cruel and hard place for women, and their reward for battles won, all too pitiful. We sat a long time in silence.

At last we were aroused by a great hooting and tooting and banging of pans and tin plates from the direction of the camp. The significance of these sounds and also the odours of baked meats that were beginning to suffuse the veldt, could not be misunderstood. We returned to camp and dinner.

Mrs Burney had her best damask table-cloths spread in line on the level grass, and Mrs Rookwood had decorated the snowy expanse with trails of wild smilax and jasmine, and jam-jars full of scarlet lilies and maidenhair fern. We sat down to a banquet of unparalleled splendour, of which I cannot now remember all the details, but only that they were opulent and luxurious and kingly. Afterwards every one had a glass of some delightful champagne that had been unearthed from the cellars of Hunloke and Dennison, and Colonel Blow ceremoniously arose and asked us to drink the health of the Queen, and we drank, standing.

Then Captain Clinton jumped up again with his glass in the air and called for toasts to Mr Rhodes and Dr Jim, and those we drank uproariously. Afterwards we sat very quiet for a moment, and only the children's voices were heard. Colonel Blow got up again and a hush fell upon us all. Some of the women began to bite their lips, to keep themselves from crying, and Mrs Shand, who had been one of the brightest and gayest of the party all day, suddenly leaned against Saba Rookwood's shoulder and began to sob.

"I ask you to drink to those who cannot be with us here to-day—because they are attending to our business elsewhere—our fellows at the front!"

Across the table-cloth Annabel Cleeve and I stared at each other dry-eyed.

"Here's to their speedy and safe return!" cried Captain Clinton, holding his glass aloft so that the wine shone and sparkled in the sunshine like liquid topaz. "Now you kids give three tremendous cheers for them, and maybe they'll hear the echoes in Buluwayo."

That saved the situation. The men's strong "Hurrahs!" mingling with the children's cheery voices, rang and echoed among the rocks and hills. Emotion was pushed out of sight once more, and faces became calm. It appeared too that Colonel Blow had not finished the giving of toasts. He got up once again, his face wreathed in smiles.

"And I want you all to drink the health," he began, "of some one here who has been the sunshine of our darkest days, and the brightest star of many a weary night; who has minded the babies and made coffee for the patrol boys, and generally kept us all from dying of sheer boredom and hatred of life just by her lovely presence amongst us. I am sure you all know who I mean."

I'm sure *I* didn't. I stared round the table in astonishment, and to see what the others were thinking of this unlooked-for enthusiasm on the part of the usually sedate and sensible Commandant. Was he dreaming, or was he infatuated with one of the women, and simply drivelling about her? I had never noticed him paying any special attention to any one—he always seemed to be so busy. Anyway, I felt quite annoyed about it, and especially cross about the babies, whom I had looked upon as my own particular loves. He raised his glass on high.

"I drink to Miss Deirdre Saurin!"

"And drink it on the table!" someone shouted, and every one got up once more and put a dirty boot on Mrs Burney's nice table-cloth and made a tremendous noise, while I stared at them. When I realised what they were saying I went hot with vexation and embarrassment, for I felt sure they were making fun of me.

"Respond! Respond!" they cried all round me.

"I never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life," I said crossly. "And utterly uncalled for." I threw Colonel Blow a glance of the utmost indignation. "I think you want to make every one hate me!" I said.

He merely shouted with laughter.

“Oh, I know I’m a wonder, but I couldn’t do that,” he said, and to my amazement the women all rushed at me and hugged me and made me feel as hot and stuffy and cross as possible.

When I say all, I don’t of course mean that the Salisbury women did anything of the kind. Miracles do not happen in modern times. But I was not surprised that they got up in a group and strolled off sniffing disdainfully. The whole thing was ridiculous and absurd.

“You’ve quite spoiled my day,” I said to Colonel Blow afterwards. He insisted upon taking me to see some wonderful drawings on a rode which he said only he and one other man knew about; and when we got there they were the same old drawings Mrs Marriott and I had been looking at in the morning. So we sat on top of the rock and I continued my upbraidings.

“Of course it was very kind of you and all that, and I dare say you meant well—but I never felt more uncomfortable in my life, and I cannot say I feel the least bit grateful to you. I made sure you were talking about some woman you had fallen in love with and expected every one else to do the same,” I continued in my most unpleasant voice.

“Well, so I was,” he had the effrontery to say. “But of course I know there is no hope for me.”

I stared at him coldly. I really did not feel disposed for any more jesting. But his face had not the ghost of a smile on it, and he continued quite gravely:

“I saw you kiss Kinsella the night he went, and of course I understood that a girl like you would not have done that except for one reason. So it can be of no use my telling you that I love you. Yet I want to tell you if you don’t mind, and to call you Deirdre once. May I, Deirdre?”

I really don’t remember what I said, but I was frightfully surprised and sorry. I don’t believe I said anything. Perhaps I sat and stared at him with my mouth open. I only know that we came out of it sworn friends.

Afterwards we climbed to the top of the highest of the rocks to get a view of the whole wide veldt lying shimmering in the sunshine with far-off hazes and veils of purple and amethyst, draped about the horizon like the robes of a god.

As we stood looking a cloud of dust appeared upon the road, and presently we made out the figure of a man on a light horse approaching the camp. He was coming from the west and, therefore, towards Fort George, and when we realised this we knew that he was not from the town, but from the front—some one with news.

Colonel Blow jumped up, and forgetting good manners and me ran for the edge of the rock and began to climb down as fast as he could. But I as swiftly followed him, and when he reached level ground I was there too. Then we took hands and frankly ran for the camp, stumbling over ruts and stones, and tripping in ant-bear holes, but covering the ground at a speed I had never achieved before except in an express train. But in spite of our haste the newcomer had arrived first, and we found him dismounted, standing at the head of a pale-coloured drooping horse, with every one in the camp clustered round him. I remember thinking that it was the first time I had ever seen a horse that looked so exactly like the pale-coloured horse Death is supposed to ride when he goes abroad. I wondered what made me think of it at that moment.

I did not recognise the man’s face as one I had ever seen; but when Mrs Burney rushed forward and flung her arms round his neck I realised that this was her husband, whom I had often seen before. Yes: it was Robert Burney the scout! Yet why should dust and fatigue and a stubbly beard so terribly alter a man as he was altered? It is true that his coat hung in tatters, we could see his bare feet through his ragged boots, and his cheek-bones seemed almost piercing through his cheeks. But as he stood there looking at us I realised that it was in his eyes that the change lay. I never saw a man with such hard, calm eyes. If it had been a woman who stood there with those eyes I should have believed that she had wept until she had no more tears, and could never weep again. But this man’s iron face, haggard and weary though it seemed, was not one that could be associated with tears. Yet it is true that when I looked into the fearless, still eyes of Robert Burney I thought of tears—tears that were frozen in the heart and would never be shed. Neither were they dumb, those eyes of his that were so calm. When we had looked at him in silence for a moment, some knowledge leaped out to us from them and entered into our very hearts, paling our faces and chilling our blood so that we stood there shivering in the warm sunshine while we waited for him to speak. Fear had us by the throat, and in the heart of every one “terror was lying still!”

Some name trembled on every lip, and each one of us longed to shout a question: but tongue clave to palate, lips were too dry to open. It was revealed to us in some strange way that Robert Burney had more to tell than the mere fate of one man.

At last he moistened with his tongue his cracked and dust-thickened lips, and spoke quietly:

“A lot of our fellows have been surrounded and cut up.”

No one cried out. No one fainted. We just stood there quietly round him, staring into his eyes and listening. No one wept, except Mrs Burney, who had her man safe back in her arms.

“Wilson from Victoria—Alan Wilson, with eighteen men, went across the Shangani River on the King’s spoor. We understood that the King was deserted all but a few hundred men, and Major Wilson was to see how the land lay. His idea was to get the King that night if possible and bring him in; but when he reached the scherms it was too late and too dark to do anything; only, he saw that the numbers round Lobengula had been underrated, and that the natives were threatening and hostile. He sent Napier back with information to Major Forbes for reinforcements, but Major Forbes did not think it safe to move that night and sent Captain Borrow instead with twenty men. Ingram and I had

already gone on ahead and joined Wilson, and when Borrow reached us we were camped out in the bush about half a mile away from the King's scherms. We lay there all night under arms, in pitch darkness and drenching rain; we could hear the voices of the natives in the bush round us. Several hours of the night Major Wilson and I spent in trying to find three men who were lost. They had got separated from the rest of us, and Wilson wouldn't rest till he knew they were all right. It was so dark that I had to feel for the spoor with my hands, and eventually we found them by calling out their names continually but very softly, and we got back to camp together.

"With the first glint of dawn we saddled up and rode down to the King's waggon again, and Major Wilson called in a loud voice to Lobengula to come out and surrender. Immediately we were answered by the rattle of guns, and a heavy fire! They had evidently been 'laying' for us. We dismounted and returned the fire, but as soon as the natives began trying to get round us we mounted and retreated about six hundred yards, when we again dismounted and returned the fire from behind our horses. Then as they began to take to the bush round us we rode off again. Two of our horses had been shot, so two horses had to carry double.

"We rode slowly down the spoor made by the King's waggons the night before, Major Wilson and Captain Borrow behind us consulting as to what to do. Major Wilson then called me and asked me to ride back and get the main column to come on at once with the Maxims. I rode off with two other men, and we hadn't gone a hundred yards when hordes of Matabele rushed out on us from the bush ahead, waving their assegais and yelling. We galloped to the left where the river lay, and by hard riding got away through a shower of bullets.

"When we got to the river we found it in flood, and we had to swim over. Of course, it was too late then for the main column to cross.

"Immediately after we got away from the last lot of natives we heard Wilson and his party come up to them, and heavy firing commenced. I looked back just before we got out of sight and saw that our fellows were surrounded.

"There must have been thousands... our men in an open space without cover of any kind... surrounded by those shouting, ferocious devils mad for revenge!

"They were the pick of our forces—the very flower—thirty-four of the finest fellows in the country—in the world!"

He paused a little while, and his throat moved in a curious way that fascinated my eyes, so that I could not think about his news, but only about what was choking him.

"It is still hoped that some of them escaped. But I don't think so... It is true that some of them might possibly have got away—*if they had tried*. By hard riding those with the best mounts might, *but they were not the kind of men to leave their chums*. No: you can take it from me they fought it out there—side by side—to the bitter end.

"But before that end came you can believe that they put up a fight that the natives of this country will never forget. I guess they showed those devils how brave men can die."

After a long time some one spoke. Some one had the fearful courage to stammer from twisted lips a question:

"Who were they? Tell us the names." Robert Burney's steady glance passed from face to face, and he gave us the names.

"Alan Wilson," he repeated lingeringly, as though he loved the sound of those two words; and there is indeed something gallant-sounding, something intrepid and chivalrous, in the rhythm of that man's name whom other men so much loved—that dauntless leader who instilled the spirit of courageous adventure and loyal comradeship into every one with whom he came in contact; whose comrades so loved him that it is certain they followed him to death as gaily as they would have ridden by his side to victory.

"Alan Wilson—Borrow—Kirton—Judd—Greenfield—" Sometimes he paused for a moment, but he never repeated a name twice and he gave us every one of the thirty-four. Some one checked them off, slowly and relentlessly, like a clock ticking and bringing us at each tick nearer to some dreadful doom. When he had finished a sigh passed over us like a ghostly wind.

Some of them were names we knew well; some we had never heard before; all were names to be thereafter written in our memories, and in letters of scarlet and gold across the deathless page of Fame. In other places many a woman's head would be bowed to the dust, many a bereaved heart torn and broken, while yet it thrilled with pride for the glorious "Last Stand" of those thirty-four dauntless men.

But for most of us standing there, hanging upon the words of Robert Burney, breathing heavily after every name as from a deathblow escaped, all that it seemed possible to feel at that moment was a savage joy; a joy so painful that it seemed as if it must burst the heart that felt it.

God knows we grudged Fame to none for their noble dead. We mourned with them, and would weep for them. But at first, just at first, in that great pain of relief, we could not help that little ghostly sighing wind of relief and thanks that escaped from our dry lips—thanks to God for the omission of the special name we loved from that terrible roll-call of Honour.

Alas! for one among us who could not so thank God—for the wife of one of the only two married men who fell with that heroic band. When we realised what had befallen her we gathered round her. We could do nothing to comfort her. No one tried to beguile her from her grief with words. But it seemed a kind thing to do to shelter her stricken eyes from the gay and flaunting sunshine.

All was not yet told. There had been other engagements. After the loss of the Wilson patrol the main column had

retreated down the Shangani River to Umhlangeni, and all the way were continuously attacked. Moreover, they had run short of food and been forced to eat some of their horses; their boots had given out; many of them were obliged to march with their broken feet thrust into the regulation leather wallets; fever also had attacked them. Another list of casualties was necessarily attached to this retreat. One of the nice cheeky boys had been killed; Mrs Shand's husband wounded; Dr Marriott—

When Burney came to this name his eyes rested for a moment on Mrs Marriott's listening face, and by something that came into his expression I knew that his news for her was of the worst. God knows if she too read his look aright, but she was the first to speak:

"What news of my husband, Mr Burney?" For a moment Robert Burney's voice stuck in his throat; then he spoke out clearly, looking at the fragile, ashen-faced woman with actually the glint of a smile on his face, for as a brave man he had a kind of joy in saying what he did.

"He died a splendid death, Mrs Marriott, saving Dick Saurin's life."

Elizabeth Marriott showed that she was made of the material of which heroes' wives should be made. She smiled too—a proud, bright, almost a gay smile. Then she turned to me and said softly so that no one heard but I:

"That is my gift to you, Deirdre Saurin." I kissed her, and my tears streamed down my face, falling upon hers; but suddenly they were dried in my eyes, and I could weep no more. Some fateful words, spoken almost brokenly by Robert Burney, had fallen upon my ears: "Tony Kinsella is missing." It was as though some one had thrust a sword into my heart and I could feel the life-blood ebbing away from me, leaving me cold—cold as some frozen thing in the Arctic Sea. Though the sun shone so gaily upon us there I shivered with bitter cold.

It was a desolate home-coming. As soon as the sun went down a mass of slate-coloured clouds that had been crouching in the south-west like some stealthy winged monster waiting to pounce, spread itself out swiftly and enshrouded us in grey, misty rain.

The men hurriedly *inspanned* and urged us into the shelter of the waggons, then started to walk ahead in silent, gloomy groups. No woman walked, except Mrs Burney; we could see her far behind, clinging to her husband's arm, gazing into his face, caring nothing for rain—why should she? Mrs Rookwood, proud to have been asked to do so, minded the Burney baby and tried to hide the gladness of her eyes from those who had little enough cause to rejoice. Her news had been good; George Rookwood had done well and was returning on some special errand in a day or two.

The children were bunched together in a little scarlet cluster at the end of the waggon, watching silent and wide-eyed two of their number who were weeping huddled against their mother. She sat between them with a white, thoughtful face on which there was no sign of tears, though her news had been bad enough to wipe all hope and joy from her life.

"Hush, children," she kept gently repeating. "*We don't know for certain*... Mr Burney said there might be... that some thought there was still hope... we can't be sure... but if it is—if he should be—he would like us to take it bravely—not to—not to make a fuss... but I don't think it *can* be true... surely it can't be true." Her afflicted eyes searched our faces for some gleam of hope. But we had none to give. We were fighting each our own devils of despair.

The mental exaltation that had sustained Mrs Marriott had given place to physical exhaustion and she lay against my shoulder with a strange heaviness, still as a stone, her eyes closed. Annabel Cleeve fainted quietly, twice, before we reached home, and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe and Mrs Valetta did what they could for her. But the latter's pale, haunted face was not one in which to seek comfort. Once her glance crossed mine like a rapier flash, but I was sick and cold with pain, and had neither pity nor disdain in my heart for her. My mind was busy with its own misery. I was striving to "rear the changeling Hope in the black cave of Despair." My thoughts set me in torment, and I could remember nothing but the words of Robert Burney:

"He was last heard of out scouting with two other men near the Shangani River. They were surrounded and attacked by a party of twelve natives armed with rifles and assegais. One of them, Britton, managed to get away and ride to the main column for help, and when he got back with a patrol an hour later the other fellow, Vincent, was lying there wounded, surrounded by the bodies of dead natives, but Kinsella was nowhere to be found—and has never been heard of or seen since. Vincent could tell nothing but that just before he became unconscious Kinsella was still standing over his body shooting—"

Not to know! Not to know! Torturing visions stole upon me; visions of men lying wounded to death; parched with bitter thirst; waiting, waiting for reinforcements that never came; for help that would never come!

Then the terrible yet merciful remembrance that it was all so long ago! Many, many days had passed since it happened. If those splendid, heroic men lay there still they must be of the great, noble company of the dead. I looked up at the grey arch above me, blurred and dim with rain, and thinking of the unsheltered dead, lying with eyes wide open to the skies, was thankful that it fell so gently and pityingly down.

> "O loved ones lying far away,
> What word of love can dead lips send?
> O wasted dust! O senseless clay!
> Is this the end? Is this the end?
>
> "Peace, peace! we wrong the noble dead
> To vex their solemn slumber so.

Though childless and with thorn-crowned head
Up the steep path must England go—”

I could not remember at that moment who wrote those great lines. I only know that I thought there was strange healing in them for mourning hearts. There seemed suddenly something peaceful in the thought of Death; something that lulled and dulled the active burning pain of uncertainty.

There seemed even a kind of mercy in Elizabeth Marriott’s definite tidings, terrible as they were. She knew at least that her man was at rest from torment; suffering was done with him; pain had been defeated.

But—*Not to know*! *Not to know*!

Before twelve o’clock that night Maurice Stair came to me and told me that he had determined to leave at once with two good colonial boys, Jacob and Jonas, to find Anthony Kinsella if possible, or at least get definite tidings of his fate.

“If he is alive I’ll bring him back,” he said, in the quiet, modest way I had always found so attractive in him, and kissing the hand I gave him he went on his way.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Witch Calls.

“Pain is the lord of this world, nor is there any one who escapes from its net.”

Within the next few weeks many of our men came home. Not as we had cheered them forth, in a gay band:

Brilliant and gallant and brave!

—But ragged, haggard, footsore, dragged by or dragging half-starved horses; many of them with rheumatism planted for ever in their joints, and malaria staring from their eyes.

Fort George was a busy place again. Wives worn with watching and waiting in suspense, braced themselves afresh to the task of nursing sick husbands, while those who had no men-folk of their own on the spot were hastily *spanned-in* by the hospital sisters who had more than they could do in the over-crowded little hospital amongst the husbands and sons and lovers of women far away. Most of these were “travellers who had sold their lands to see other men’s,” as *Rosalind* puts it, and possessed of the accompanying qualifications—“rich eyes and empty hands!” Many of them were just members of that great Legion of the Lost ones always to be found in the advance-guard of pioneer bands—the men who have strayed far from the fold of home and love and women-folk.

“The little black sheep who have gone astray.
The damned bad sorts who have lost their way.”

The nursing to be done amongst these cases was of the most difficult kind, for there was no co-operation from the patient. Most of them didn’t care a brass button whether they recovered or not. They were tired, disappointed, *blasé* men, and their attitude towards life could be summed up in one brief potent phrase that was often on their lips: “Sick of it!”

The war had been a disappointment in many ways. It is true that the work had been accomplished. The Matabele were broken and dispersed, and life in the country was now secure. But the war had not been the glorious campaign anticipated. The quiet honour of having done his duty belonged to every man of them; there was glory for few save those whose ears would never more hear blame or praise. There had been no big, wild, battles, force closing with force: only “potting and being potted” they complained.

“Sniped at from the bush when we weren’t looking! No loot, no sport, nothing but fever and sore feet, and hunger, and disgust, and lost pals!”

Ah! that was the rub! There lay the sting! When they thought of the thirty-four men whose bones lay bleaching in the rain beyond Shangani they turned their faces to the wall and some of them died. The price of the campaign had been too high!

The whole thing was one of Africa’s sweet little mirages, others told me as I sat by their beds—one of her charming little games, and her rotten cotton ways. In changing moods and tenses that varied from raving delirium to a painful clarity of thought their cry was unanimous and unchanging: “Sick of it!”

First and last and always they were sick of Africa, and “on the side” as Mr Hunloke phrased it, they were sick of “bucketting and being bucketted about all over the shop;” of bad whiskey; of no whiskey; of sore feet; of veldt sores; of fever; of mosquitoes; of never getting any letters from home; of getting letters from home that contained plenty of

good advice but no tin; of the rottenness of the country; of the whole damned show; of life in general.

“There’s nothing in it,” they said, and uttering that bitter brief indictment more of them died. Others by slow degrees recovered and began to quote bits of, *Barrack-Room Ballads* and cynical lines from Adam Lindsay Gordon to the nurse in charge.

They are a poetical people—these black sheep and travellers. Nearly all of them carry about, hidden in the deeps of their hearts verses, tag-ends of sonnets, valiant lines from the men’s poets—Byron, Henley, Kipling, Gordon; and I learned to find it not strange that even on profane lips the lines were always of the strong and chivalrous and the pure in heart.

Mrs Valetta and I found ourselves in daily touch with each other at the hospital huts. We were the only ones left of the Salisbury group. Anna Cleeve had gone back, on hearing that her *fiancé* had arrived in Salisbury ill of fever, and later Mrs Skeffington-Smythe departed in the mail-coach, seated amongst a hundred parcels which she had been obliged to stage-manage herself, as Monty, appearing to think that martial law and marital responsibility ended together, had bestowed the favour of his company upon two strangers who owned a comfortable spring waggon and were bent on getting some sable-antelope shooting.

By the first coach that came down there had been a letter from Judy urging me to join her as soon as possible, but at the time it did not seem the best thing to do. There was no special work for me in Salisbury, while in Fort George there was much. Moreover, I had put out too many roots and fronds to be able to detach myself easily from the place where Anthony Kinsella had left me and told me to wait until he came. Judy’s letters became more pressing after the return to Salisbury of Mrs Skeffington-Smythe and Anna Cleeve. It transpired that with implacable malice they had given to all who cared to listen their version of my parting with Anthony Kinsella. Judy flew to pen and paper to let me know that my “infatuation for Tony Kinsella” was the most interesting topic of conversation in Salisbury, and that the kindest thing any one found to say was: “What a pity he is already married!”

Dick who had returned from Buluwayo wrote that he was coming down as soon as an injured hip and a broken arm would permit to see Mrs Marriott before she left for England, and tell her all he could about her husband’s splendid death. He had some plan to discuss with her, too, about the farm of six thousand acres which was her husband’s share as a volunteer. Each man who went to the front was entitled to a farm of that size, twenty gold claims, and a share of the cattle captured.

Dick’s idea was to take care of this property for Mrs Marriott, and to put all his energy into enhancing its value for the benefit of the woman who had been widowed for his sake. Incidentally, he wrote that he hoped I would return with him to Salisbury. But my sister-in-law, who wrote by the same mail, coldly advocated a return to Johannesburg and the wing of Elizabet von Stohl.

“You can never live down the scandal that is being talked about you,” she said. “There will always be a tale attached to you, and all the fast men in the country will want to flirt with you on the strength of it. Besides, what are you going to do when Tony Kinsella comes back—*for he will come back of course*.”

I thanked her much for that! Gladly I forgave her all the rest for the sake of that last little sentence that had slipped with such conviction from her pen. It was true that every one felt so about Anthony Kinsella: he was such an alive, ardent personality, it was impossible to believe him dead.

“*Of course* he will come back,” was what they all said. Claude Hunloke went further.

“Tony Kinsella is a slick guy!” he announced. “I tell you he has got cast-iron fastenings. Nothing can ever break him loose.”

“And I know that it is true,” I said to myself. “He will come back. Then every one will know the truth about us”; and I crushed down doubt and dismay. Africa put her gift into my heart and wrote her sign upon my brow.

I was minding Tommy Dennison at about this time—a jaundiced-coloured skeleton in a very bad way with black-water fever. He was one of the patients who had overflowed from the hospital into a private hut for special nursing. So I tended him under the instructions and supervision of the hospital sisters, though if any one had a few months before described “black-water” to me and told me I should ever nurse a case without blenching and shrivelling at the task I should have announced a false prophet. But it was even so. I sat by him through the wet, hot days, listening to the drip of the rain from the thatch and the little broken bits of an old song that was often, on his lips.

> “Lay me low, my work is done,
> I am weary, lay me low,
> Where the wild flowers woo the sun.
> Where the balmy breezes blow,
> Where the butterfly takes wing,
> Where the aspens drooping glow,
> Where the young birds chirp and sing,
> I am weary, let me go.
>
> “I have striven hard and long
> Always with a stubborn heart,
> Taking, giving, blow for blow.
> Brother, I have played my part,
> And am weary, let me go.”

At intervals he raved, fancying himself back at Buluwayo where he smelt the King’s kraal burning, and heard the kaffir dogs making night hideous by their howling.

“Oh! will some of you fellows kill those dogs?—choke ’em—feed ’em do anything, only let me sleep... *How* many do you say? *six hundred of them starving in the bush, left behind by Loben*... Six hundred!... Into the valley of death... rode the six hundred!” Then back again to his old song:

> “When our work is done, ’tis best,
> Brother, best that we should go,
> I am weary, let me rest,
> I am weary, let me go.”

Always, always, day after day, sleeping and waking, he muttered those lines with the persistency of the delirious. But one day he varied them to:

> “Lay me weary, I am low,
> I am low—I’ve never done any work!”

and smiling at me with his fever-broken lips, closed his eyes for ever. Just four months after he had sat upon the summit of Anthony Kinsella’s hut playing subtly upon the flute!

My brother arrived the next day—the same old kindly tolerant debonair Dick of old; but yet with some of his gaiety and boyishness wiped from his face and replaced by a heavy look that it saddened me strangely to see, for I had begun to recognise that look and knew that it meant care. His eye had a strained expression, too; and when I saw that his arm hung useless by his side, and that he came limping towards me, I burst out crying.

“Oh, Dicky!” I cried. “They have shot you all to bits!”

But he only grinned.

“Nonsense, Goldie, I’m all right. What’s a chipped arm and a game leg if they’re not the honours of war? Some of the fellows haven’t a thing to show for their trouble. These are my trophies. I’m proud of ’em. I show ’em round.”

“That’s all very well,” I said, still sniffling and mopping up my tears, “but you’ve got a temperature too. I can see it by your eyes.”

“Oh! a little bit slack. A pinch of quinine will put me right with the world. But, Deirdre, I’ve some fierce news for you. What do you think the last mail brought me but an announcement that your solicitor, Morton, had skidooed with every rap of yours. Betty wrote to me in a fearful state about it. You’re bust, my child.”

“Dick!”

“Yes, every red cent! We don’t have a bit of luck about the dibs, you and I. It turns out that he has only been keeping things going for the last year or so, by borrowing money on your securities; then just as things began to look too fishy, and discovery *had* to come, he scooted with the fragments that remained—about twelve baskets full I *don’t* think, and Chancery Lane knows him no more. But wait till I get after him! Just wait till I have got things fixed up all right for Mrs Marriott, and you and Judy! I’ll get after him! Not that I suppose I shall get much out of him, but still—”

The cold-blooded American who has been robbed of a dollar gleamed out of one of Dick’s eyes and a red Indian raging for the scalp of his foe glared from the other.

“If he’s got anything left he’ll belch up all right when I get him!” he announced with the conviction of a Nemesis. Presently he regained calmness.

“You must come up and live with me and Judy,” he said. “There are some catamarans of women in the world, Deirdre, and I believe you’ve been up against one or two, but they’re not all like that. There are some jolly nice women in Salisbury, and we’ll put the rest to the rightabout, and make them eat up their silly tales.”

“Dear Dick,” I said, “it takes a real reformed rake like you to be truly generous. But I can’t come to Salisbury.”

“Why not? It isn’t like you to run away from the music.”

“I’m not going to. But I can’t leave Fort George yet.”

He looked troubled and wistful, but asked me more questions. He was too much a believer it the family integrity. But after a day or two, most of which he spent with Gerry Deshon and Colonel Blow, for I was still much engaged at the hospital and had only the evenings for him, his troubled looks disappeared. Eventually, having planned with Mrs Marriott her secure future, he was ready to return to Salisbury.

“I shall have to get back, Deirdre; but you stay on here as long as you think fit, with Mrs Burney. Blow and Deshon will mind you for me; and when you’re ready to come on to Salisbury send me a wire and I’ll fetch you.”

A morning or two later I walked up and down with him in the early dawn, before the post-office, waiting for the mails

to be put into the coach that was to carry him away. A few sard-coloured stars lingered regretfully in the pale sky. Not until his foot was on the step of the coach did he say the words I wished to hear from him, but would not ask for.

"Goldie—of course I've heard everything, all about it—it seems to be a queer tangle. If it were any other fellow I'd get after him—but Kinsella is straight—as straight a man as there is in Africa. If he has let you believe he is free, then you can take my oath he is."

I could have kissed his feet for those words, and the way he spoke them—as though it was unquestionable that Anthony was still in the world. I could not speak, my heart was too full. I could only look at him gratefully through my tears. He patted me on the shoulder.

"Dear old girl, don't fret. He'll turn up." I did not have time to fret: there was too much to do. Among other things I had Mrs Marriott to pack up and send away to her English home to those who would tend and love her and bring her safely through her coming trial. Her last words to me from the coach were:

"Deirdre, I *know* I shall have a son to take up life where poor Rupert laid it down: and I think he can do it under no finer name than Anthony."

"Thank you, dear," I cried, "and then you must come back here and give him his father's heritage. It's going to be a splendid heritage. Dick will see to that."

A week later we packed off the little woman whose husband still lay unburied at Shangani. She was taking her small fatherless tribe to her people down-country, and was then coming back to earn her living by nursing. Saba Rookwood and her husband were travelling with the same waggons. They had been married that morning, and were going away for a time to return later and start farming and mining in the Buluwayo district.

In the evening, Gerry Deshon, Colonel Blow, and I rode to their first *outspan*, about twelve miles out from the town, and had supper with them—a sad, affectionate little farewell supper, sitting round an old black kettle that was propped up by two tall stones over the red embers of the wood and *mis* fire.

If any one had told me a few months before that I would sit at a camp-fire, my eyes blurred with tears and my heart full of regrets at parting with a dowdy, worn-faced little colonial woman who understood nothing of life as I had known it; and another who had broken the moral code and transgressed against the tenets of my religion, I should have been both deeply offended and incredulous. Even if it could have been explained to me that I should love and reverence the first woman because the great forces of life—Love and Sorrow and Death—had touched and beautified her, revealing to all her strong heart, and courage, and a lovely belief in the mercy and wisdom of God, I should yet not entirely have understood; nor that I could honour the second because I saw in her a gentle, kind, and brave spirit, sweet in humiliation, and free of malice and the small sins that devour the souls of so many women.

Africa had taught me a few things.

I had come out to her stiff with the arrogance of youth and well-being, of pride that has never been assailed by suffering and disgrace; of rectitude that has been untried by temptation; full of the disdainful virtue of one who has known only the bright, beflowered paths of life, and been well hedged and guarded from all that hurts and defiles. But she had opened eyes in my soul that had been blind before, and had shown me lives seared with pain and sin and scorched with the fires of passion that were yet beautiful; of men who could fight down the beasts of temptation and conquer the devils of vice; of men who could forget self-interest to hold out a helping hand to the weak and the stumbling; of men who could die in lone, silent places so that others might live in safety and security; of women who could offer their all for the public good, and lose it with a smile on their lips.

These were things I had read of and heard of and dreamed of perhaps. But in this fierce, sad land they happened. Africa had shown them to me happening in all their naked terror and beauty. In Europe I had known pictures, and sculpture, add music, in all their finished and accepted beauty. But here I had found the very elements of Art—deeds to inspire sculpture, and all the tragedy that a violin in the hands of a master tries to tell.

Riding home between the two men, along the dusty road, silver fretted now under the glancing stars and a moon that hung in the heavens like a great luminous pearl, I realised how changed I was, and how changed was life for me. I think then for the first time it dawned upon me that the claw of Africa was already deep in my heart, but that the throe it caused was not all of pain.

When we got back to the town we found that some waggons we had met on our way out had come in. They were drawn up in the front of one of the shops, and left standing there for the night, but a little of the unloading had been begun, and on one side of the road lay three enormous packing cases. We reined in for a moment to look at them, and read the address painted on each in large black letters. Afterwards we gazed at each other and exchanged sad ironical smiles. Mrs Marriott's *trousseau* had arrived!

I think it was just three weeks afterwards that I heard of Dick's death. The news came as an absolute shock to me, for I had not even known that he was ill. It appeared that he had been suffering from fever ever since his return from Fort George, but he had not allowed Judy, to tell me because he thought it would add to my worries, also he hoped from day to day to have better news to send. Instead, weakened by his wounds and the privations undergone at the front, he suddenly got rapidly worse, and almost before they realised in what desperate case he was, passed quietly out one morning at dawn. When I heard, it was too late even to see his face before they buried him, for the dead do not tarry long with us in Africa, and I could not have reached Salisbury in less than three or four days.

While I was still quivering under the blow, and as though it were not enough, they came to tell me that Maurice Stair had come home—*alone*. Walking like a woman in a dream I went to the hut where he was resting, and heard the

story he had to tell.

After much searching and enquiry among the Matabele who had come in to lay down their arms, but were all averse to telling what part they had taken in the past fighting, or to confess the solitary deeds of horror many of them had committed, he had at last found certain natives willing to lead him to other natives still away in the bush who had knowledge of the disappearance of Anthony Kinsella. By inference, implication, and insinuation—anything but direct information, for fear they should be accused of complicity—these boys had told what they knew of the affair—which was too much!

They said that after Britton had escaped to fetch help from the main column, Anthony had gone on fighting, shooting with his revolver when his rifle ammunition had given out, and attacking the natives with such violence that all had fallen except one, who, wounded in the legs had crawled to the bush, and from there had watched. He reported that Anthony Kinsella had been hit on the head by one of the last bullets, and seemed to have gone mad afterwards for he suddenly threw down his revolver and leaving the body of Vincent (supposed by the natives to be dead) had walked away into the bush, *laughing and singing*! Afterwards some more natives had come up, and the wounded man had shewn them the direction Kinsella had taken. They had followed his spoor, and come upon him in the bush, unarmed —

Maurice Stair paused there, and turned his face away.

“You must tell me all,” I said calmly and waited.

“They were ten to one—they killed him by the stream where he was lying—they left nothing by which we could identify him—but the natives took us without hesitation to the spot where the bones lay. We buried them and put up a rough cross.”

It seemed to me then as if my last hold to life was broken: as if the last rock to cling to in a cruel, storm-racked sea had crumbled suddenly away, and I went down for awhile under the waves of that sea; it washed over my head and submerged me.

For three months I lay at the door of death, craving entry into the place that held all I loved. But Africa had not done with me. She dragged me back from the dark, healed my sick body with her sunshine, and cooled my fevers with her sparkling air. She even after a time began to lull my mind with a peace it had never known before. In strange moments a kind of exquisitely bitter contentment possessed me at having paid with the last drop of my heart’s blood the price she exacts from the children of civilisation who come walking with careless feet in her wild secret places. Mocking and gay I had come to the cave of the witch, and now she clawed me to her and held me tight in her bosom with the hands of my dead. And not *my* dead only: the hands of all those men with whom I had laughed in the moonlight and afterwards waved to, in farewell—they held me too, though they were hands no longer but pale bones on the brown earth; they held me fast like the hands of dead brothers and I could never leave the land where they lay. With the strange prophetic knowledge that sometimes comes to one when the body is weakened by illness, but the spirit’s vision become wonderfully clear, I knew at last that I could never leave this cruel land that had robbed me of those I loved and given me instead a bitter peace and a strange contentment in her wild, barren beauty.

Chapter Fifteen.

Part Two—What Australian Gold Achieved.

> “Life has always poppies in her hands.”

“Salisbury lies behind that big brown hill,” said Judy, “about an hour’s drive from here.” She was perched with a certain daintiness upon Dirk Mackenzie’s water *fykie*, sipping a cup of coffee, her back crêpe draperies spread round her on the scrubby grass. Mrs Shand and I, very sunburnt, wearing print bonnets and our oldest skirts, sat of the ground sharing a striped kaffir blanket with several dozen small brown ants, who were busy collecting the crumbs left from breakfast and hurrying off with them to a neighbouring ant-heap. The ox waggon in which we had taken a fortnight to travel from Fort George was loaded so high with packing cases and Mrs Shand’s furniture that it cast quite a large patch of shade, in which we sat as in some cool black pool while the rest of the world, including the dashing Cape cart in which Judy had just arrived, sweltered in blinding sunshine.

Dirk Mackenzie our transport driver, a big, bearded, Natal man, stood smoking in his shirt sleeves talking to Mr Courtfield, the man who lad driven Judy out, and Maurice Stair in riding-kit with his legs twisted, holding his elbow in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stared reflectively at a group of kaffir boys who at a little distance off were squatting round their three-legged pot of mealie-meal pap.

I looked from them to the big brown hill that hid Salisbury, the road of red-brown dust that led there, the dazzling blue of the morning sky, and back again to the *chic* and pretty widow sitting upon the *fykie* with her crêpe skirts spread so daintily about her.

Her grey eyes were sparkling, there was pink in her cheeks, and *poudre de riz* upon her nose; her blond hair, charmingly arranged, shone softly, and a tiny fair curl lay in the centre of her forehead just under the white crêpe peak of her little widow’s bonnet. Quite the most fascinating widow I had ever seen! I had thought of her all the way up as the languid, *passé* little woman who left me at Fort George, and had longed to reach her and comfort her as

best I might. But any one appearing less in need of comfort than this fresh, smart lady it would be hard to find. She looked as if she had stepped straight out of Jays's. All her languor and weariness of life had disappeared. She seemed to have gone back to the days of her youth before she married Dick. There was the same pretty, appealing look in her eyes, the same clinging, helpless manner, mingled now with an alluring little air of sadness. As for the small white hand that held her coffee cup, nothing could have been daintier, more eager and alive looking. Certainly a very different Judy to the one I had last seen in Fort George! I suppose I ought to have been glad, but I was not. My heart, with astounding contrariety, yearned after the other little languid, untidy, almost unkempt Judy, as one longs in sorrow for the old scenes and surroundings of happier, dearer days.

"Our cart has had a smash-up, but Mr Courtfield lent me his to come and fetch you, Deirdre," she was saying, "and would insist on driving me himself. Wasn't it sweet of him? I find that men are so extraordinarily kind to me in my trouble." Her sad little air deepened, and my heart stirred to her for the first time. Perhaps after all under that elegant crêpe frock she was just a lonely little miserable creature!

"Of course they would be," I said. "Any one would be kind to you, Judy; and all men loved Dick."

"Every one in this country is kind, don't you think?" ventured Mrs Shand.

"Oh, *every* one? I'm sure I couldn't say," said Judy, and looked away over Mrs Shand's head in a way that made that little woman realise that after all she was only a mere Fort George frump; a faint red colour stole into her sunburnt face.

"Will you get ready, Deirdre?" continued my sister-in-law. "We ought not to keep Mr Courtfield's horses waiting in the sun."

"I don't think I care to leave Mrs Shand alone, Judy. I would rather stay and come in with the waggon to-night. Couldn't I do that?"

She was full of remonstrances for this plan, and Mrs Shand would have none of it either, saying that a boy had been sent into town for her husband, and that she expected him out at any moment to stay the day with her.

"Besides," said Judy, "if you stay out here all day and come crawling in by waggon to-night there will still be the journey to make from Salisbury to our place, nearly twelve miles, and I should not be able to borrow Mr Courtfield's cart again, as he is going away in it to-night to Umtali. You look a perfect wreck, and ought to get to the end of your journey and rest. Don't you think so, Mrs Shand?"

"Yes, of course she is tired. We've been *trekking* all night, and the waggon is not a very springy one. Mr Mackenzie hoped to get into Salisbury by the end of this morning's *trek*, but there is no grass, and the oxen are poor."

I was obliged to go and tidy myself up in the waggon tent, and thereafter climb into the Cape cart with Judy and sit behind the short, fat, soft man with the pointed golden beard and confidential eyes, to whom I had taken an unreasonable but nevertheless poignant dislike. I hated to get into the cart Mr Courtfield had so kindly placed at my service, and glanced longingly instead at Maurice Stair's horse as he slowly mounted and prepared to ride beside us. He looked his best in riding-kit and sat his horse well, swaying in the rather slouchy, graceful way that men who have done stock-riding in Australia affect.

I had long ago learned from him that he had spent several years in Australia before coming to Africa. But it appeared that Mr Courtfield was the real thing from that country—an Australian born and bred, not just a man who had learned to ride there. Judy told me this in a low voice, perhaps to account for the extraordinary accent and bad manners of the man in front of us. I was not very interested. I only wondered vaguely how she could reconcile herself to accept favours from a man who was so obviously not a gentleman. Dick used to say there were some women who had no discrimination about men, and absolutely didn't know the difference between a gentleman and a cad, even when they had the advantage of knowing and living with gentlemen all their lives. Opportunity had never discovered this trait in Judy; and I vaguely hoped she was not going to develop it now. Life is difficult enough spent among nice men: I could not tolerate the thought of what it might be with a few Mr Courtfields about. Under cover of his talk to Maurice Stair, riding beside us, Judy now addressed me:

"Dearest girl, how awful that you are not in mourning. I suppose you could not get any black in Fort George."

"I did not try," said I, looking down carelessly at my grey velveteen coat and skirt, which had certainly seen hard wear and tear in the seven months I had spent in Mashonaland. "I never thought about it, to tell the truth, Judy. Besides, Dick always hated to see people dressed in black."

"Surely that has nothing to do with it, dear," said my sister-in-law gently. "One must respect the conventions."

"I daresay there are some black frocks in my packing cases. They arrived just as we were leaving, so I brought them on."

"How fortunate!" said Judy, looking cross for the first time, but quickly recovering herself after a searching glance at me. "Still, I don't suppose you will look well in black, Deirdre. It is such a trying colour for any one but the very blond, and you are so very brown, aren't you? What a pity you didn't take more care of your skin on this journey. I never knew anything like a waggon journey to turn one's complexion to leather!"

"What place is that on the right, opposite the the hill?" I asked. "It seems to be all dotted with white things."

"That is the cemetery, dear. Poor darling Dick is buried there."

A grey veil seemed to come down before my face at that, and presently through blurred eyes I saw that the white

things were indeed little crosses and headstones.

“I should like to get down,” I said in a low voice, as we reached a wide path that showed the way to the cemetery gate. “But don’t let this man come.”

“Oh, no, he won’t. He buried his wife here a few months ago,” was Judy’s strange answer.

I hoped she would let me go alone, but she expressed a wish to accompany me, so we stood together by my brother’s grave. There were no trees anywhere, and very few flowers, just one or two sturdy scarlet geraniums and some green runners clambering carelessly over the wooden fence. Lines of dusty graves lying in the brilliant light, coarse veldt grass growing about them, and above them the little white crosses, with the oft-repeated phrase, “Died of fever!”

There they lay, sleeping in the sunshine: Cecil Rhodes’s “boys!” The men who had helped to open up the country, light the first fires, and turn the first sods to let the malaria out of the ground for others to build towns on. Of such as these was written:

> “Where are the brave, the strong, the fleet!
> Where is our English chivalry?
> Wild grasses are their burial sheet,
> And sobbing waves their threnody.”

“Let us go quickly,” said Judy. “There is a funeral coming.”

So we went back to the cart, and drove slowly so as not to smother with dust a little *cortège* that passed us, taking a short cut over the grass. If Judy had not said it was a funeral I should not have recognised one, though I had seen many since I came to Mashonaland. The coffin was placed on a Scotch-cart drawn by two bullocks, and had a black cloth flung over it. But some kind hand had redeemed the sordid loneliness by putting a little bunch of wild flowers and a green branch on the black cloth. Three men followed behind, and a woman on horseback.

“Isn’t it awful?” said Judy. “That is the way they buried my poor Dick too. A Scotch-cart with bullocks! But Dr Jim and every one came to Dick’s funeral. He was one of the ‘old crowd.’ This must be some stranger.”

“Fellow from Lomagundis’, died of the jim-jams last night,” said Mr Courtfield pleasantly. “Anderson’s barmaid was sweet on him. That’s her behind, hanging on to Browne’s grey. The horse will have a raw back before it gets back to Police quarters.” He finished his informing remarks with a cheerful snigger, seeming to take some *kudos* unto himself for discovering that the bunched-up, red-eyed woman could not ride.

Having at last got round the brown hill we came suddenly upon the town. In a moment we were in the main street, which was called Pioneer Street, and the shops of galvanised iron were blinking and winking at us from either side. There were a few brick buildings, and many thatched roofs. All had the conventional verandah, which at the sound of our cart rapidly filled with the usual brown-faced, shirt-sleeved men. Judy dispensed a number of queenly bows and one or two charming smiles, all gratefully received. I smiled too, sometimes, when I saw a face I knew, for many old Fort Georgians were in Salisbury; but my heart was aching, aching, as the sight of brown-faced, shirt-sleeved men now always made it ache.

It was explained to me that this was the business part of the town, known as the Kopje; the residential quarter was on the other side of a large green swamp, and was called the Causeway. A number of squat-looking houses were scattered far and wide over the veldt.

“How I wish,” said Judy, “that Dick had bought a place in town instead of going so far out. Kentucky Hills is still twelve miles away, on the Mazoe Road.”

Mr Courtfield agreed with her that it was very annoying she should have to ride twelve miles for society, or society for her. My head and heart ached dully. I was thankful when at last Maurice Stair rode up to tell me that Kentucky Hills, my brother’s place, was just round the next kopje.

It looked very homelike as we suddenly came upon it, lying in a wide green kloof with low hills winging away from it on either side—a big square bungalow house, painted green, with verandahs all round, and the beginnings of a charming garden about it. At one side of the house a tennis-court had been laid out, and a summer-house put up. It was certainly far ahead of most of the Mashonaland houses, but Dick had begun to build it as soon as he came up, and having the advantage of a little capital had been able to do more than most people.

The verandahs were blinded and full of ferns growing in native pots, and the inside of the house was charmingly comfortable: big airy rooms and windows looking out on the ever-changing changelessness of the red-brown veldt and the far-off hills. The furniture consisted chiefly of deep, comfortable lounge chairs, and tables of polished brown wood that I took for oak, but was really teak, a wood of the country. Judy had her English things scattered about, and photographs of Dick and home-scenes that brought blinding tears to my eyes. There was also a piano, the first that had come into the country, Judy told me; a hotel-keeper had brought it up to make his bar more alluring, but Dick offered him a hundred and fifty pounds for it, though it was only a simple instrument of no particular make. Since the war plenty of pianos have come into the country, but in those days one in hand was worth ten *en route*.

Judy had asked the men to stay to lunch, and while they were in the dining-room and we were taking off our veils in her room, a boy brought in little Dickie, a darling wee man of five with his father’s eyes and his mother’s blond colouring.

“This is your Auntie Deirdre,” said Judy, and he lifted a shy face to be kissed. At the touch of his innocent cherubic lips the great loneliness that filled me dispersed a little. My world was not so empty after all. Here was Dick’s son for kinsman!

Later in the day when the men were gone and we were resting in the cool, pretty drawing-room, I broached the subject of the future to. Judy.

“What is there I can do?” I asked. “I want to stay in this country. What can I do to earn my living here?”

“Earn your living, Deirdre? My dear girl, what on earth are you talking about? If you really wish to stay in this country you must live with me, of course. Dick especially wished it. But I can’t think why you should want to stay here. I certainly shall not, if I can strike a good bargain with some one for the property here, and sell Dick’s farms and claims in Matabeleland.”

“Oh, Judy! you surely wouldn’t sell the Matabeleland property that Dick practically paid for with his life?”

She stood looking at me in surprise so plainly mingled with resentment that I swallowed indignation and addressed her with all the gentleness I could at the moment command.

“You know Dick had set his heart on that country. He was full of plans for turning his property there into a beautiful heritage for Dickie and at the same time helping on Mr Rhodes’s great scheme of Empire by developing the land to the utmost. Dear Judy, I implore you to keep that for the boy.”

She turned away from me, answering peevishly:

“That is all very well, Deirdre. But what kind of life is this for a woman? I have, with what Dick settled on me and his insurance, four hundred a year. With that and what the property realises I could be quite snug and comfy in London; but here it is nothing at all; one is poor on it. Besides, what is there to keep one in a place like this?”

Strange that the remembrance of that peaceful dusty grave in the sunlight was not enough to keep her! That any one would rather be snug and comfy in London than live in this wide, open land where you had but to go to your window to see plain and sky touching on the horizon! Ah! well, what was the use of trying to make her feel what she could never feel? I returned drearily to the subject of my own future.

“But what is there *I* can do, Judy? I can not and will not live on you. How can I earn a living?”

“The only women who earn their living up here are barmaids and domestics, my dear,” she answered dryly. “I don’t know if you contemplate doing anything of that sort. All the rest are busy minding their husbands and their homes. I advise you, if you are really bent on staying here, to do the same as soon as possible.”

“What do you mean, Judy?”

“You must marry, of course. When you have once lived down that scandal about Anthony Kinsella I dare say you will have plenty of offers.”

I did not speak, but perhaps something in my face answered for me, for she flushed a little and when she spoke again it was somewhat apologetically, though her words were of much the same tenor.

“I’m afraid you don’t realise how much you have been talked of, Deirdre. Mrs Valetta and Anna. Cleeve both have terrible tongues, and Mrs Skeffington-Smythe simply doesn’t mind what she says about anybody. Every one is outraged at the story of your infatuation.”

“That will do, Judy,” I interrupted violently. “I refuse to hear another word, and do not ever speak to me on this matter again. Don’t you understand that it is sacred; that the memory of that man is the only thing I have left? Haven’t you eyes to see and ears to hear anything else but gossip? Don’t you realise yet that I have never for one moment believed those lies about Anthony, that nothing can shake my belief in his honour? Dick believed in him too. Thank God Dick believed in him too. I have *that* at least.”

I spoke so passionately and bitterly that she was abashed for a moment.

“I know that Dick believed in him,” she admitted grudgingly. “But then Dick was one of those curious people who would believe in a man simply because he could ‘stare you clear in the eyes’ or ‘had a straight look about his mouth.’ He would pit those things against the blackest evidence, and expect other people to be similarly impressed—dear, sentimental, ridiculous fellow! But I’m afraid the Saurins are like that.”

“Yes, the Saurins *are* like that,” I said, “and thank God for it.”

Later, when anger had been put away and we could speak more calmly and dispassionately she said:

“Well, if you *must* stay here and if you are so set on doing something, why not undertake the care of Dickie for me? He begins to need teaching, and of course it is too far to send him to the little school in Salisbury; then it is very bad for him to be always with the black boys and piccanins; they teach him all sorts of naughtiness; you can’t trust them. It would relieve me of a great worry if you would take entire charge of him.”

“But why not do it yourself, Judy?” It made me sick to think of Dick’s boy being left to the care of natives, but I wanted to be quite certain that she was not inventing a task out of charity. She looked at me, almost indignant.

“My dear girl! what time have I for teaching a child? You forget that now Dick is gone I have simply everything to see

about for myself: the care of the property, the accounts, the servants, social duties—such as they are—*everything*. I haven't a moment for Dickie. If you won't undertake him I shall have to send him to Durban again, until I can sell the place. My idea in staying on at all is to improve the property on the lines Dick intended, with the help of his foreman, Mr Stibbert, and presently sell it at a good price to some one of the people who will come pouring into the country now that the trouble with the natives is over."

After that I consented: but only on the condition that if she sold the Mashonaland property she would at least refrain from parting with Dick's Matabeleland farms and claims, but keep them for the boy. I had less trouble in persuading her to this on reminding her of the splendid reports that were coming in of the mineral wealth of the country. Experts said that Matabeleland was full of gold.

So it was settled that I should stay, minding and teaching Dickie, and I thanked God for a valid reason to remain in Mashonaland.

The household of Kentucky Hills consisted, I found, of ourselves; Mr Stibbert a clever young German who understood farming on scientific principles and had been engaged to manage Dick's cattle and land for him; an elderly woman of the same type as Adriana who had brought Dickie up by the East Coast; and a number of native servants. We were not near enough to Salisbury to expect much social life, for it requires some energy in Africa to mount your horse for a twelve-mile ride to pay an afternoon call. Yet I was astonished to find how many people thought it worth while to come galloping along the Mazoe Road for the sake of a cup of tea and a cucumber sandwich. These things were much in request by behabited ladies and begaitered men, in Judy's cool drawing-room; and Judy was always ready to dispense them, looking very sad and sweet and appealing in her little white crêpe widow's cap. She told me that she had never had so many visitors before, and that what they came for was to see *me*, the contravener of bylaws and conventions from Fort George. I thanked them much for that! But if it was true, their object was not attained. I forsook the drawing-room on these occasions and was neither seen nor heard. Judy, a skilful little social politician, told them I had not recovered from my serious illness brought on by overwork among the sick in Fort George, and shock at my brother's death. She was much too clever to give them any inkling of the vexing arguments she had with me on the subject; of her tart reminders that I was no longer an heiress, nor even a girl with a few hundreds a year, who could go her own way regardless of the opinions of the world; and of her constant injunction to me to try to get the friendship of these women instead of treating them with indifference.

"If you want to live up here you had better propitiate people and make friends," she advised me, "so that you may at least share such interests as there are in this benighted country."

But her arguments left me cold. I cared nothing for the interests or the friendships of Salisbury, though I did not doubt for a moment that as Dick had said there were many nice women in the place. All I wanted was to be left alone; to be let roam the veldt; to climb the rocky kopjes with Dickie, and dream up there in the sunshine of the days that had been all too short, when Anthony Kinsella and I lived our brief sweet hour of happiness. I could not bear to meet people who looked upon that dream of ours as outrageous and illegitimate. And I did not want to talk to people who spoke of Anthony Kinsella as one to whom much should be forgiven because he was of the dead. I had outwardly accepted the fact that he was dead and that a monument had been erected where he died. But yet—but yet, why should he seem so alive to me still in my dreams, and my thoughts? Why had nothing been found to identify him? No one could swear to the bones that had been found. Ah, God! what wild hopes and foolish thoughts my heart fed upon. But I wished for converse with none who would rob me of those hopes and I found life easiest to bear with only little gay-hearted Dickie for my companion.

And so, at the first sound of a horse's hoof Dickie and I were away, scudding up a hill at the back of the house, there to lie hidden among the rocks and sugar bushes until we heard the hoofs once more departing. Sometimes we had a little kettle up there and made a fire for our tea, and afterwards Dickie would climb the rocks pretending they were ship masts while I lay on the short hot grass and dreamed of the days that were no more, talking out my wild hopes—all that I had left, to ponder upon and brood over.

If I had possessed any money I should have fitted out an expedition into Matabeleland over the ground where Anthony had last been seen: and drag-net the whole country for traces of him, or at least for full details of the tragedy, if tragedy there had been. Some one would have had to tell something. Some one should have been made to pay.

It is true that an official inquiry had been made after Maurice Stair's report, but nothing further had transpired and the matter left for a time had been gradually put aside in a country full of new interests and new men. It is not much use being a dead man, or a missing man, in Rhodesia, or any other country for that matter.

> "To us the absent are the dead;
> The dead to us must absent be."

The living have the best of it. The dead and the missing are soon forgotten, except by the few who loved them personally.

I felt that if I could have gone out into the wild places penetrating the great Somabula Forest and searching all along the thickly bushed banks of the Shangani I should have found some trace, some news, something to break the aching, mysterious silence, and confirm me in my belief that Anthony was still alive somewhere. But across Africa's rolling leagues of bush and rocks and empty, rugged, burning land no one can travel without the accessories that only money can buy. Bitterly I regretted my stolen thousands, and bitterly hated the old solicitor Morton, whom we had so well and so unwisely trusted.

Poor Aunt Betty too had been badly hit over his defalcation, losing not only her private fortune but the money she had made at sculpture in years of hard work. Nevertheless, she had written and urged me to come back to Paris and share with her all she had. But I steadfastly resisted her urgent letters. I could not go if I would. Stronger bonds held me fast in Africa than ever Betty van Alen's love could forge. I had to stay with Judy and Dick's boy as long as I could be of use to them. They had just claims. But even when the day came that they no longer wanted me I should not leave Africa. The witch had dug her claw in deep. I could not go if I would.

As it was I cost Judy nothing. For clothes and the necessities of life, which since I lost my income had become luxuries, I parted one by one with my jewels, sending them down to Durban to be sold.

And so the months slipped by, until a year had gone since the night I kissed Anthony Kinsella goodbye. Of all the old Fort George friends there was only one left in my life—Maurice Stair. The rest were scattered far and wide in Matabeleland, and the different camps and townships springing up in every part of the country.

That is the way in Africa. People come into your life, live in almost family intimacy with you, learn (very often) the very inmost secrets of your heart, share joys and sorrows with you, then pass on and are lost to you for ever. Only here and there you grasp a hand that you can hold over hills and seas, though darkness hide you from one another and leagues divide, until the end.

Of the Salisbury women I had known in Fort George: Anna Cleeve had married her rich man and left Africa: Mrs Skeffington-Smythe was still, to the fore in Salisbury and might always be found where scandals were rifest and the battle of the tongues wagged hottest: but she did not much afflict Kentucky Hills with her presence.

Mrs Valetta sometimes came riding out with Maurice Stair to visit Judy, but she and I never met, and within the last few months she had gone away with her husband to some new town in Matabeleland. I did not inquire where. I asked nothing better than to forget Nonie Valetta, and that she and I had ever crossed each other's paths.

Maurice Stair was very kind and gentle and silent always. I often let him come with Dickie and me to the hill-tops. He was so quiet that I could almost forget that he was there. Apparently he asked nothing better than to be with me as often as his work allowed. His duties as an Assistant N.C., which he cordially detested were not very arduous, and often took him away for long spells. But whenever he was in Salisbury he found his way to Kentucky Hills.

I liked him for several reasons. One was because he talked so little in a country where everyone gossiped perpetually. Also, there was a kind of quiet melancholy about him that suggested acknowledged failure, and there is always a pathetic appeal to a woman in that. Certainly a man of his age and education ought not to have been idling away his life at work he hated and in which there was no probable advancement. I often felt that, and apparently he felt it, too, though he made no effort as far as I knew to change the tenor of his life. But really I knew very little about him except what he told me in rare expansive moments. He was a public school man, and had been prepared for the Army, a profession he had set his heart on but had been prevented from entering by the caprice of his guardian. This guardian was his uncle and only relative, Sir Alexander Stair, a distinguished diplomat I had often heard of at home—a very clever, witty, lonely, and sardonic old man, and not at all a lovable character, people said. I half understood the bitterness with which his nephew always spoke of him. But it seemed to me very sad that two men, the last of their family and alone in the world, should be so apart in sympathy. Yes: there were several pathetic, appealing things about Maurice Stair, his gentle, dark eyes and quiet, restrained manners, were in striking and refreshing contrast with those of John Courtfield who was perpetually about the house. The Australian's common ideas, expressed in common accents, did not offend Judy as they did me. Nor was she outraged by the intimacy of his horrible bulging eyes. I came to look forward to Maurice Stair's presence as a relief from the colonial's obtrusive personality.

Not that John Courtfield came to see me. I did not in fact think he came to see any one in particular, but that he simply made Kentucky Hills a convenient stopping place on the way to a mining camp out Mazoe way in which he was interested. But at last it dawned upon me that Judy was the star in his sky. When I realised this I don't know whether I was more shocked that such an unutterable cad should have the effrontery to aspire to my brother's widow or that Judy should complacently permit such an insolence; the latter I could hardly bring myself to believe with poor Dick hardly yet part of the brown earth that covered him. But the truth was thrust violently upon me one evening when just after putting Dickie to bed I came into the drawing-room and found Judy and John Courtfield sitting there in the half-light, holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes like moon-struck sheep. I was so horrified I almost fell upon her then with reproaches, but instead I burst from the room as hastily as I had entered it and going to my own room threw myself on my bed and wept for Dick.

A few moments later I heard John Courtfield's horse taking him away, and Judy came scurrying to my room. I sat up with the tears streaming down my face, and cried out bitterly to her:

"Oh, Judy! It cannot be true! You cannot have the baseness to think of putting that man in Dick's place!"

She burst out crying too: called me cruel, heartless, one of those cold-blooded women who do not understand a nature like hers that *must* have love as a flower the sun—a clinging, helpless nature that must be loved and cared for—that could not live without a man's love.

"I am so lonely," she wept. "I feel so helpless—it is sweet to be minded. Of course my heart is buried in Dick's grave—darling Dick! There can never be any one like him—but I'm sure he would not have wished me to be lonely!"

"He would never have had a cad like that man Courtfield inside his gates," I raged. But a moment later I was pleading with her, beguiling, begging.

"Oh, Judy! if you *must* marry again choose some one else; there are lots of nice men here; why should you take one

who is not even a gentleman? You know it has been more than hinted to us that he is not honourable. He cannot get in at the Club because of some shady thing he did about money, and because he is so insufferably common that other men detest him. Think how men loved Dick, and how much they think of you as his widow! Do not, for Heaven's sake, make such a frightful *bêtise*. You surely cannot *love* him?"

She looked at me with eyes grown like two little grey stones, and her mouth was a fast-shut trap.

"Haven't I told you that my heart is buried with Dick? But John Courtfield is clever and rich, though you despise him. He is clever enough to have got very rich. We would never have to worry about money again."

"We!" said I fiercely. "You surely do not include me in your hateful scheme to forget Dick—to disgrace his memory?"

At that she rose at me white-lipped.

"No, I do not: I am thinking of myself and my boy."

"Don't include Dick's son, either. His father thought of him and provided for him; bought him a heritage with his life. He does not need to live on the bounty of this horrible Australian. No: you are thinking only of yourself, Judy. Oh! how can you? How *can* you?"

I suppose I had no right to say these things. I did not mean them cruelly either, only pleadingly; and in a just cause they seemed excusable. I could not bear this thing to happen.

But she was furious at my opposition and said even bitterer things than I did; told me that I was jealous because no one loved me enough to seek me out; flung jibes at me about Tony Kinsella; said that I was talked about all over the country, that women would not speak to me, that the scandal reflected on her also who had never had a breath of scandal attached to her. She would be glad to change a name that had been so brandished she finished at last: and I doubt not in that moment I was as white-lipped as herself. But I was not so eloquent. I was cold and still as a stone. When she burst out crying, in weak reaction, and began to mumble apologies, I did not speak but walked away from her out of the room and out of the house. I had no gold to offer there for her tinsel and dross—for the ashes and mud that had been flung at me.

I walked the ground until I was weary, then sat on a rock on the kopje side, wondering dully what further daggers for my heart Africa had hidden in her mantle. While I sat there I heard another horse at the gates, and Maurice Stair's voice echoing across the garden and up the hill. He stayed some time in the house, but later I saw him coming as I knew he would to look for me. In my white gown I was plainly outlined on the moonlit hill, and he came straight where I sat, but before he reached me I called out abruptly, even rudely, for I was in no mood for companionship:

"Do not come and talk to me to-night."

"I must," he answered, and came and sat at my feet. "Oh, do let me, Miss Saurin. I have been talking to your sister-in-law. She was crying, but would not tell me why. Only—I gathered that you and she are not happy together. Dear girl that I love, why will you not let me try and make you happy? Marry me, Deirdre."

"Do not speak of such a thing," I said gently. "It is impossible. You don't know how sorry you make me. But—I can never marry any one."

"A girl like you cannot live alone, unmarried. By God! you were not made for such a life!"

"God knows what I was made for," I answered bitterly. "I am beginning to wonder. But I am sure it was not to many you, Maurice. You must not think of this any further."

"Why not? Ah—but I know why not. You think Kinsella is still alive. I know that is it. My poor child, how can you delude yourself so?"

"You don't know that it is a delusion," I said.

"But I do."

"You do not," I contended almost violently. "No one knows; no one can know for certain—"

"But I do," he repeated oddly: so oddly that my attention was arrested. My heart stood still.

"What do you know?" I demanded, in a trembling voice. "What can you know that is not known to every one? And it is not enough. For me at least it is not enough."

In the long while that seemed to me to elapse before he made an answer I had time to soundlessly cry from my heart in exquisite bitterness and fear:

"Oh, God! spare me this... spare me this... let this pass."

Maurice Stair looked strangely pale standing there in the moonlight. When he did speak his voice was low and stammering: but I heard his words as clearly as bells.

"I never told you before—it seemed unnecessarily brutal—but now I know that it was a mistake. I ought to have told you. I found something on the spot where the bones lay—something that made me absolutely certain that the man killed there was Tony Kinsella. I have never told any one of it. I—"

"How dared you keep it secret? Oh! how dared you? What was it? But I do not believe you—nothing will ever make

me believe you.”

I thought to cry the words in a ringing voice, but I found that I was speaking in a whisper. The ground was slipping away from beneath my feet; Africa was dragging her gift from my heart; my eyes dimmed; I swayed a little, almost falling: but still I whispered:

“I do not believe—I do not believe—”

At last I saw that he was holding something out towards me, and speaking:

“I searched long and well for the other—but—either it was washed away, or the kaffirs took it.”

The thing that lay in the palm of his hand stared up at me like a dull blue eye. I took it with trembling, frozen fingers—*a little turquoise ear-ring*!

Chapter Sixteen.

What a May Day Saw.

> “And are not afraid with any amazement.”

“He is rich,” said Judy for the twentieth time.

“And a clever business man. And he adores me. I do not see how you can think yourself justified in being so hard and unsympathetic about it, Deirdre. I am one of those extremely feminine women who must have some one to look after me. You can have no idea how wretched and lonely I am. It is all very well for you—so self-poised and full of character. Women like you don’t really know what it is to love and suffer. I don’t believe tall women feel things like little women either; and I am so tiny—Dick always said I was like a tiny sweet rosebud.”

“Oh, leave Dick out of it for God’s sake, Judy,” I groaned. “Content yourself with the words of Mr Courtfield now. Let poor Dick rest in his grave.”

“How brutal you are, Deirdre!” A moment afterwards she added vindictively, “It is really the best thing that could have happened for both of us. You and I could not have got on together much longer. And I can see you are beginning to set my boy against me too.”

“Oh, Judy!” I burst out passionately, but the moment after my anger and indignation evaporated, and I felt nothing but the dull aching pain that would never leave me now. What did it matter what unjust, cruel words she spoke? What did anything matter? I did not care. I did not care about anything, nor want anything. Ah, yes! There was one thing I wanted burningly, consumingly, terribly: to leave the pitiless brute of a country that had beaten and broken and robbed me, that had ground me to powder in its cruel maw.

But I did not know how to go, nor where. And I knew not how I should bear to leave Dick’s boy behind. I had no money, either. I must earn it first. And how to do that? In a country where there was nothing for a woman to do who had never been trained to work with her hands!

“What is there I can do?” I said to Maurice Stair. “For God’s sake tell me how I can earn money to leave this country and never see it again.”

“There is no way that a girl like you can earn money here,” he said. “There is only one thing to do, one thing which I am always urging—to marry: to marry me. Be my wife and I will take you away.”

“Oh! don’t, *don’t*. How can you ask me that? You know I have nothing to give. You know I can never love you.”

“I will make you love me, Deirdre,” he cried, and even in my dull misery a ghostly smile twisted my lips to hear once more that vain-glorious boast so often on men’s lips!

“I don’t care—I will ask nothing of you—until you love me—Until then I want nothing of you, only to be near you, to have the right to take care of you, to give you all you wish for, to do all you desire. Oh! Deirdre, do not turn away from me—I want you—I want you.—I am a failure and a good-for-nothing now, but with you at my side to help and guide me I feel that I could carve out a great career—make a great name for you to bear. I know that I have it in me to do great things, and for your sake and with you beside me I will do them. Why spoil two lives?—mine as well as your own. You say your life is a wasted one! Don’t let it be. Do something with it: make a man of me! Help me to become something, instead of pitching away my youth, a waster and loafer who will never do or be anything. If you refuse me, my life will be over as sure as I am standing here. God knows what will become of me.”

He stood there pleading in his low, gentle voice, pale and handsome and chivalrous-looking in the moonlight—the liquid, silver, African moonlight that had tricked and mocked me! And the great, empty woman-land echoed back to me his pathetic pleading words. The scarlet stars hung overhead, and the golden moon that had seen Anthony Kinsella lying dead smiled down her mocking smile. Everything mocked me in this cruel land. How I hated it! How I hated the sun and moon and stars of it!

“*If you will take me away from Africa*!” I cried at last, hardly knowing what I said in my bitter pain.

“Yes—yes: I will do anything, everything you wish. We will marry and go away immediately afterwards. My uncle has great influence in diplomatic circles and can easily get me into the Consular service. We will go abroad and begin a splendid new life in some other land.”

“You offer me too much,” I said, “for I have nothing to give in return. Do you understand that, Maurice? I can only give you my services as a sister, a companion, some one who will make your interests hers, entertain your friends, help you in your career—”

“I swear to God I will ask nothing more of you, Deirdre—until you love me.”

“And you will take me away from Africa?”

“The minute I can break loose from my billet in the Chartered Company.”

That is how I bartered myself away in marriage to Maurice Stair.

He was of my religion though he had never been what is called “a good Catholic.” All *that* was going to be altered now he told me, but I did not think very deeply about it. My faith required that I should marry a Catholic, but I had never cared for religious men, being content if those I closely knew were just clean-hearted and generous-minded gentlemen—“steel—true and blade-straight!”

We were married by one of the Jesuit fathers on a May morning a year and ten months after my first coming to Mashonaland. The thought of being married in May did not irk my superstitious soul as once it might have done. It was unlucky every one said: but I knew that luck and I had parted company. She had done her worst, and thrown me over. I laughed with a wry lip when even Judy did not fail to repeat to me the old rhyme:

> “Marry in May
> You’ll rue the day,”

- just in case I might never have heard it before! I told her that rue had been my portion for such a good time now that I was used to the flavour, but it seemed to me the saying came with singular gracelessness from her lips, seeing how much she had to do with my choice of that—or any month in which to marry Maurice Stair.

It was to avoid seeing her marry John Courtfield, or in the alternative to prevent the scandal my absence from her wedding would cause, that I had let Maurice persuade me to be married at once instead of waiting for the end of June when his service as one of the Company’s officials would be at an end. So after all, I should be obliged to stay another month in Rhodesia—and that as Maurice Stair’s wife.

The arrangement was that after a few days on the farm of a friend of his we were to go for the rest of his service to a small new township in Matabeleland, where he would take over the work *pro tem* of another man on leave. When I first heard of this I trembled and turned sick.

Not only was I to stay longer in this fateful land, but must turn my feet towards the bleak portion of it that had robbed me directly and indirectly of all I held dear in life. In that moment I strove to draw back from the barren promise I had given Maurice Stair, telling him in burning words that he was not keeping faith with me; that I had promised to marry him but that his part of the contract was to take me from the country without delay. I resented and resisted with all the strength left in me; but that was no great amount. Strength of will, and many other things seemed to have died in me on the night I took from his palm that little blue turquoise. So his humble pleadings and arguments prevailed.

I said to myself—why, being so wretched, make another equally so? and sought with prayers and weeping for courage to take up my life afresh and face my empty fate. And in some measure at last I found it, and strength to cry with Stevenson:

> “Come ill or well, the cross, the crown,
> The rainbow or the thunder,
> I fling my soul and body down
> For God to plough them under.”

I planned with myself a fine new plan of life. If mine must be empty of the sweet personal passionate love that every girl thinks her rightful due then I would fill it with a big altruistic love for all the world. Like Heine, out of my great sorrows I would make little songs. I would live a life of gentle sacrifice to the exigencies of others, of unselfish devotion to all that was best and most beautiful in the characters of the people with whom I came in touch. Surely that would bring some solace and sweetness in the many years! I thought of faces I had seen with stories of sorrow carved upon them that were yet most noble and beautiful; and I said, mine shall be a face like that when I am old. Of the first few years I expected little but lost battles and “broken hopes for a pillow at night,” but surely in time, in time, after much stumbling and rising again to the fight, victory would come, and peace from the passionate ache of youth. Perhaps in the end that peace of God which passeth all understanding would descend like dew upon my parched soul—and give me rest from the pain of love unfulfilled. I could not die, I would live for others. Gold for silver!

These were the thoughts and plans that I took to the altar, and Maurice Stair, standing by me, so gentle and

chivalrous-eyed, so debonair in his khaki and leather, seemed no ill-chosen companion for the path I was setting my feet to.

We were married in travelling-kit. I shrank from putting on all the panoply of a bride, and Maurice, when I asked him, diffidently enough, to let me off white satin and orange blossoms, was perfectly content. I was pleased at the time to find him so careless about outward forms and conventions. Still, I felt it to be only fair to him, and the proper fulfilling of my part of the bargain, to make myself look as charming as possible, so I had a special little white crêpe walking-frock made and a wide wavy hat of white lace and roses.

Judy gave me away: Sore as my heart was with her, I had to remember that she was Dick's wife. Also there was a concession to be paid for unstintingly; she had promised, that because she must live in Buluwayo for the first year of her married life she would let little Dickie come to me wherever Maurice and I found the lines of our new life laid. I was so thankful to her for this chance of keeping Dick's boy away from the influence of his step-father that I could almost forget her treason to that big loving heart lying out beyond Salisbury hill. *Almost*—not quite; but at least for the sake of the dead man's son I tried to stifle down my resentment of an act I could not prevent.

So I let her take my hand as we drove to church, and babble to me about how sure she was that I was going to be happy—what a nice fellow Maurice was—every one said so—and so handsome—and five hundred a year apart from his salary—very few men had that out here—they all came out to try and make it by hook or by crook—of course he was nothing like some of the matches I might have made at home—but still—etc.

That aspect of the situation had indeed never occurred to me before, and while she talked I considered it musingly, remembering suddenly that there were indeed others I might have married. I wondered, vaguely then for the first time, how I came to be marrying a man I knew so little of as Maurice Stair when there were men at home who, to use their own words, were "always to hand if I should change my mind at any time."

But Maurice was to hand too! He had in fact been right at hand, with a plan for a useless, broken life at a moment when there seemed to be nothing left to do but die. And there was something almost like a tie between us in the knowledge that we shared of Anthony's fate; and in the fact that he was the first to go forth to seek news for me. True I could not thank him for such news as he brought; but somehow he seemed almost sanctified to me in being the bearer of that little fateful blue stone I wore against my heart; the last thing Anthony had worn: the last tangible trace of him on earth!

Oh, yes, there were reasons, bitter cruel reasons why I should repay the love and service of Maurice Stair, inasmuch as a loveless wife and the empty shell of a heart could repay him. It seemed a poor bargain for a man of thirty with ambitions for a great career, and all the world before him, to make and be content with; but he never ceased to assure me of his content, so the least I could do was to refrain from the gracelessness of reminding him of it. And indeed I meant to do my part for his career, at least. When his uncle had once launched him in the Consular service well I knew that he would find no wife more able for that kind of life than I who had been practically trained to society: with my upbringing and knowledge of the world and its ways, with a heart empty of any thing but ambition for my husband I could go far and I meant to—in return for being wrenched from the claw of Africa!

Chapter Seventeen.

What a Jeweller Made.

> "The truth is rarely pure, and never simple."

So Maurice Alexander Stair and I were married.

After the ceremony we drove back to Kentucky Hills, and shared with a few friends the pretty breakfast Judy had arranged for us.

Later they all rode away, and Maurice with them, leaving me to pack for our exeunt that afternoon to a little place called Water-lily Farm. It was the home of a fellow N.C. of Maurice's; he had just prepared it for his wife who was coming out from home, but with the ready good-fellowship so common in Africa had offered it to Maurice for our honeymoon; and we, both anxious that the world should guess nothing of our strange bargain, had accepted it to stay in and spend the first few days of our married life.

Maurice was delayed in Salisbury, and it was late afternoon before he fetched me at last from my brother's house.

The pale May sunshine was almost as cheerless as that of an early spring day in England, for the winter was coming on rapidly, and winter in Africa can be very bleak indeed. I was glad to wrap myself in a warm coat and lean back in the shelter of the little tented cart we were to make the journey in. It was only large enough for two, and Maurice, obliged to manage the restive horses, had little time to talk, for which I was curiously thankful. Passing through Salisbury he discovered that he had left his watch at his rooms and asked if I would mind his calling there for it. I made no demur of course, only, knowing that he lived in a row of bachelor chambers almost next door to the Club, I stipulated that he should pull up a few hundred yards away. I had driven and ridden past the Club before, and knew something of the *insouciant* curiosity of its members, and their happy habit of filling the verandah of sound of a horse or wheels.

"They're rather fresh," hesitated Maurice as I took the reins.

"Oh, Maurice! Do you think I can't manage two old Mashonaland nags?" I smiled.—So he left me, and as I watched him go, tall, nonchalant, and graceful, taking long strides over the knolly ground, I asked myself if it could really be true that I was married, and that—my husband!

Frogs were beginning to croak in the swampy marsh between the Kopje and the Causeway. I could hear far-off voices, and see the smoke of others' homes against the evening sky. But a terrible soul-sickness crept over me: the sickness of a soul that has lost its mate. At that moment I seemed quite alone in the world. Some words of Gordon's that a dying man in Fort George had been fond of muttering flitted through my mind:

> "Oh whisper, buried Love, is there rest and peace about!
> There is little help or comfort here below!
> On your sweet face lies the mould, and your bed
> is straight and cold—"

Voices and the sound of horses coming along the road broke my dreary reverie. A man's rather sardonic laugh reached me, and a voice I seemed to know, yet could not recall the owner of. The riders were still a long distance off but sounds travel far on the clear high air of Rhodesia, and I presently heard some words as distinctly and plainly as if they were spoken beside me in the cart.

"He is not a fellow I have ever cared about—I found out long ago that he is not straight. Another thing, he's too fond of his little quiet tot by himself.—I like a man that drinks with his fellows—not one of your soakers in his bedroom."

"Well! I'll tell you what *I* don't like about him, Bell, he hasn't the pluck of a louse—there was a little incident here in Salisbury just after he came up—then again, at Fort George, he played sick with a sprained arm rather than go into Matabeleland with the others. Sprained arm! Sprained grandmother—and I told him so! He slunk out of my office like a dog!"

"It makes me sick to think of him marrying that fine girl."

How careless people are about what they say of others: I mused. Small wonder one's secrets are not one's own in a land where a reputation can be damned on the highroad for all the world to hear!

I had heard a man's honour—all that was worth keeping in this sad old world—dispensed with, in a few cynical but strangely convincing words. How cruel life was! How tragic! I shivered and wished Maurice would come.

I could see the backs of the two men now as they rode blithely upon their way, having saddened me with the sordid tale of a man's secret sins that were no secret! the story of some poor fellow's stumbling journey down hill instead of up! Men were very pitiless in their judgments I thought. Perhaps the other man was not so despicable after all. But *secret drinking, cowardice*! Those were terrible sins—none more revolting to a woman's mind—and *not straight*; the hardest thing one man can say of another! Surely there had been no such man in Port George!—I had never heard of one, and I had heard most things in that tragic little town.—I could think of no one whom such condemnation, fitted. Monty Skeffington-Smythe perhaps?—but no; *his* faults were open and above-board for all the world to see—nothing hidden there, not even his preference for *laager* in time of war! Anyway it was no business of mine—I ought to have been ashamed to be speculating about it even, and I *was*. But why did Maurice stay so long? What could be keeping him?

Some one who *played sick rather than go into Matabeleland*—But they were all so keen.—all except baggy old Dr Abingdon. Ah! now I knew whose voice that was—Dr Abingdon's of course—the *blasé* old doctor with his goat-like leer, and his pretentions that fear kept him from Matabeleland, when as we had found out afterwards he had absolutely begged to go, and been refused on account of his gout—the dear old doctor! His value had been only too well proved in the hospital work he had done later—in the big fights he had put up for men's lives, and won out, when every one else despaired... I had heard of his recent arrival in Salisbury, and was hoping to see him before I left.

With the knowledge that it was he who had been speaking, my curiosity was once more aroused by the words I had heard. Against my will my mind persistently went back again to the subject. Who of all his patients in Port George had a sprained arm. Ah!—*suddenly I remembered*!

Afterwards, all the words I had heard floating so idly on the clear air came back one by one, like little birds of ill-omen, to roost in my memory and sing in my ears. It seemed that my brain had taken down everything in shorthand—there was nothing in that brief conversation that I had forgotten!

When Maurice climbed in beside me and took the reins from my hands he exclaimed at their coldness.

"Good Lord! you're frozen," he said. "Why, it isn't cold!"

As he turned towards me I caught from his lips that faint sickly odour of spirits I had long ago learnt to associate with African scenery.

"I am not cold," I said in a voice that in spite of my striving must have given some sign of the inquietude of my soul, for he gave me a curious glance as the horses lunged forward.

"Oh! cheer up, my dear girl, for God's sake! This is not a funeral."

I was so utterly taken aback at this remark, unlike in tone and words anything I had heard from him before, that for

an instant I almost forgot the terror that in the last few moments had crept like a little cold slimy snake about my heart. Suddenly I burst into a convulsive laugh, so strange in sound that it should surely have betrayed me. But no, he did not perceive the *genre* of my laughter. He was satisfied that I laughed.

“That’s right!” he approved, whipping up the horses. “And as soon as we get round the Kopje I’ll give you a little whiskey to warm you up. I never drink anything myself, but its a good thing to keep the cold out, and I’ve brought a bottle with me in case of accidents.”

I laughed again then, a merry ringing laugh, extraordinarily like Mrs Rockwood’s in the old Fort George days. He lashed at the horses and we tore through the town in clouds of dust. When he made to pull up, almost opposite the cemetery, I clutched spasmodically at his arm.

“Don’t stop, Maurice. I don’t want whiskey,” I stammered. “I—I cannot even bear the thought of spirits. Please, *please* drive on.”

“Oh, very well!” he said in an impatient voice. “All right, if you don’t care about it. As I said before, I never drink myself but it is a good thing to keep out the cold.”

He turned and observed me with something like suspicion in his manner, and again the faint sickly odour crept past me.

We were travelling now at a slackened speed. There was time and opportunity for conversation, and driven by the cold little snake that wound itself tighter and tighter round my heart, I hastened to make it.

“What detained you, Maurice? You were away a long time!”

“Some brute had been ransacking my room. I found the place in absolute confusion. As far as I could see at a glance not a thing had been stolen, but everything was all over the place—papers, letters, clothes! I picked up the important things and stuffed them in my pockets, no time to put anything away; besides, all the padlocks had been burst off everything. I think I can guess who it was—a nigger I discharged last week, and to punish him took away from him a charm that some witch doctor had given him. That’s what he was after, no doubt, but he didn’t get it, the brute, for I have it on me, that’s some satisfaction. Good God! what a mess the place was in!”

“Why did you take his charm, Maurice?” I asked, not from curiosity but from a wild desire to keep talking.

“Oh, never mind about *that*! There is one thing I must ask you, Deirdre—never interfere with me and my boys.”

For the second time that night I flushed hotly at the tone he used, resenting its unpardonable rudeness. It was on my tongue to answer him proudly that he would not need to make the request twice; but remembering all the plans and resolutions I had taken to the altar a few hours before, I bit the words back before they could escape, and found courage to say instead, with as much gentleness as I could conjure:

“Of course not. You know that my wish is to help, not hinder you, or interfere in any way.”

“*That’s* all right then,” said he in a tone so extremely domineering and self-satisfied, that my spirits drooped even a little lower than before. But I picked them up again, I forced myself to be gay and sociable, I laughed (like Saba Rookwood), and talked of anything and everything that could have any possible interest for him, even while the knowledge began to push itself into my mind that there were strangely few subjects of common interest between us; and the wonder began to make itself felt that I had never before noticed how little he had to say on any subject. He had always been so quiet, so chivalrously, gently silent, that I had perhaps given him credit for depth and feeling that were not there. No, no, I struggled against that thought, and jested on, occupying my tongue with incessant remarks.

At last the lights of our temporary home beaconed across the veldt and the interminable drive came to an end.

Water-lily Farm consisted of three thatched rooms, and a few straggling huts dumped on the wide and rolling plain with horizon all round. As we drove up in the chilly gloom we saw that the beaconing lights came from lamps with green glass shades that gleamed like anaemic stars from the windows of the bungalow. A dog barked fretfully in the verandah, and a boy came running out with some information in the native language.

“He says there’s a letter from Bingham on the table,” remarked Maurice. “Wait a moment, I’ll go and see.” He sprang from the cart, catching his coat on some projection and sending a shower of papers and things flying from his over-crammed pockets. I collected them as best I could in the darkness, while he went within, and found the letter. He presently came out again calling to me:

“*That’s* all right. It’s only to say he is sorry he had to go off on duty and couldn’t wait to welcome us; but our boxes of provisions have arrived and everything is O.K. Go inside, dear, while I see about the horses with the boy. If anything happens to them I shall have to pay.”

He helped me down, and I went into the homely little living-room lighted by the pale-green lamps. The supper-table was carefully laid out with an attempt at grace that was more touching than successful. As I looked at the clumsy little bunches of wild flowers arranged in tumblers, I felt that Bingham was a pleasant fellow. There was an honest, serene air about the simple room with its canvas deck-chairs, cane lounge, white-wood book shelves and framed photographs of English people on the walls. The woman who was coming from England to her man here should be very happy, I thought.

A light from the door of an adjoining room drew me thither, but before I reached it I passed some boxes piled against the wall—open packing cases full of provisions: canned beef, biscuits, bottles of preserved fruits, loose potatoes, a

case of champagne. There was another case also, nailed up and branded with the name of John Dewar and Sons. I had lived long enough in Rhodesia to know that these were not the names of gentlemen-philanthropists who lived in the Imperial Institute and provided packing-case seats in the open air for the public. I now recognised a case of whiskey when I saw one. I fled from the room and from my thoughts.

The next room had nothing in it but a wholesome smell of pipe-tobacco, a rough desk with many papers piled on it, some racks of shelves, and a chair: obviously Mr Bingham’s office.

More simplicity in the bedroom: white mats, a white dressing-table of unpainted wood, a sheet of mirror in a white frame, a large white double bed. I gazed at that large white bed, fascinated, while the knowledge crept slowly over me that there was no other bed in the house. At last I turned away, and then I saw that in the mirror there was a woman who matched all the other white things in the room—a deathly white woman with a gay-tragic face, standing very still, her clutching hands full of papers. I stared at the papers for a moment wondering what they were, then remembered picking them up in the cart. I was holding a little green leather case too, that I had gathered up with them—something Maurice had dropped. I recalled having heard the little dull thud of it as it fell. It was a jewel-case, a small, new-looking, green leather box, and when I saw that it was half open I wondered if anything had been lost out of it. My mind turned to that question as though it was of importance far greater than the one that was blanching my cheeks and chilling my blood. It was imperative that I should fasten my mind on something outside itself, and I fastened it with avidity on the little green jewel-case half open in my hand.

“Perhaps something is lost out of it,” I repeated mechanically; something of Maurice’s—something of my husband’s!

I opened it entirely, looked in, and found that it contained one blue turquoise ear-ring.

It was a very new little box, with the name of the same Durban jeweller to whom I had sold my rings, printed in bright gold letters on the white satin lid. (Of course! I remembered it was Maurice who had given me the man’s address.)

The one ear-ring was stuck into a dent in the white velvet cushion; by its side was another little dent—empty.

“The other ear-ring must have been lost,” I said to the woman in the glass. She made no reply.

“The other—must have been lost!” I repeated, but I did not hear my voice, and though I saw that the lips of the woman in the glass were moving, no sound came from them.

Then I noticed an odd thing. The woman in the glass was tearing open the front of her gown: tearing it open with shaking frantic hands to get at something that she wore against her heart in a little silken bag.

I did not see her again for a long while. When I looked up at last she was still standing there: only the white lips in the gay-tragic face were smiling, a brooding subtle smile, that had in it a strange mingling of triumph, despair, hatred—and some other desperate element that might have been hope or madness; and the little leather jewel-box in her hands contained two ear-rings. *The lost one had been found*.

Steps in the verandah dragged me away from the glass and the fascinating things I saw there. I crossed the room swiftly, and closing the door locked it; there was also a wooden button to turn, and a large bolt which slid into its socket soundlessly.

I returned to the dressing-table and my contemplation of the contents of the pretty new box from Durban. I examined them as carefully as if I were a jeweller; as if I had never seen a turquoise ear-ring before and might never see one again. The gold setting of one was tarnished with mud; tiny particles of dirt were still clinging to it; but the stone was undimmed blue, and resembled in every particular its radiant mate which had plainly never left a white velvet bed to make acquaintance with mud. They were screw earrings, meant to pass through a hole in the ear and screw behind the lobe with a little gold washer like a miniature bicycle-nut. Both nuts were in place and the hold wire thread on which they were screwed was quite unworn. When I had removed all traces of mud and stain from the one and polished it with a handkerchief, they were both as flawless and new as when they left the jeweller’s; you could not tell one from the other.

The only interruptions I suffered in my engrossing occupation were the sounds of tins and bottles being opened and occasional shouts to me to hurry up and come to supper. To these I paid no attention until they were accompanied by thumpings on the door.

“What have you locked yourself in for? Do hurry up, for God’s sake! I’m as hungry as the devil. Deirdre! what on earth are you doing?”

I was considering with her the fate of the woman in the glass.

“Are we or are we not going to eat anything to-night?”

“You may eat without me,” I called out in a clear voice. “I do not need any food.”

“The devil you don’t!” There was a pause.

“But—What on earth is the matter with you, my dear girl. Of course you must eat—what’s the matter? Are you angry about anything?—Damn it! what kind of behaviour is this? Open the door.”

“I do not intend to open the door, Maurice, until—I have come to a decision. You had better go away and not waste your breath speaking to me.”

He wasted a good deal more breath, however, before he went away. The next sound was the pop of a champagne cork hitting the ceiling, and the little water-fall rush of wine into a glass. Afterwards the boy was roughly and loudly told to "*Hambeela* and get out." Later a knife and fork clattered on plates, and there were more pops and water-fall rushes. At length a silence. The scent of a cigarette crept into the room.

"What now?" I wondered dully. Having finished considering the problem of the future with my reflection, I went and sat on the large white bed which no longer had any terrors for me. I heard the front door being locked, then steps across the room to my door once more.

"Is this a game, Deirdre?"

I did not answer.

"If you do not unlock the door I will break it in!" he said in the same loud bullying voice he had used to the boy, but which did not alarm me at all. I knew now that it was a coward's voice—a coward's and a liar's: my husband's!

I looked at the stout, unpainted deal door and then at some kaffir curios fastened to the wall on either side of it in rather picturesque groups. There was quite a collection of strangely shaped knives and assegais.

"Do you hear? I shall break in the door."

"You may do what you wish. But if you come in here I will kill you."

My voice was very low and quiet, but the hatred in it carried through the door like a dagger aimed at his heart, and he drew away as if it had reached him. A moment later he laughed—a coward's laugh—uncertain at the beginning, then, taking courage from its own loud sound, blustering at the end. Afterwards he sought in more champagne courage to fulfil his threat: but he found what was better for him at that time—oblivion.

As for me, I lay on the great white bed with crushed face and clenched hands, and asked God for death. At first I was a woman in agony, a tortured and tricked woman whose sorrows were too many for her, whose right was death as the only solution of the sordid problem. But afterwards I was only a weeping child, sobbing over the wreckage of my life, and crying out in the words of my childhood's prayers:

"Oh, gentle Jesus!... Oh, Mary!... have pity on me!"

Chapter Eighteen.

What the Dawn Heard.

> "The means of a man's ruin are on his tongue."

In the bleak grey dawn I unlocked the door and sought my husband.

He was sleeping, sprawled in a canvas chair beside the table frowsy now, and littered with empty tins, spilt wine, and overturned flowers. His mouth hung open, and I saw that it was weak and loose; that his dark skin was yellowed, not tanned; that his eyes were set with a sinister closeness to his handsome thin nose; that under them lay the mean lines of secret sins; that his hands were not the staunch, square hands of a man that could work for a woman and take hold of her heart and keep it for himself against all comers; they were long and cruel and womanish, and looked as though they knew only how to tear and wring and destroy.

While he snored I drank to the dregs the bitterness of my cup. I was bound to this drunkard and liar for all my days. And Anthony Kinsella was alive. I knew, that he was alive. If all the angels in Heaven had come down to tell me now that he was not living I would not have listened. I knew that he was living and breathing somewhere in this land that he loved. *I had always known it*. But I had let this man blunt my instinct and blur my soul's vision with his base lies; and he had profited by the blindness of suffering to trick me with a lie and an ear-ring dipped in mud to convince me of my lover's death! It seemed to me a shameful thing that I should have been so easily convinced. Now that my faith had come back in a great sweeping tide I convicted myself of base treason in the haste I had made to believe the false tale. But faith, reproaches, discovery—all came too late, for me. Anthony was living—somewhere; but not for me. Here was the mate I had given myself, snoring before me in drunken slumber! Lest I should strike him on his open lying mouth, I fled from the room.

In the verandah the austere, sweet air of dawn greeted my burning temples and lulled the fever of my burning cheeks and hands. The stars were paling to whiteness and falling away into lemon-tinted distance. Shadowy hands tipped with faintest rose reached down from the skies, gathering the mists of night back into the bosom of the clouds; and the land, like some subtly tinted Japanese map on which was traced streams, grasses, and flying birds, swiftly unrolled itself to the eye, yard by yard, mile by mile. A line of mauve-tinted hills appeared suddenly on the horizon, as though sketched in by some rapid, skilful hand.

A strange thing about the veldt is that if you stare long at it when you are happy your eyes will fill with tears, and an indefinable sorrow surges in your veins. But go to it when you are wretched, and its beauty will lay shadowy hands on you and bless you and enfold you, and something will wing its way into your heart like a white heron of peace, and nestling there give you comfort and courage.

As I re-entered the room the man in the chair opened his eyes and regarded me stupidly. We looked at each other in silence for a while. I was surprised to see that the eyes I had always thought to be a deep and rather beautiful brown were really as yellow as an eagle's: the effect of darkness was given by a number of brown spots scattered closely on the iris. When the eyes were opened the little mean lines disappeared, and a curious deferential expression took their place. His colouring was dusky, almost mournful, but he had beautiful teeth that lit up his face when he smiled, and the effect was that fleeting suggestion of chivalrousness that had impressed me so deeply and was so false. He was smiling now, but the chivalrous engagement was absent. His gaze had quickly changed from stupidity to one of sneering anger.

"So you have deigned to come forth at last! Would it be troubling you too much to ask for an explanation of your charming behaviour?"

With an affectation of carelessness which his furtive glance and shaking hand denied, he took out a cigarette and lit it.

Without speaking I laid upon the table the little green jewel-case, open—with the blue stones smiling on their satin cushion.

For a few seconds there was silence, and as I watched him with disdain and hatred I could not control, I saw that he was not taken unawares. He knew what I had found, and had his tale ready. Incredible as it may seem, he was ready to burden his soul with fresh lies. I had yet to find that this was ever his way. He never confessed a fault, but lied to cover it, and if the lies were not long enough or broad enough he lied again; and if you still did not believe he lied on and on—useless, futile lies.

What pretty ear-rings, he said. Where did I get them? They were just like a pair he had bought intending to give me; but he had remembered in time that turquoises meant unhappy memories for me, so he had kept them, and by Jove, yes! when he had found his things all over the place in his rooms he had come upon the box, too, but with only one ear-ring in it, and had thought that brute Makupi had taken it (he forgot he had told me the boy had stolen nothing). Perhaps he had the thing in his pocket now. (He, in fact, affected to make a search, feeling in all his pockets, then looked more closely at the box on the table.) Why! this was the very box—but of course I must have picked it up in the cart—then the ear-ring had not been lost after all! At first he had thought it was a pair of my own I was showing him—a pair just like those he had bought,—for that class of screw ear-ring was all made alike—a jeweller had told him so. *They were all made exactly in the same way—you couldn't tell one pair from another*.

Fascinated, I stood watching him weave his tangle of lies and uttering them between little puffs of smoke. If it had not been so horrible it would have been an interesting study in soul pathology. I had never met any one with an idiosyncrasy like this; never known a man who thought it worth while to lie at all, certainly not in this idle yet curiously intent way. Could he be mad, I wondered. With each new lie or portion of one his confidence increased. The last part of his statement, made with the utmost *aplomb*, was an inspiration. I saw the gleam of the creator in his eye as he propounded it. And when I still gazed at him in stony-eyed fascination he repeated it with an assurance almost childish.

"All blue ear-rings are alike. Yes: that fellow in Durban told me so when we were talking about earrings once long ago. Perhaps that is why you are upset—old memories, I suppose. You are thinking of that chap Kinsella. Still, I don't see why you should treat me like a dog on that account."

His tone became injured and indignant once more. There were to be no more propitiatory inventions. He had explained the whole thing satisfactorily as far as he was concerned, and the subject was now closed. He swept it away with his tobacco smoke, and returned to his grievance against me.

"On a man's wedding night! To drive him into getting beastly drunk out of sheer misery and loneliness! I have told you before that I never drink anything, but last night,"—he waved at the empty champagne bottles—"upon my soul I think this lapse should be forgiven me."

Half unconsciously my eyes sought the wall where the packing cases stood; the case of whiskey was gone. It had been spirited away in the night to some other hut. I remembered now the shuffling sounds of some one lifting and carrying away a heavy weight.

"But I am willing to kiss and make friends if you are."

He rose to his feet and put out a hand with the frank manly air he could so easily assume while the half-modest, half-chivalrous smile that had always attracted me flitted across his face. It was an elusive expression and never stayed to be examined; but for a moment it bred in me the hope that at the bottom of this dark soul there was some spark of nobility, covered heavily with great weights, perhaps, but smouldering still. I must appeal to it if there was to be any way for either of us out of this tangled wild.

"Maurice," I said almost gently, "there can be no kisses between you and me. I know now that you have lied to me and deceived me, and the knowledge is so terrible that I can hardly bear it. There was a time during the past night when I could have killed you for what you have done. I can never forget it—it is no use saying that. But because you and I are irrevocably bound together by the laws of my religion I will try to forgive you if you will give me time. I will try only to remember the promises I made to you at the altar a few hours ago. By the help of God I will keep compact with you: if you on your part will not lie to me any more, and will strive to be the honourable man I believed you when I married you."

He gazed at me with a sneering mouth.

"And what is to come of all these fine compacts, may one ask?"

What indeed! God knew best what house, if any, could be built upon the shifting sand of this man's nature and the ashes of my heart's desire! I could not prophesy with my hope; I could only try to keep from my voice the despair that obsessed me.

"A home perhaps that you and I can live in with peace and honour, Maurice," I faltered at last. "Who knows; we may yet build some fine thing with the wreckage of our old selves. If we learn to tolerate and help and comfort each other—will not that be something? Perhaps in the end friendship may come."

He interrupted me with a fleering laugh.

"Friendship! You think that is what a man marries a beautiful girl like you for? You talk like a fool. If friendship was what I wanted I could have got it—and a jolly sight more, too—without tying myself up for life. It is not every woman who finds me so objectionable as my wife apparently does. Friendship be damned!"

"It is all I ever promised you," I broke out at him then. "I told you when we made our bargain that you must expect nothing from me but my presence in your house, and my help in your career. You swore you would ask nothing more of me."

"A likely story," he answered. "Who ever means those tom-fool things?"

"*I* meant them if *you* did not, and I mean to stand by them," I said firmly, though my soul shook at this faithlessness; this trampling under foot of solemn vows.

"We'll see about that," he said darkly.

"We will see about it now. It will be finally and definitely settled now, or I will leave this house, and you. If your promises do not bind you neither will I be bound to you."

He was moved at last, though I could not tell on what raw place of pride or personal vanity my words flicked him. His manner changed. Consideration came into it, and some trace of humility.

"Deirdre, you would not leave me?"

"Not unless you force me to. But so sure as you forget the compact there is between us, Maurice, I will go. Understand now clearly and then let us speak of it no more. I married you believing Anthony Kinsella to be dead, and hoping to dedicate the rest of my loveless life to something which would make it worth the living. You offered me the task of helping you, and I took it with a clear bargain between us, and a hope—Ah! I know not what hope, but I thought that perhaps—life might still bear some little gentle flower. And so it may,"—I found courage to continue, looking at his whitening face: "I pray God for your sake, that it may. But you must not forget, Maurice, that things do not stand just where they were that night we made our bargain; do not forget that I gave my promise with a lie between us that made all the difference to me; that now I know the truth and believe Anthony Kinsella still alive I can no more help loving him than I can help my heart beating. You can drive me from your home if you choose, but I tell you that I love him, and I will never forswear my love for him. I cannot now ever give him my body as he has my soul; but neither will I give it to another."

My voice had sunk to a whisper. My words rustled out like leaves across my dry lips. He, too, was pallid-faced and stammering.

"This is a bitter bargain!"

"Not less for you than for me," I contended inexorably, for I was fighting for more than life. I knew that if this last appeal failed it would be the end. The ship of our marriage must founder, and we two, like broken, useless spars float apart on dangerous seas.

For me the thought of living in companionship with this man held nothing but terror and disgust. But with the fervour of a Catholic I clung to the marriage vows I had made, not only because my faith and the traditions of all the clean, pure women of my ancestry bade me do it; but, because I terribly feared for what might happen when Anthony Kinsella came riding back into my life, as now with the clear prevision of an Irishwoman I knew he would.

If I were alone—married and yet alone—and he should come for me, would I refuse to go? No, no, no! I knew the spell of my love and the strength of his will too well to suppose it! Faith and tradition would go to the winds; they would be burnt up in the fierce flame of our love.

I was fighting with Maurice Stair for my soul. I could not love him; he was an unworthy traitor and liar, but I was his wife and I wanted his home and name to shelter me from sin. Only, I would take them on no other conditions than those I had named to him.

Long, long we stayed there, fighting that fight. I cannot remember all that was said. I only know that once I sank into a chair almost fainting, that once there was a time when he wept like a child, his head on the table. At another he reviled me until my knees shook, and cursed the hour I had set foot in his life.

But at last when the sounds of broad day were all about us and the room full of leaping sunshine, the fight was over, and I knew that my will had conquered. The victory, if so it could be called, was to me! For how long I knew not. I had learned much of my husband in those dawn hours of weeping and reviling and recriminations; and one thing I knew—this battle would be often to fight. Life with Maurice Stair, unless I was prepared to surrender my will to his, would be one long, ceaseless struggle—a struggle in which my adversary would disdain no weapon or device to bring me down.

Chapter Nineteen.

What a Goad Performed.

> “A word fitly spoken is like apples of silver in baskets of gold.”

A few days after our marriage Maurice went into town, and came back to Water-lily Farm with a brief but interesting statement.

“We shall not be leaving Mashonaland. When I made you some such promise I had not reckoned with my dear uncle Alexander. It appears that he objects to my going away from Africa.”

I regarded him steadfastly for a while, trying to read between the lines of this announcement.

“What has made him change his mind about helping you into the Consular service, Maurice?” I asked, not without a shade of irony I must confess, for any one less adapted than Maurice to a profession in which high principles, tact, and good manners are essential qualifications it would have been hard to find, even in Africa, where budding diplomats do not grow on every bush.

“He hasn’t changed his mind. I have changed mine about asking him, that’s all. I know it would be no good, anyway.”

He got into the verandah hammock, which was also his bed, propped himself comfortably against a cushion, and lit a cigarette.

From my deck-chair I stared blankly at the surrounding horizon. To say that I was *agacée* is to say nothing. Even in the face of his recently revealed duplicity I was unprepared for this cool jettisoning of the most solemn part of our compact. It left me breathless. I said at last:

“What is there to prevent you from leaving Africa without your uncle’s consent? You are not an infant—”

“No; I wish I were. Life would be considerably simpler. But the fact is, my uncle is so kind as to pay me five hundred a year to stay out of England, and the country he specifies as my residence, being a nice long way off from him, is Africa. The moment I quit he’ll stop payment, and I shall have nothing to live on but my lordly salary of twenty quid a month.”

What sinister meaning lurked in so strange an arrangement I shrank from asking, but I had an instinct to combat it—an instinct that was roused in me twenty times a day as my husband’s character unfolded itself, and I saw upon what ignoble props and bolsters his life was arranged; how slack were his moral muscles; how low his code of honour. Sometimes, when I realised these things, and that my lot was irrevocably cast for life companionship with a man who so deliberately outraged my ideals of what a man should be, and what life should mean, I felt like a trapped creature, and my instinct was to turn in bitter rage and rend the trap with teeth and nails. But what good in that? And what good in all my fine resolutions if they so quickly dissolved in the face of disaster? I smothered down indignation and disdain, and used a gentleness with him that, knowing my own proud ardent heart, surprised myself. With burning cheeks I might presently have been heard pleading with him to throw off the five-hundred-pound yoke, and strike out on his own account.

“Surely the freedom of your soul is worth more than five hundred a year!” I cried. “You detest your uncle, why take his money under such an ignominious condition? Fling his money into his teeth and take your life into your own hands. Africa is not the only country on the map. There are still Europe, Asia, America, and Australia. Let us go to Canada and start a farm, open a shop, run a hotel—anything, anywhere. I will help you at whatever you put your hand to, Maurice, and I don’t care how poor we are. Only let us be honourable, and let us go away from Africa.”

And all the time my blood was leaping and my heart quivering at the thought of staying on in this land, behind whose silent hills and dense bush the fate of Anthony Kinsella still was hidden. To all my eloquence he puffed at his cigarette and returned a cool stare.

“Jack up five hundred a year and go and look for a chance living in some new country where I don’t know the ropes? Not much, my dear girl! I know my own limitations, thanks, and how likely I’d be to make my fortune or even a bare living in Canada or anywhere else.”

“What of the noble career you were to carve out for yourself,” I flung at him, hoping that scorn might achieve what pleading and reasoning failed to do. But that stone broke no bones. He merely laughed and flung one back at me with a man’s sure aim.

“Why should I bother about a career, since I am never to have any children to pass my glories on to?”

That sealed my lips from further retort. I sat still and stared silently at the passionate blue of the skies, and the radiant sunlit plain. What was the use of struggling against the witch who had me in her toils and never meant to let me go?

“If she loves you, she will keep you, whether you will or no!” Anthony had prophesied on just such a blue-and-gold day, when life went sweetly with us. Well, if this was love, it was a strong, austere passion, hard to distinguish from hate. Under its fierce cold caress I could truly cry with the words of the Hindoo woman to her faithless lord:

“Hadst thou not called it Love—
I had called it a drawn sword!”

A little way off a native boy, whom I had noticed about the place the last day or two, was sitting in the sunshine, with his back against a hut. He wore a brick-red blanket sewn with large blue beads, swathed round him rather gracefully, and a necklace of some wild beasts’ teeth about his neck. He was better looking than the average kaffir—nose less flat, and lips less protruding; with a dreamy, moody air about him, and in his big dark eyes. He had a tiny kaffir instrument in his hands, upon which he was making a soft, sad, monotonous sound.

Tom—brr—torn—brr—tom-tom-tom—

Sometimes he would give a look, in which there seemed to be some significant wistfulness, towards the verandah where we sat.

“Yes, I’ve got a nice little soft billet in the Mounted Police,” pursued Maurice serenely. “The powers that be thought it a pity for a happily married man like me, with an adoring wife, to have to be so much away from home as an N.C. must be, so they laid their heads together to see what they could do for you and me. The result is the offer of a sub-inspectorship in the Police, my service in the N.C. Department to count towards seniority. They’ve given me the camp at Mgatweli.”

Afterwards I learnt, as one learns everything in Rhodesia if one lives long enough, that the whole affair had been arranged weeks before, upon Maurice announcing the news of his approaching marriage. He had accepted the appointment quite a month before he told me anything about it.

But I soon learned that I must take falseness and double-dealing for granted.

Judy, too, was proving faithless to her promise. She had written to say that she had decided to take Dickie with her to Europe, where she was going to spend her honeymoon.

I rose wearily to go inside and find out what arrangements were being made for lunch, when I noticed that the boy with the music had left off playing. He put his piano in his hair and came up to the verandah. His eyes were fixed wistfully upon Maurice, who was apparently composing himself to sleep. In the Mashona tongue he made a soft little request:

“*Neega meena e’tambo Inkos*.”

My husband very quickly opened his eyes.

“Get out, you scoundrel, or I’ll give you a kicking instead. And don’t let me see you hanging round here any longer.” He added something. Some added threat in the vernacular made the boy walk away. But he did not leave the farm. I found out later that he was Makupi, the boy whose charm Maurice would not give up, keeping it out of sheer deviltry and malice, just because the boy wanted it so frightfully. When we left Water-lily Farm Makupi left also, and a few days after our arrival at our new home I saw his brick-red blanket again, and heard the thrumming of the little melancholy piano. Often he would come to Maurice and repeat his gentle request:

“*Neega meena e’tambo Inkos*” (give me my charm, master). And when refused with menaces would walk uncomplainingly away.

Mgatweli was a little gathering of houses and huts, a church, and two hotels—the habitations of three hundred souls. The town nestled in the hollow of a plain, with low, wooded kopjes brooding round it.

Our home consisted of five huts: a dining-room lined with white limbo, a drawing-room lined with red, two bedrooms, and a kitchen. They had been lived in before, and left in a ragged and disreputable condition. There was grass growing on my bedroom floor, and the ants had devoured most of the drawing-room wall drapery. However, the place was undeniably picturesque.

The huts were built in a wide ring round a compound full of bush and big trees, and the whole camp was pitched half-way up the slope of the biggest kop.

We were about a mile away from the town, and between us and it stretched an emblazoned sea—an extravagant, brilliant *champs Élysée* of terrible colour.

In the first mushroom uprising of the town the little hospital had stood where now our huts were built, and a young nurse, receiving a packet of zinia seed from home, had, in the innocence of her heart, planted it at the doors of the hospital, to cheer the patients, she said; but in time it had frightened the patients.

Any one who knows anything about zinias need not be told that they want nothing more than a shower and some sunny days to bloom gaily, and thereafter fling their seed in turn to the four winds. That is what Nurse Agnes’s zinias had done, and now between the camp and the town billowed an iridescent ocean of colour. And such colour! Atrocious blues and reds and terra-cottas and pinks and magentas, all cheek by jowl, and head to head. Perky little stiff-stalked wretches, blazing wickedly in the sun. I detested them. The natural flowers of Africa never clash with each other, or the skies, or the changing scarlets and ambers of the veldt. But these malapert immigrants sinned against all laws and canons of colour. They struck the eye a thousand blows a minute. They disturbed the splendour of the skies. There was no peace in the distant hills because of them.

Close beside us was the police camp: a bevy of huts built round a large open space, with the stumps of chopped-down trees for occasional seats. A sergeant and ten troopers came and went on the zinia-lined road, patrolling the neighbouring kraals and visiting the town. From our hut doors we could see the men busy with their horses at morning and evening "stables," and on Sunday nights they usually chanted Barrack-room Ballads round their fires to hymn tunes played on a concertina. They were an ill-kempt, casual, careless lot of men, but fine looking fellows and all of them well-born ne'er-do-wells. The only one among them who had no claim by birth to the title of gentleman was Locke, the smart and spruce sergeant in charge of them under Maurice.

Life with Maurice Stair was too lively and active a misery to be truthfully described as dreary. It was more difficult than climbing the *Dent blanche* with bare and broken feet, or wandering waterless in the burning desert; for there was no glorious peak in sight up the steep and rugged path, nor any oases to rest by in the weary desert, nor any hope of "Death, the tardy friend" overtaking one's faltering footsteps. I was too young and strong to hope for death, even while I felt that youth was being left far behind in the shadow of happier days, and age crouched somewhere in the tangled thorny wild in front. And always, always, the terrible regret for the passing of days that held nothing in them! Empty days—empty nights! Life was not meant to be passed thus, and life was passing!

> "The wine of life was falling drop by drop;
> The leaves of life were fading one by one!"

Maurice spent little of his time at the police camp. His duties as commanding officer did not oppress him. He rarely went near his men. The sergeant came to the house with all papers and reports, and Maurice conducted the affairs of the Government in his bedroom, often from his bed, for which he had a fondness.

As Public Prosecutor he was obliged to go over to the court-house every morning at ten, but it was usually nearer eleven when he rode away, looking like a modern Galahad on his white horse. There is no doubt he was a very handsome fellow.

His duties at the court-house did not keep him long, there being little more to do than to produce certain Mashonas who had been brought in by the troopers for refusing to pay the hut-tax (ten shillings a year) and thereafter to be sentenced to a month's labour at Government work. Sometimes there was a cattle-stealer to face his crimes, or a breaker of his brother's skull in some kraal revel. Whatsoever the cases they did not detain Maurice long. He soon came riding gallantly back through the zinias, to the hours of idleness that his soul loved. He would fling off his uniform, get into a pair of shrunken flannel trousers, and in his shirt sleeves and a pair of atrocious black leather slippers spend the rest of the day *pottering*. He was the most successful potterer I ever met. Sauntering from one hut to the other, he was never far from his own. He may or may not have believed that I did not know the reason for this; but I must have been deaf and blind and lacking in all my seven senses not to know of the case after case of whiskey that was carried to his hut and consumed there in solitude. Yet he still kept up the pose of being a man who did not drink, and when I had the tantalus filled with spirits and placed openly in the dining-room he looked at me with surprise, and asked me whether I realised that whiskey was five pounds a case!

He had the art of wasting time brought to a fine point. He could sit for hours polishing some part of his saddlery (that it was his batman's business to attend to), or spend the afternoon piercing fresh holes in a strap he never intended to use, piercing them beautifully, with the care of a diamond cutter at the most delicate work, polishing them afterwards with sand-paper. He loved polishing as few housemaids do. The matter of getting a rhino-hide *sjambok* ebony black would happily occupy him for many days, or cleaning a pipe that he never smoked—anything that was futile and foolish and useless and that some one else could have done better!

He also liked to make little pottering things with carpenters' tools. After studying for the army he had, it appeared, taken a course at one of the big technical training colleges in London, and had there chosen to learn carpentering. No doubt I am snobbish, but I could never quite understand what a gentleman wanted with a knowledge of carpentering. Probably Maurice took it up to avoid being obliged to study something that would make a demand on his brain. He was always very careful not to overstrain his brain in any way. However, the result of this special branch of instruction was that he could make nice little boxes that would not quite close, and wooden pegs that wouldn't stay in the *dagga* walls, and other things that no one had any earthly use for.

Once, it is true, he made a beautiful little tea-table, a thing we much required, for furniture was still almost unobtainable in the wilds as we were, and the drawing-room was but scantily furnished. But when the table was finished he spoilt it by painting it a diabolical pink that made it get up and smite in the eye everything in the room, including the walls which were lined with scarlet twill. The thing was impossible. The colour of a stuffed wolfs tongue! But do you think he would change it? No. He would have it no other colour, and he forced it through the drawing-room door, tearing the limbo and smashing up pots of ferns, and planting it in the middle of the room, left it there whether I liked it or not. I dispensed tea from it to my visitors and let them gauge my taste by it if they liked. What did it matter?

When all his possessions had been picked over and polished and he could for the moment find nothing sufficiently futile to do, he would get a pack of cards and play patience, or amuse himself with a chess-board. He never touched a book or a pen, or took the slightest interest in the profession into which he had been pitch-forked over the heads of better *warn*, by a Government whose kindly idea at that time was to do well by the men who had first come into the country. He appeared to have no use whatever for his head: but his long, womanish, restless hands were everlastingly occupied.

His favourite seat was a packing case under a big thorn tree—not too far from his bedroom door; and there day after day he murdered time.

If he had possessed the easy-going, warm-hearted, beauty-loving Bohemian temperament that usually accompanies a lazy nature, much could have been forgiven him. A gipsy's heart and a poet's dreams would have gone very far towards compensating to me, at least, for idleness and incompetence. But Maurice had no more poetry in him than a packing-case. And if his soul had ever given birth to dreams he had long since drowned them in whiskey. So far from being easy-going he was extremely cantankerous to every one under him. The servants detested him, and his men only tolerated him because he left them to their own devices. As for loving beauty; he never raised his eyes to the hills except to curse them for cutting him off from civilisation. He infinitely preferred to see his own cigarette smoke than to watch the pansy-coloured shadows flocking across the plains at eventide. A sunset left him cold; he never saw a dawn.

If any one thinks I sat down meekly to this life, and to this man they gravely err. I am not of the meek of the earth. Irish-Americans rarely are. Moreover, a meek woman in the household of Maurice Stair would have been extremely out of place. He would have calmly proceeded to wipe his boots on her.

I was consumed with shame for this man. I looked upon him as a cheat; and I knew the humiliation and shame of a woman whose husband was defrauding his employers. I had been long enough in the country to know how hard the *real* men, who had ideals, worked for the country and for themselves. I knew that there were a hundred things Maurice could have done to improve his men, the camp, and the general state of affairs. But he preferred to let Sergeant Locke earn his salary for him, while he sat under a thorn tree and polished a strap; and I, his wife, shared the salary!

At first, having learnt something of his arrogant, stubborn nature, I tried to beguile him from his ways with soft and even flattering words. I painted to him, with a daring impressionist hand, the future that ought to be his, clothing it in mists of scarlet and gold.

"Grind away at your profession," I invoked him, "and show them you're too good for this little hole. Have your men in such a state of efficiency that the fame of them will reach Buluwayo. Improve the camp. Get after the kaffirs and make them work at this place so hard that the next time the C.O. is here he will cast an envious eye on it for one of his pets, and you'll be moved on somewhere else. Having shown your stamina they won't dare to push you in the background again. They'll *have* to give you something better."

I descended deep into flattery, and though to my own ears it sounded uncommonly like irony, he took it well. But afterwards he smiled at me, the patient smile of the great.

"What's the good, my dear girl? You don't know this country. You can work the flesh off your bones and nobody will thank you for it. You will never get ahead of the Company's pets."

The old cry of the idle and incompetent, whether in art, trade, or the professions—the uselessness of striving against injustice and favouritism!

"I consider that they have distinctly petted you, Maurice. Show them that they did well, and you'll get more petting."

"I suppose you would like me to be like Popper in Salisbury—always after the men to see if they've got their putties on straight, and whether they're taking Epsom salts and saying their prayers regularly."

"Oh, Maurice, you know very well that is not what I mean."

"I don't think you know what you mean. You are talking through your hat, my dear girl, of things you know absolutely nothing about."

"Perhaps so," I admitted with a humility that was far from being natural to me. "But I am only making suggestions. I can't bear to see you wasting your life. There are such a lot of things you could do in this country, and make a big future out of. If you could get inside the inscrutable native mind, for instance, you who know so much about the natives already. Why not become an authority on them, a master of the native tongue as no other man in this country is? Dear Maurice, I want to see you start carving that career you told me about."

(I never let him off that!) But he was entirely undisturbed.

"You talk like a book, my dear girl," he affably responded. "But I'd rather carve a stick. Less trouble. Go and get into the native mind yourself if you think it such a mighty interesting place. And further, I wish you'd remember that I warned you on our wedding day that I would not have you interfering with my affairs. I knew well enough you'd start this blither about ambition. I must ask you once and for all to mind your own business."

"It *is* my business," I said. "How dared you ask me to take a name you did not mean to do something with?"

This was no gentle answer to turn away wrath, as I very well knew. But there were moments, and this was one of them, when my spirit rebelled against the embargo of submission I had laid upon it. I saw at last that guileful persuasion was useless. I might as well have tried to beguile a *wildebeeste* from the veldt, or a crocodile from the *green* slime of the Pungwe River, as this man from the paths of sloth. But there was still the goad left.

"Oh, Alexander the Great! Do you remember what he said to the soldier he found sleeping at his post? 'Either honour your name, sir, or change it!'"

"Oh! Bah! What do women know of honour. Let me alone, for God's sake."

But I would not let him alone. Even when his retorts were coarse and insulting, I persisted. It burned me like an acid to bear the name of this neglecter of his duties: this skulker behind a bush while other men did his work. I made clear to him that any woman with a backbone detests the type of man who potters about the house driving in nails instead

of getting out after the big things of life. I gave him no rest under his thorn tree.

I jeered at his wooden boxes, and made mock of the slovenly troopers who passed upon the road below our camp. I jibed at his beloved shrunken white flannels, and let him know I found him no object of beauty in the black bath-slippers. I scarified him, and inflicted many a scar on my own pride in the process; and apparently he remained invulnerable. But sometimes I saw a little colour creep into his sallow cheek, and knew that an arrow had gone home. Until at last one day he turned on me raging:

“Good God! a man had better have married a flaming sword than you! I might as well try to sleep with vitriol trickling over me!”

At that I rejoiced: if an emotion of mingled despair and savage triumph could be described as joy. And thereafter I gave him no quarter. More than ever I bit into him like a steel blade and flickered round him like a flame.

That was the beginning of a new era. And if sometimes the last state of these persons seemed worse than the first—I flamed and flickered on.

One thing was certain; anything was better than stagnation in a swamp; so I made the swamp as untenantable as if it were infested with asps.

However, departure from the swamp meant departure also from tranquillity. With the mists of idleness and the green slime of sloth, peace also disappeared. It is true that Sergeant Locke came no more to the house with the reports; no longer paid the men and harangued them vainly for their sins; nor rode any more to the court-house to play deputy P.P. while his superior officer lay in bed; nor performed any more of the duties of that same superior officer. That was so much to the good. But for amendment Maurice took toll of me at home, retaliating with the malice of a small-minded woman, interfering in the affairs of the house, grumbling at the food, abusing the cook, and insulting me. Nothing pleased him. Though he was much more at the camp and court than he had ever been he also seemed to have more time to be at home, to fall upon the cook and kick the house boys, with the result that no sooner had I trained one servant to do his duties unsuperintended, than he ran away, and I had to begin the thankless task over again.

My husband was a bad person to keep house for at any time. One of those men who tells every one he doesn’t care what he eats so long as it is food; and then raises the roof if he has cold mutton daintily served with a salad for lunch, after having had it for dinner the night before.

“Damn it! is this goat going to last for ever?” he would cry outraged. “It must have been a blazing horse. Did you buy the whole four quarters in the name of God?”

My mornings were taken up with trying to manufacture new dishes, and teaching Mango, the cook, to manage the sparse material at his disposal, so that the result might spell variety in the *menu*.

I discovered that turning out charming suppers in a Paris studio was a very different matter to keeping house in a land where goat and “bully” were the foundations of life; fresh fruit and fish unheard-of things; and vegetables luxuries that had to be fetched on horseback from a coolie river-garden several miles away, and pleaded and bartered for at that.

Chickens, of which it took about half-a-dozen to make a meal, had also to be fetched from kaffir kraals, and eggs had to be ridden after (and sometimes run away from afterwards).

I found, as many a weary woman has found before me, that housekeeping is the most thankless, heart-breaking, soul-racking business in the world to those who have not been trained to it from their youth upwards. But I had to stick to my job. Maurice having been driven forth from his swamp into the wilds had come back with at least two of the qualities of the king of beasts: an enormous appetite, and a tendency to roar the house down. My plain duty was to appease him, and pray for further lion-like attributes to develop.

In a small way we were obliged to entertain. Maurice’s official position demanded as much, though it was an obligation he was very willing to shirk, preferring a quiet, swamp-like evening in his hut to the trouble of dressing for dinner and being polite to people for a few hours. But my plans for his redemption did not include any evenings off, and I asked the necessary people to dine whether he liked it or not. He had many ways of revenging himself on me for this. Sometimes he would absent himself at the last moment, leaving me to make what excuse I was able to the guests for the non-appearance of the host whom they had probably seen lounging in his hut door smoking, as they came up the road. At other times after I had made elaborate excuses he would appear in his white flannel trousers and shirt sleeves, and without any apology take his seat at the head of the table where his guests sat arrayed in the immaculate evening dress that people buried in the wilds love to assume, cherishing the custom of dressing for dinner as a symbol that they are not yet of the beasts of the field, though obliged to congregate with them. What these people thought of a host in dirty flannels facing a hostess decked in a Paris gown, *décolletée et très chic* (for if I could not alter my gowns with the skill of a *couturière* they at least still bore the *cachet* of Paris) I cannot say. But Rhodesians are a gay-hearted people and would always prefer to believe that you mean to amuse rather than insult them, and so, as a flowing brook passes over a jagged rock, the incident would be passed over and covered up with ripples.

As for me, I learned in time to manage my cheeks as well as my gowns, so that they no longer burned at such *contretemps*.

My method was not to apologise in words for my husband’s behaviour, but by delicate implication to let it be understood that I considered such vagaries perfectly permissible in a genius—or a fool. They may have been in doubt

(as I meant them to be) as to which of the two I considered him. But Maurice *knew*; and his was the cheek to burn.

When he insulted his guests over cards later in the evening I pursued the same tactics. I do not profess that I at any time played the *rôle* of a gentle and propitiating houri. As I have before remarked, such a person would have been thrown away on Maurice, and very bad for him. A man with a dog whip would have been much more to the point.

The art of winning or losing with equanimity at cards was not one which his ancestors had bequeathed to him. If he lost sixpence he also lost his temper. If he won he became jaunty and facetious and tried to make others lose their tempers by jeers at their poor play. When things went very wrong with his game he thought nothing of taking advantage of being in his own house to jibe a man about his income or his debts or any private matter he might happen to have cognisance of.

Once after squabbling outrageously with a man over his losses early in the evening, and winning from him later, he at the end of the game ostentatiously tore up the man's I.O.U. saying calmly:

"That's all right old man! I know you can't afford to lose it."

The man turned a bright green, and everybody in the room commenced to talk vivaciously about the weather. But Maurice smiled the triumphant smile of the man who has scored.

It was upon such occasions that I positively detested him. When I saw a man who for the sake of decency had been calm under affliction all the evening, smiling the set smile of a gargoyle, when only the presence of women prevented him from getting up and hitting Maurice in the eye (as I certainly should have done in his place); when I saw such a man swallow some flagrant final insult with an effort that made him turn pale, I too turned pale, and tasted aloes. When in my bedroom at the end of the evening, while they were putting on their wraps, I found myself mechanically muttering inventions to women as pale as myself about my husband's touch of fever—stroke of sun—overwork—strain, anything that was not too utterly futile a reason for outrageous behaviour; the taste of life was bitter in my mouth, and I knew shame that burned to the bone.

"... THAT STATELY MADONNA BOUGUEREAU PAINTED, WITH HANDS UPRAISED AND GREAT EYES FULL OF SORROW FOR THE FATE OF WOMEN." (*See page* 388)

FROM THE PAINTING BY BOUGUEREAU IN THE LUXEMBOURG GALLERY

From a photograph by Alinari

Those were the nights when I could have torn out my tongue for making vows before God to Maurice Stair; when my soul was blotted with hatred; when I drove the knives of scorn and contempt into myself for desecrating my life, and my father's name by such an alliance.

On such nights I dared not open my lips to Maurice. I feared myself too much. Locked in my hut I would spend hours watching with dry eyes the spectacle of pride writhing in the dust. Or kneeling before the tortured body of Christ crucified, but not daring to lift my face to him, nor to the lovely face of that stately Madonna Bouguereau painted with hands upraised and great eyes full of sorrow for the fate of women; no prayer would come to my bitten lips, nor tears to my scorched eyes; but the cry of the desolate and the despairing was in my heart.

"*Oh, Mother of Consolation!... Help of the Afflicted... ora pro nobis*!"

Often when dawn, that scarlet witch, with golden fingers came tapping on the canvas windows I would still be kneeling there, stiff-limbed, my shoulders chilled to stone above my gown. And after a little while I would open my door and go out into the sweet wild morning. Strange that sometimes it almost seemed as if the pagan witch had more healing in her golden hands than the Mother of Sorrows herself; for standing there gazing at her rising from the mists of the hills like a goddess from the incense on her altars, I would feel at last the frozen tears thawing in my heart and surging to my weary-lidded eyes.

There were other hours when battles of a different kind were to be faced, not with myself but Maurice. Thrusting himself violently into my hut he would revoke all promises and trample compacts under foot, making demands of me that seemed to fill and darken the room with shame: transforming me into a pillar of ice that could utter no word but one—a word that fell like a little cold icicle into space, re-forming again upon my benumbed lips to fall and fall again. "No—no—no—no—no—no."

There was such a night that ended at dawn with an unspeakable struggle—scorching kisses on my bare shoulders, and a blow across his lips that left blood upon my clenched fist.

Ah! those were dark days! Desperate, soul-deforming nights!

There was another night when after bitter taunts had been hurled like poisoned arrows round the room, he tore the bed-clothes and pillows from my bed and the gowns and hangings from the walls and flung them in heaps and tatters into the rain-sodden yard. When the boys came in the morning to their work they picked everything up, cleaned and dried them as best they could, and with calm, inscrutable faces replaced them in my room.

After such incidents came intervals of days and weeks in which we never opened lips to each other. I moved about his house like a ghost, passing from hut to hut, arranging his meals, ordering his household, but speaking him no word, or if I did getting none in return. When we rode together, because it had become a set habit to mount our horses at a certain hour every afternoon, we never addressed each other except in the presence of other people who might chance to join us in our ride.

One day when we sat at table and I crossed myself for grace, as I had always been accustomed to do, he found a new jibe to throw at me.

"It makes me sick to see you sitting there tapping at yourself like an Irish peasant!"

Swiftly I found words to requite him for this new outrage. Until then he had at least left my faith untainted by his touch.

"Oh, Maurice!" I said. "If you were only an Irish peasant I would wash your feet and dry them with my hair."

I spoke very softly, but my words brought two little streaks of red into his cheeks, as though I had flicked them there with a whip. God forgive me, I had developed a cruel tongue; I was no Angel in the house: only a sorely driven woman. And it was true that I would have poured out gifts at his feet if he had only been an Irish peasant with any of the nobility of some of the natures that come to birth in that sad land of beauty. If only he had possessed some of the lovely Irish traits that draw love as the sun draws the dew—generosity, a few ideals, a sweet thing or two about his heart, a little room in it for dreams and beauty!

If even his sins had been *big* sins I should have felt some hope. Had everything he did been of the same calibre as his coming to table in his dirty flannels, offensive and discourteous as that action was, I could have forgiven much. There is hope for the boldly offensive man who does not care a button whose feelings he hurts, or who sees his sins. Such men usually have the force of character to do big, bold, fine things also to offset their offences, and such men never fail to bring women to their banner; for women, above all things, love in a man the quality of *bigness*.

But a man who lies and is a coward! who drinks whiskey in his room, and afterwards eats cloves! who pats animals in public, and viciously kicks them in private! whose wretched puling sins are afraid to stand on their own legs and assert themselves as sins—hiding behind doors, skulking in the darkness!

Oh! there were days when, as we rode together over the short golden grass, I wished my horse would throw me and break my neck—and did not pray at night for forgiveness for that sinful wish. In the terrible season of drought that had fallen, the source of prayer was beginning to dry up and fail.

In a letter from Judy, which came from Australia this passage occurred:

"I hear that the *petit sobriquet* Rhodesians have for you since you went to Mgatweli is 'Ghostie' Stair. They tell me you are as gay and witty as ever, and seem to be extremely happy in your marriage, but have become as white and spectral as a ghost. Doesn't the place agree with you? Dickie is flourishing, and I have got a splendid German governess for him. John is a perfect Pet."

Chapter Twenty.

What a Vulture Told.

> "As I came thro' the Desert thus it was—
> As I came thro' the Desert."

For a reason that had to do with my intense love for animals I had steadfastly refused to have any pets, though I had been offered an adorable Irish terrier puppy, a tame *meerkat* and a baby monkey.

But one day, Major Ringe, the magistrate, a big, fair man of forty with innocent eyes, lank limbs, and a reputation in the Gunners for valour second to none, brought me a pretty little white kitten that I could not resist.

It had china-blue eyes and other traces of Persian ancestry, but its chief charm was its lovely fluffy playfulness, and soft snowballiness. It seemed to me I had never had anything so sweet and wonderful in my life since the day Anthony Kinsella left me. It was like a little blue and white cloud dropped from the skies: it brought back dreams.

We called it Snowie, and from the first Maurice seemed as fond of it as I, and insisted that Major Ringe had meant it for him also. I was only too willing to share it with him if he really cared, but I was always a little nervous for fear that in some sudden gust of rage he might give the little trustful thing a bang. But at other times, when I saw him fondling it with real tenderness in his eyes, I reproached myself, and a piercing thought darted into my mind.

What if I am ginning against him? What if in my selfishness and pride I am wickedly unjust to him? Perhaps if he had a child to love—he would be different!

Yet when I thought of a child of mine—with Maurice's eyes and Maurice's ways—I turned sick and faint, and I flung the thought out. But it came back and back, roosting in my mind, pecking at my heart like a little black vulture.

I let him have the kitten to himself when he wanted it, and he would take it away to his room. We got into the way of keeping it in turn to spend the night with us. But it always preferred me. It would escape from him whenever it could and come scampering back across the yard to me; and he following it in a rage, would grab it up roughly, accusing me of feeding it in the night to make it like me best!

The nights I had Snowie I slept well, dreaming I had a child with Anthony Kinsella's blue eyes, nestling at my heart. I often woke crooning to it as my old Irish nurse used to croon to me:

"*Hush-a, Hush-a, Hush-a, m'babee*."

But on the nights that I had no kitten to nestle against my throat, the little black vulture kept me company, staying with me unweariedly, plucking at my heart, asking little terrible questions to which I had no answer.

"*Do you think Maurice Stair also croons over dream children?—does he give them the eyes of his love?—have they little hands that fondle him*?"

"*You have tried beguiling, and flattering, and scorn, and hate—is there nothing else left to try*?"

"*Is a man's soul nothing?—what of the little smouldering spark down below, under the mud and weights—is it still there?—or have you put it out*?"

"*Who are you to keep yourself so aloof and proud?—do you think women have not sacrificed themselves before to-day—better, nobler women than you*?"

"Yes—but for love—for love—for love!" I cried, and wept till dawn.

One night it was raining terribly when Maurice got up to leave the drawing-room and go across to his hut. Lightning was streaking between the trees, and great crashes of thunder seemed to fall bodily from the skies and explode like tons of dynamite amongst the kopjes, echoing and detonating through the land.

It was Maurice's night for the kitten, but she didn't want to go. She tried hard to get away to me, but he tucked her into the pocket of his mackintosh, and only the top of her little fluffy face was to be seen gazing at me with appealing blue eyes.

"Let her stay for a little while, Maurice," I said, "just till the storm goes off a little. I'll bring her over to your door later. She's afraid of the storm."

"Nonsense: the storm won't hurt her. Get back into my pocket, you little devil."

But the little devil only mewed the louder, and tried the harder to escape, gazing at me imploringly. I turned away with my eyes full of tears. She was so like a child asking to be left with its mother. I knew, too, that I had a wretched night before me with a black companion. I should have been glad of the little furry thing snuggling against me. But it was Maurice's turn.

"Good-night!" I said abruptly. "I shall stay here till the storm goes down. I'm afraid of the lightning in the trees."

He said good-night, and went out into the storm, his mackintosh buttoned round him, lantern in hand. I stood watching in the door, and heard him stumbling against tree trunks and swearing, until he found his hut. Then the door banged, and light gleamed through his canvas windows.

Presently when the lightning was not quite so vivid, I wrapped myself up, and locking the drawing-room door beat my way across the compound to my own hut. Though the journey was only a matter of a few seconds I was wet to the skin when I arrived, and hastily throwing off my clothes slipped into bed. As I put out my light I thought I heard Snowie mewing again. I was very tired, and, contrary to my expectation, fell asleep very quickly. Perhaps the vulture was tired out too.

I dreamed I saw Snowie backing away from the fangs of a wolf and crying piteously. I rushed to save her, but the wolf already had her, and was mauling the life out of her. Her screams were terrible—almost human! They woke me up. With a wet forehead I sat up in bed, listening. But I could hear nothing; only bursts of thunder, the whip of the rain on the trees, and the swish and ripple of little streams tearing down the sides of the hill. The storm had increased.

After awhile I lay down again, but I could sleep no more. The cries had been so real they haunted me. I considered the matter of going over to Maurice to see if all was well with the kitten. I had never entered his hut, only looked in the door daily, to see that it was kept clean by his boy. What excuse had I to knock at his door in the middle of the night? He would probably, and with every reason, be very indignant at being waked up. Nevertheless, I presently found myself on the floor groping for my slippers and feeling for my cloak.

When I opened the door a wild blast tore in, lifting my cloak to the roof, and in a moment the front of my night-gown was like a wet rag, and my body streaming with wet. It was no use attempting to take a light. I stumbled among the trees, in the thick darkness; blinding lightning flickered across my eyeballs like liquid fire, but it showed the way, and at last I reached the door I knew to be Maurice’s and battered on it. Silence!

“Maurice! Maurice!”

Silence again. Nothing but the flacking rain and pealing thunder. Within, all was darkness and silence; evidently Maurice was fast asleep, and Snowie too. My worry had been about nothing. How foolish to be so disturbed by a dream, I thought, as I beat my way back, and once more sought my bed. Still, I was glad I had gone and set my mind at rest.

By one of those extraordinary lapses of memory that sometimes occur, I woke in the morning with no recollection of the night’s adventure. I had slept it all away. The only thought in my mind as I jumped out of bed was that if I did not make double-quick time Maurice would be at the breakfast table before me, a thing I never allowed to happen since he had taken to rising for breakfast. I flew through my dressing, and was still five minutes to the good when I ran across the yard in the morning air of a world washed, and fresh, and glittering like crystal.

To my astonishment Maurice was not only at the table, but had finished his breakfast.

“But why so early?” I cried in surprise.

“I had a message from Ringe to say that he wants me at the court early.”

As he finished speaking Mango entered to say that Sergeant Locke was outside, wanting to speak to the master. Maurice rose hastily, putting his serviette to his lips, and as he did so I saw upon the back of his right hand three long deep scratches. In an instant he had whipped his hand into his pocket. He gave me a searching glance which I noticed but vaguely, for at that moment the whole of my last night’s dream and adventure in the rain had come flashing back, brought to memory by the sight of those deep new scratches on the back of his hand. While I sat thinking I heard Sergeant Locke’s voice saying:

“Major Ringe went off at four this morning, sir, with Mr Malcolm—they got news last night of a lion out at Intanga. As they rode by the camp the Major called me up to ask you to see about Masefield’s boy at the court this morning. It is the only case there is.”

“All right, Locke.”

Then how could Maurice have received a message from Ringe? Why had he got up so early and finished his breakfast before—What was that scratch?

As these questions flashed one after the other through my mind, I sprang up and ran to the door. He was just flicking the reins on his horse’s neck for it to start. He hardly ever wore gloves, but he had a pair on this morning, and the scratch was hidden.

“Maurice,” I cried out, “where is Snowie?”

He turned on his horse without stopping it and regarded me with surprised eyes.

“Snowie?”

“Yes—my kitten?”

“Why, haven’t you seen her around the place this morning? She was in the dining-room a few minutes ago.”

“Oh!” I cried, and my heart nearly burst with relief. I waved to him, gladness in my smile, and ran back into the dining-room calling the kitten. “Snowie—Snowie—Snow—ie.”

Later I went into the yard, and all round the huts, still calling. But she did not come running with her little tail erect and her little pink mouth open. There was no sign of her. I turned to the boys, but their faces were blank walls. No one had seen her that morning. I questioned Mango. He had not noticed her, he said. Doubtless if the *Inkos* said so, she must have been in the dining-room, but he had not happened to notice her.

The other boys seemed to be observing me closely, but when I returned their searching gaze they dropped their mysterious dark eyes to the ground, after the manner of kaffirs. None of them had seen Snowie since the evening before, when I had crossed to the drawing-room with her on my shoulder, after dinner.

Maurice came home very gay and hungry to lunch. He had easily disposed of the one case, he said; but he and Clarke, the magistrate's clerk, had had a great morning hunting a wild-cat that had taken refuge under the courthouse, and refused to budge. It was imperative to get her as she had been after Clarke's canaries.

"At last we smoked her out," he related, "and she came for me like a red-hot devil. If I hadn't put up my hand she'd have had my eyes out. Look what she did to me."

He held out for my inspection the hand with the long deep scratch I had seen at the breakfast table! I stared at it speechless. He withdrew it and proceeded with his lunch. Presently he related to me several bits of news he had heard in town that morning. He was, for him, extraordinarily talkative.

"And who do you think have just arrived here?—the Valettas. They've taken that big thatched place that Nathan, of the Royal Hotel, has just put up. Mrs Valetta is very sick—fever and complications—never been right since Fort George, Valetta says. He's brought her here from their mine, to get some good nursing before he can take her home."

I was silent as the dead.

"Valetta has struck it rich somewhere to the north of Buluwayo, and is going home to float a company as soon as his wife is well."

"Maurice, Snowie cannot be found. We have searched everywhere for her."

He put down his coffee cup.

"But that is strange! I tell you she was in the room here when you came in this morning. I had just given her a piece of bacon."

I looked away from him. It was not good to watch his eyes when he was lying. It seemed to me that I saw something in them black and naked jibbering at me like a satyr.

"What made her cry out last night—in your hut?—"

"Last night?—in my hut? She didn't stay with me, you know. The little brute was so ill-tempered and vixenish, and so determined not to stay, that I opened the door and threw her out about half an hour after I left you."

"Into the storm?"

"Oh, the storm! Pooh! cats know how to look after themselves. *She* evidently did, for she was as lively as a cricket in here this morning. What are you worrying about, my dear girl? She'll come sidling in when it pleases her. She's gone off on a hunting trip like Ringe. All the cats in this country are more than half wild."

I got up and left the table, my heart like a stone: not only for my little snowbally cat with her winning ways, but for myself. At that moment I terribly hated life.

"I'm going to ride out and see if Ringe got that lion," he called after me. "Will you come?"

"No!"

I had planned to go ferning that afternoon to a creek near by. The ground of my grotto was all prepared for the new plants, but I could not bring myself to start. I kept wandering up the kopje side, and among the zinias. At last, as I came to the huts again, I heard the boys wrangling outside the kitchen.

Mango was a Zanzibar boy and always at variance with the Mashonas. Maurice's servant, Sixpence, a shrewd-looking fellow of about seventeen, was squatting on his haunches opposite the door, fiercely and monotonously demanding soap; some clothes lay beside him on the ground. He must go to the river and wash, he announced. But Mango replied that all the washing was done the day before yesterday, and declined to hand out soap. Coffee was backing up Sixpence, and telling him that as the master's boy he had a right to ask for what he wanted, and get it. Makupi, who in spite of curses and blows was quite one of the domestic staff, though he never did any work, was turning over the soiled linen with his foot when I came up.

"But it is not washing day, Sixpence," I objected. He arose quickly and gathered up the things he proposed to wash, muttering imprecations on Makupi for spreading them out. He rolled them hastily, but a little too late, into a ball. I had seen what he wanted to wash—a suit of pale blue pyjamas with fresh stains of blood all over them.

"The master told me I must go and wash to-day," he repeated sullenly.

"Give him soap, Mango," I said dully and walked away. It was no use looking for Snowie any longer!

For three days I did not speak to Maurice. I saw to his house and food, but I would not sit at meals with him, and I would not speak to him. He bore all with a cheerful air. I often heard him whistling. On the third day he wrote a note and sent it to my hut by Sixpence:

Would I be so extremely kind and condescending as to grace his table that evening? A rather important man from Salisbury was in, and coming to dinner. Of course I was full of imaginary grievances against him (the writer) but perhaps for the sake of appearances I would be so exceedingly gracious as to forget them for an hour or two. He had not the slightest objection to my going back to my sulks afterwards.—Mine effusively, Maurice Stair.

I arranged a good *menu* with Mango, decorated the table, and was ready to receive his guest. Dinner passed as smoothly and pleasantly as a deep river may glide over dark unthinkable things.

Just as the boys were putting the dessert upon the table I felt something against my skirt. I pushed back my chair and looked down. Snowie had come home.

With a cry I caught her up and put her on the table before me. The next cry came from the guest.

“My God!—the fiend who did that ought to be—hanged!”

There was a silence that the kitten tried to break. She essayed to mew, almost as if she had something to tell; but no sound came from the broken jaws gummed together with matter and dried blood. One blue eye gazed dully round, the other was battered into her head like a crushed turquoise. Every paw but one was broken; they trailed behind her, and her body waggled strangely from an injured spine. I was afraid to take the little mangled body to my breast for fear of what fresh pain I might cause it. I thought I heard it moaning like a woman: yet its mouth did not move.

“Hanging would be too good for the brute—brandy, Stair—your wife is fainting.”

“No—no; milk—bring warm milk for my baby—it has Anthony’s eyes—my poor little white baby—all broken—”

The moaning that did not come from Snowie filled the room.

“No use giving the poor little beggar milk, Mrs Stair—it is dying—better to put it out of its misery at once—drink this brandy, will you—got any poison in the house, Stair?”

“Yes.”

The man took the kitten from me and went from the room, and I followed; but as I passed Maurice Stair I whispered three words at him, with terrible eyes:

“*Take it then*!”

I had suffered too much.

As I entered my hut the silver travelling-clock that had come with me to Africa struck three clear notes from my dressing-table.

Of all the strange hours of my life it had knelled none more desperate than this! I came in with the dew of the night on my face, dust and dead leaves hanging to my white satin gown, some little stains of blood upon the bodice, an ashen-blue flower in my hand. My nails were full of earth. I had dug a grave with my hands for Snowie, and buried her among the zinias.

The hut seemed strange to me. I found myself looking round it as if I had never seen it before—or should never see it again. On the little altar the *veilleuse* flickered upwards to the silver crucifix; and from above, the Mother of Consolation regarded me with grave, sad eyes that made me afraid of my purpose. I turned away and opened a dispatch-box on my dressing-table, and took from it the revolver I had brought to Rhodesia.

One little bullet lay snug, waiting to be sent on its message.

I stared at it, pondering on the power of such a tiny thing to force open the great sealed gates of Death! So small and insignificant, yet with surer, swifter power than anything that lived or breathed to send one swiftly beyond the stars, beyond the dawn, beyond the eternal hills! I should know at last what fate was Anthony Kinsella’s—but I dared not look behind me to where the *veilleuse* gleamed on the drooping head of Christ who died for sinners.

A shadow fell across my hands as they mused upon the polished barrels, and in a moment the room seemed darker; the air grew bitter to breathe when I knew that Maurice Stair was sharing it with me. I looked in the mirror and saw his face.

“What do you want—murderer?”

“I want to die, Deirdre—I am not fit to live—kill me.”

“There is rat poison in the house,” I said, and saw my lips curving in the bitter gleaming smile of a Medusa as he blenched and shook under my words.

“My God!—you are cruel—crueller than death. It costs more to stand here and face you than to go and die like a rat in a hole. You are right, it *is* the only death I am fit for—but speak to me first, Deirdre—give me one kind word—just

one word.”

“*Words*!—what do they do for you? A hundredth part of the words I have flung at you in my misery would have put manhood into a baboon, and driven a *real* man mad with shame—but *you*!”

“I know—I am a coward, a skunk, a liar, a drunkard. I will die to-night if it will please you.”

“*Nothing you can do will please me*.”

“My God.—let me tell you how it happened,—she scratched my hand trying to get away to you, and I went mad for a few moments—for a few moments I saw red—before God I did not know what I was doing—afterwards I saw her lying on the ground all battered to bits, and found the bloody boot-jack in my hand—”

“*Ah*!”

“Oh, God! don’t look at me like that—I never meant it, Deirdre—I swear I never meant it—I put her outside—she must have crept away into the bush to die.”

“She lay there three days suffering the hells of hunger and thirst and wounds—too broken to crawl home—while you whistled, and lied! Maurice Stair you are an unspeakable brute. Be very sure you will answer to God for this.”

I threw down my revolver, and turned on him the implacable Medusa face of the stone image in the mirror.

“If you are going to die to-night, then I will not. Your presence would poison the very valley of death for me.”

“You meant to die—*you*? Deirdre, have I brought you to such a pass? Forgive me—forgive me.” He grovelled on the floor clutching at my skirt, kissing my feet, but I thrust him away.

“Forgive me—I did not mean to do it—some madness entered into me—I loved the little thing, Deirdre—I loved it—I used to lie in the dark with it against my face, and think it was a little child—*your child*.”

Black vultures flew into the room then; the air was darkened with their wings. They filled the hut rustling and beating. They flapped about me, with cruel beaks plucking at my heart. Through the trailing of their dusky wings I saw the tortured face of the man on the floor. And across the room the great eyes of Mary accused not him, but me.

“Get up, Maurice,” I said to him at last. Now that I knew that the sweet rest and peace of death were not for me a great weariness crept over my spirit. “Get up! Do not kneel to me. You make me ashamed.”

“Give me another chance, Deirdre. May God curse and afflict me root and branch, if I do not change from what I am. Give me one more chance.”

I held out my hand to him, while the floor swayed under my feet.

“This is a deep, terrible pit—we are in—Maurice.” I stammered, hardly having strength to speak. “We must try and help each other—to climb out of it—together.”

Looking past him out through the open door, into the grey weeping morning I saw a vista of long weary years.

Chapter Twenty One.

What the Knuckle-Bone of a Sheep Did.

> “The senses no less than the soul have their spiritual mysteries to reveal.”

We were sitting under a mimosa tree outside the drawing-room hut, elbows on the tea-table, enjoying the sunset lights and the extraordinary content that nothing so well bestows as a day’s work well done.

It was almost the end of a February day, and everywhere around us bloomed and flaunted the radiant tints of summer at the full. In a tree close by a little green-breasted bird was singing a passionate song. The sea of zinias still swayed its multi-coloured waves below us, but boundaries had been set, and full-tide now only reached to the foot of the kopje. Above high-water mark Mgatweli Police Camp and the home of its commanding officer, picturesque still, but no longer disreputable, rose like a Phoenix from its ashes.

Stubbly bush had been uprooted from charming slopes to make place for luxuriant beds of tomatoes and Cape gooseberries; and terraces of flowers already gave evidence of beauty and fragrance to come. Gnarled growths had disappeared, and big trees had a clear space to branch abroad in freedom and grace. A fine tennis-court, the delight of every player in the town, stretched its gleaming level space near a newly begun small banana grove.

Each of our huts except the kitchen had now a picturesque rustic porch added to it, round which were set plants of young grenadilla—the best shady creeper in Africa, and one that bears a lovely purple passion flower, and most delicious fruit.

The men’s camp was also enormously improved. A little agitation in the right quarter had resulted in a grant of

Government boys to build and thatch a big mess and club-house. The parade ground had been enlarged, and the beginning of an out-door gym was visible. The men had something better to do now than loafing to town in off hours, or getting drunk in their huts out of sheer boredom with life. There were shooting-butts up, and regular hours for practice in view of putting forward a Bisley team. There was also a Sports programme in active rehearsal for a projected gymkhana meeting in the near future. Under a smart officer full of initiative and invention the best bred wasters in the world are bound to "buck up and look slippy" and that is what the Mgatweli troopers were very busily occupied in doing.

In six months Maurice had done wonders; and the wonders had not ceased with improvements at home and in the camp. You had only to look at him sitting there, neat and debonair in his grey uniform, to recognise that fact. He had the clear eye, healthy skin, and quiet, firm air of a man with a purpose. Force of character may be cumulative, and six months may not be a very long time in which to accumulate it. But a will to do well, and a lovely climate to do it in, is much; and I should say the matter depended not so much on time as on the number and size of the difficulties met and overcome. Six months may not be a long time but it is too long to fight daily battles with your vices without getting results; and an accumulation of results sat upon the serene brow of Maurice Stair, and revealed themselves in the firmness of his mouth.

No more sealed wooden cases were surreptitiously carried to his hut. He drank his whiskey-and-soda from his own sideboard like a sane and decent gentleman. No more shirking and shelving of duties: but rather a seeking of fresh ones. No more sloth and skulking and petty sins. The old vices and weaknesses were under foot at last. He had his heel on the heads of them.

I know not what upheld him in the fight; what secret dew refreshed his jaded spirit in the terrible struggles he must have undergone. Often I saw him stumble and falter, and sometimes (but not often) fall "mauled to the earth." And I cannot tell where he found the strength to "arise and go on again;" but he did. There is little one human being can do for another in these crises of the soul, these fierce battles with old sins that have their roots in deep. They must be fought out alone. External aid is of small use. But what I could I did. And perhaps it helped a little to let him see that I too was fighting and suffering and striving to climb by his side with my hand in his. But whatever the means the result was there plain for all who ran to read; and I am bound to admit that it was so far beyond my dreams and expectations that I sometimes found it hard to recognise in this new Maurice, whose feet were so firmly planted on the upward slopes, the old Maurice, my dark-souled companion in a deep and dread ravine.

Sitting there in the sunset glow he gave me fresh proof of his changed outlook on life. He offered of his own free will to renounce the five hundred a year Sir Alexander Stair paid him to live in Africa. A few days before he had unflinchingly and without preliminaries told me the meaning of the income he enjoyed from his uncle.

"He pays me to keep out of his sight. He has always despised me for a rotter. The reason he put a clincher on my going into the army was because he thought I'd disgrace the family name there. It makes him sick to think I'll get the title after him. Rather than see me, and be reminded of the fact, he pays me nearly half of his income to stay out here."

I said nothing at the time beyond exclaiming at the arrogant self-righteousness that made it possible for a man to condemn his only relative so harshly. But I knew very well that the new Maurice felt the ignominy attached to such an arrangement, and that his confession to me heralded some change. Now he volunteered to give up the money, and asked me if I would leave Africa with him for Australia, where an old friend of his father's had a large ranch near Melbourne and had offered him a sort of under-managership on it. Having been out there for several years before coming to Africa, Maurice thoroughly understood the life and its conditions.

"As soon as I get back to the ropes, after a year or so Broughton will offer me the whole thing to manage. And I know well enough I'm able for it if you will only go with me and back me up."

"Of course I will go, Maurice," I said quietly, and we fell to making plans; but I looked no longer at the sunlit hills, and in the thorn tree the note of the little green-breasted robin had changed. It seemed now to be sobbing its life away in song.

"You see we couldn't go on here at twenty pounds a month, Deirdre. It is impossible. Living in this country is too high. These billets aren't meant for men without private incomes. Later, when the railways get up here, it will be different. But before then we are going to have another row with the niggers here, or my name is not Jack Robinson. Then life will be dearer than ever. There's trouble brewing again with these Matabele fellows. Ever since the rinderpest broke out they've been queer. They are desperate with vexation at losing their cattle, and their *Umlimo*, a sort of god or high priest who lives in a cave and prophesies to them from the depths of it—having carefully collected his information first, by means of spies—tells them it is the white man who is causing their cattle to die. The funny thing is that this fellow is really the god of the Mashonas, yet the Matabele put absolute faith in him. Old Loben used to send and consult him about everything—"

I was not listening very intently to Maurice. I was wondering whether it was the bird's song that had suddenly filled me with despair. Why was I not glad to be escaping at last from the claw of the witch? Was it these thatched huts that held me—because we had made them so charming and homelike without and within? I knew it could not be. Places appealed to me, and people; houses and things never. Goods and chattels had no hands to hold me as they do some people. Of late I had come to think that life under a tree without any accessories at all could be very full and sweet—if one only shared the shade of the branches with the one right person in sill the world. Moreover, the legend carved above a door in dead Fatehpur had always struck me as a peculiarly appropriate motto for people whose lives were cast in Africa.

"*Said Jesus, to whom be peace, the world is a bridge, pass over it, but build no house there*."

As we talked, Makupi in his brick-red blanket passed down the sloping pathway towards the zinia-sea, and when he came to its beach squatted himself down, took his piano from his hair, and began his sombre beating.

Tom—brr—torn—brr—torn—brr—tom-tom-tom-brr.

It seemed to me that I heard the throbbing of a human heart laid upon the stone altar of some monstrous god. My eyes wandered to the hills again. Then suddenly I knew that it was the thought of leaving *them* that filled me with such haunting despair—the far-off Matoppos that held for me some hidden mystery, some magic that drew my eyes at dawn, and at setting of sun. On moonlit nights I would often rise from my bed to gaze at them and wonder.

Tom—brr—torn—brr—torn—brr.

"Call him over here, Deirdre," said Maurice suddenly. "Let's give him back his *e'tambo*."

Putting his hand into an inner pocket he drew out a small black object and handed it to me. It was a little bone taken from the joint of a sheep (the boys call them *dolour-ossi*, and often play with them). But this one was black, either with age or by some artificial process, and polished until it gleamed like a jewel. On it was traced in spidery lines the profile of some weird quadruped of the same description as the Hottentot drawings on the rocks; otherwise there was not the slightest thing about it to suggest mystery or romance. Yet Makupi was eating his heart out and growing hollow-eyed for lack of it. He wanted to go back to his kraal in Mashonaland, he told me, but would never leave until he got his *e'tambo* back from the *Inkos*. He had even offered me some mysterious bribe if I would steal it for him. Something about a mysterious gold mine, no doubt, I thought, and laughed. But I always wished Maurice would give it to the poor fellow. Lately we had become so accustomed to seeing him about that I think we had almost forgotten what he was there for.

But *he* had not forgotten. When I called to him to come, that the *Inkos* had something for him, his thoughts flew at once to his charm, and he leaped to his feet and came running. He guessed what it was Maurice had hidden in his hand.

"But what about that wonderful secret you were going to tell me, Makupi?" I laughed. He rolled his eager sad eyes at me.

"Give me my *e'tambo* first. You will be glad."

"Give it to him, Maurice. Let us be glad," said I, still laughing, and suddenly feeling, in spite of my sad thoughts of the last hour, extraordinarily light-hearted and happy.

One swift glance at the small black bone, and then Makupi's lithe hand closed over it. He made a movement with both hands over his body and hair, and then his palms hung empty by his sides, and we never saw the charm again.

He looked at Maurice first, then his eyes came to me and rested there while he spoke a brief sentence in the pigeon-Makalika which he knew I understood.

"*In the cave of the Umlimo in the Maloppos, there is a white man hidden. He wears blue charms in his ears*."

For one moment he watched the paralysing effect of his statement, gazing at me in astonishment as though he saw a spectre, and afterwards at Maurice who had risen from his seat and was holding to the tree as if for support. Then his eager voice continued. He poured out the strange story now in his own tongue, of which I only understood a word here and there. But I understood enough to make the blood fly rustling through my veins, leaping from my heart to my ears and cheeks. When he had spoken a few sentences he made a gesture towards me and waited for Maurice to translate. I kept my eyes averted from my husband's.

"He says—that in the cave of the *Umlimo* a white man has been hidden and kept prisoner ever since the Matabele war—he is a man whom a party of Matabele warriors came upon just at the close of the campaign—alone in the bush, not far from the Shangani. He was wounded in the head, and had gone raving mad—was singing and laughing when they came upon hint—that is why they did not kill him. They are afraid to kill the mad—the mad are sacred. They took him prisoner and carried him to the camp where Lobengula lay dying."

Makupi took up the tale once more.

"He says—that the King forbade them to kill the man, but to take him by out-of-the-way routes to the cave of the *Umlimo* who would get wisdom from his madness, and be able to advise the Matabele how to defeat the white men later, if they were beaten in the war. A wife of Lobengula who had skill in sickness took charge of him and after the death of the King he was taken by devious ways to the Matoppos, where he has been ever since."

Maurice paused a minute moment. He seemed to be suffering. His lips twisted as with some agonised effort to produce words from a lacerated throat. Later, he took up Makupi's tale. Unconsciously he adopted the boy's chanting tone, and used the native phraseology.

"He says—the wound in the head took long to heal—only in the last few months has wisdom fully returned to the man —and since then the *Umlimo* keeps him in bonds for fear he should escape and tell of the things he has seen and heard in the cave where the Deity sits brooding over the fate of Matabeleland and Mashonaland. They are afraid to kill him, not only because Lobengula put the command on them not to, but because he is a great white man with strong eyes that make them afraid to strike—he sits all day with his hands bound—but when the stars come out and on nights that the moon shines he commands to be taken out, and he walks for many hours among the hills."

Another swift flow of words from Makupi.

“He says—that two men of the old Imbezu Regiment are with him always—armed with assegai—but there are never any horses near, and they never unbind his hands. He eats well, with the air of a man who is content—but his eyes are looking always beyond the hills and though he pretends to be content they see that his desire lies in Mashonaland.”

When Makupi’s tale was finished the sun was gone, and nothing was left of the sunset but a little red light and one last streak of gold that lingered between two hills. He folded his hands upon his breast and stood still with his eyes drooped to the ground.

“Poor Kinsella!” said Maurice abstractedly, almost like a man speaking in his sleep. “What a dog’s life—for nearly two years!”

Like a little codicil to a last will and testament Makupi added a few more words.

“This is a very secret matter, and forbidden by the *Umlimo* to be spoken of to any, under pain of—” he made a dramatic gesture of stabbing. “It would have been better for me to have told any of the secrets of the Matabele and the Makalikas than this. But because the *Inkosizaan* is like the departed glory of the Matabeleland, and her hands are kind and healing to all she touches, I have told.”

“You have done well,” said Maurice firmly. He had wakened from his dreaminess now; “and we’ll take care you don’t suffer for it. But look here, Makupi, will you go with me to the Matoppoe and show me the way to the cave of the *Umlimo*?”

Makupi looked at me for a moment.

“If the *Inkosizaan* wishes, I will go and show the way,” he said. “But it will not be easy to overcome those men of the Imbezu with their assegais and stabbing knives; some of the *Umlimo’s* people have guns too, which they did not give up after the war. We will have to wait in secret places of the hills with horses always ready to start, and coming upon them by surprise spring on the guard and kill them, then quickly unbind the white man and ride away. But it is hard to say how long we shall have to wait hiding in the hills.”

“That’s nothing. Be ready to start the dawn after to-morrow’s dawn, Makupi. Do not fail me—or the *Inkosizaan*.”

“No, *Inkos*.”

He went away with a spring to his walk. I turned to Maurice and spoke as steadily as I could.

“Do you not think you should tell the Company and have an expedition sent?”

“No!” he said abruptly. “I shall take Makapi and go alone. They would get wind of an expedition—you can’t keep anything dark from kaffirs for long—and then they would kill Kinsella as sure as a gun. After holding him so long they know well enough that some one will have to pay when he is released, and they’ll think nothing of killing him off and denying that there was ever any one there at all. We can’t risk that. I must go alone and very quickly. There will be nothing unusual in a police inspector setting off alone, and they will suspect nothing. We won’t give them time to suspect.”

“I think you should tell the Company,” I persisted. There was something terrifying and awful to me in letting my husband go off alone on this dangerous mission to bring back the man I loved.

“Of course I shall tell the Company—as much as is good for them to know. I must get my chief on the wire at once, and get leave to go off on urgent secret inquiry work. There are any amount of reasons to go secretly to the kraals, now that the natives are so unsettled. He’ll be glad enough to have me visit the Matoppo kraals and see what is going on.” He turned on me suddenly. “Do you grudge me this work to do for you?” he said strangely, and I knew not how to answer him, but at last I faltered:

“For *us*, Maurice. I think it is splendid of you to offer to go. It will be no child’s play, but a brave, big thing. Whether you succeed or not no one will be prouder of you than I. It is the going that counts. But I know you will succeed.”

And indeed I had always known that I should see Anthony Kinsella again before I died.

Maurice and I were closer in spirit during the next few hours than we had ever been. They were hours of unceasing occupation, swift consideration and selection.

There was the route to be planned, and where to have horses waiting for him on his return; leave to be got from headquarters and arrangements to be made for his absence; double arms to be prepared, so that Anthony might be able to fight for himself if the need arose; food for two to be prepared and packed—medicines and bandages!

To avoid rousing the suspicions of any of the *Umlimo’s* spies that might be in the town, Maurice decided to leave about an hour after midnight, when all the boys were in their quarters asleep. Thus even speculation would be unaroused. Makupi was not to travel openly with him, but to meet him at various given points, guide him, and disappear again until they reached the final place selected to hide in until an opportunity for the rescue occurred.

There was little time for reflection during those rushing hours of preparation: but when at last all was complete and ready for Maurice’s departure within the hour, I had that to think on which gave me pause.

Handsome and business-like in his khaki and leather, my husband sat down at his desk to put in order some papers

dealing with the police work during his absence. It would only take him a quarter of an hour or so he told me, then there would be time for a last talk together before his horse came round.

“Will you come to my room then?” I said in a low voice, and swiftly left him.

Strange thoughts were mine as I stood at my dressing-table, combing my hair with shaking hands, until the little short curls lay like wallflower petals on my forehead, and my ghostlike face was framed in waves of bronze. Yes, my face was ghostlike. I was obliged to take some powered rouge and introduce a subtle pale rose flush to the faint hollows of my cheeks, and with a little camel’s-hair brush to outline carefully the curve of my white lips with liquid crimson. It was a difficult process for there was a mist before my eyes, and my hand trembled so much that I sometimes made a false line and had to wipe all out and begin again. For it would not do to let Maurice see that I had had recourse to make-up. His eyes were strangely keen those days, and his vision clear, like his skin. I wondered would he notice the look in my eyes. Within the next hour I must veil them often with my lashes lest they betray me.

When all was finished I was very charming to look at: a slim, subtle-looking woman, with bronze hair and a curved mouth, bare armed and white bosomed, in a low cut gown of black lace.

Only the strange shadow in my eyes could not be treated with. It looked out like a desperate hunted thing, but it would not come forth. I knew it well. It was the shadow of the soul I had given to Anthony Kinsella, awaiting affrightedly for the desolation I was going to work upon it before Anthony Kinsella came riding back into my life to claim it. It knew that I was resolute to sign and seal myself away to Maurice Stair before that hour, and it was sick unto death.

But the thing had to be. I had practically accepted it on that sinister night six months past, when the black vultures swarmed and the eyes of the Mother of Consolation terribly accused me. It had come nearer and nearer with every fresh victory Maurice gained over his devils. I had always known there was to be no escape. But, ah, God! why had I not embraced my fate before this hour in which I knew that Anthony still dreamed of me behind the hills?

Maurice came in, forage-cap in hand, riding-crop tucked under his arm, and stood by me in the place where six months before he had cowered, and I had spurned him with my foot. What a different man was this! Pride and *élan* in his gait, and in the old enchanting smile upon his lips real chivalry at last. I felt my heart stir strangely, as very deliberately I put out both my hands to him. He took them, kissed them, and lightly let them fall again.

“Well! Expect us back in about a week, Deirdre. I shall not fail.”

I stood looking at him with my lids drooped a little to hide my eyes. Why had he let my hands fall so quickly? My first effort had gone astray.

“No, you will not fail, Maurice. You and the word ‘failure’ are never going to have anything to say to each other again. I am glad now that you are going alone, and will have all the honour and glory of it to yourself. I want people in this country to appreciate your courage before we leave it.”

I thought of Dr Abingdon, and the other man on the Salisbury road. It was odd what a thrill of pride I felt that all the world would soon know that whatever had happened in the past, in the future none might ever again call this man coward.

“Leave it?” he said. “You still hold to that plan?”

“Of course.” I looked at him in surprise. “Is it not all settled? Didn’t you speak to your chief about it on the wire this morning as you said you would?”

“No—I thought it had better wait over—until I came back you know.”

“You should have done it at once, Maurice. I wanted to begin to do things—sorting, packing, arranging what we are going to take with us. The delay about your resignation will keep us here months longer perhaps. Will you let me write it for you and send it in while you’re away?”

“Oh! all right then,” but his tone was still hesitating. I turned on him reproachfully. It seemed hard to have to be firm for him as well as myself.

“Is it that you have changed your mind again—after all our plans?”

“No, dear—but I don’t want to fasten you down to anything we planned. *You* may want to change.”

“Why should I?” I asked quietly. “Nothing is changed because of *this*: except that in our future life together we shall both be the happier for it.”

He stood looking at me with glad though doubtful eyes then, tapping his gaiter with his crop. But always he stayed at a little distance, almost as though he feared I might touch him. I went over to him, and put my hands on his shoulders.

“That real life you and I are going to live presently, in—

> “Some neater, sweeter country,—
> Some greener, cleaner land.”

My voice gave a little catch in my throat, but I struggled on.

“Life is full of possibilities for us, Maurice—I believe we are going to be very happy.”

But he turned aside moodily, hanging his head a little. I had not seen him look like that for, many months.

“What is the good of pretending to me, Deirdre? I have been too bad a brute and a devil to you—and you love Kinsella—I know you can never love me.”

His sullen misery made me take trembling resolution by the throat and vacillate no longer. I lied firmly, though my voice had a strange sound in my ears.

“Yes I can—I have already begun to love you. You have shown yourself worthy of any woman’s love, Maurice, and who am I—?”

A cold hand gripped my heart; my soul cried out to me in its despair. He stared at me amazedly for a moment, then caught me by the wrists, trying to look into my eyes. But I dared not let him see that stricken, dying thing.

“Is it true?—do you mean it?”

“Yes,” I said suffocating, and sank half fainting to my bed. He still held my hands but he came no nearer, and for a moment a gleam of light radiated through the darkness; a little radiant bird of hope flew through my mind. Could it be that he no longer cared for me—that I had killed desire in him—that he would be content to go on for ever as we had lived, and never require of me this terrible immolation of body and soul? The thought unsealed my closed eyes, and I looked at him keenly. But what I saw staring in *his* eyes was not distaste nor hatred, but something no woman wishes to see except in the eyes of the man she adores. The hour for sacrifice had struck. I put up my arms and wound them round his neck.

“Kiss me, Maurice,” I whispered, and drew him down beside me. He flung his arms about me and held me tight.

“Is it true? Do you mean it? You are going to give yourself to me at last—at last?”

“Yes—”

“When I come back?”

“No—” I tried to say a word that my stiff lips refused—“when you will.”

Then he kissed me at last: terrible kisses that crushed my lips upon my clenched teeth, bruising and cutting them; that scorched my eyes and my throat.

“Say you love me,” he demanded.

“Kiss me, Maurice—take me,” I cried in a whispering voice. But something in me was dying a little death—hope, youth, love, all were passing. I saw like a drowning woman all the glory of life depart. And in that moment I realised a terrible thing. All was in vain. I could never love my husband. Something in his touch, in his nearness, in the scent of his hair as he bent over me, sent an agony of revulsion shuddering through me, as though some spider of which I had a peculiar fear and horror was creeping over me. I knew not whether it was of the flesh or of the soul, or a terrible mingling of both. I only knew that this piercing agony of the Magdalene who loves not where she gives would always be mine to suffer as the wife of Maurice Stair. One other thing I knew, too: I should not long be able to sustain that agony; it would kill me. Almost I believed myself dying then. My limbs turned to stone, my veins seemed filled with lead. He might have been showering his passionate kisses on a marble image.

Perhaps no other woman in the world would have been affected in that terrible way by his personality: perhaps no other man in the world would have inspired such a feeling in me. That it should be so was my tragedy—and his!

“Why are you so white?” he cried between his blazing kisses. “So white—like a snowdrop? Open your eyes, Deirdre—let me see love in them.”

“No—no,” I cried, resolute to drown, to die. I wound my stone arms round his neck and drew him close to my cold face. But I dared not open my eyes for fear he should see the dying gestures of my soul.

Then a strange thing happened. He leaned over me once more and put one more kiss like a coal of fire on my lips, then drew gently away from my arms. There was a jingle of spurs, the tread of heavily booted feet, and presently the sound of a galloping horse. I lay very still where he had left me, my eyes still closed, my leaden arms where they had fallen at my sides, the words of reprieve ringing like little bells in my brain:

“I am not worthy—first I will earn this gift of you. Good-bye.”

If my soul (which was Anthony Kinsella’s) sang a chant of praise because of respite, that other physical me (which was Maurice Stair’s) had heaviness and sorrow because of the knowledge that the battle was all to fight again, the agony to re-endure.

Chapter Twenty Two.

What the Hills Hid.

> “Life is not a speculation. It is a sacrament. Its ideal is love. Its purification is sacrifice.”

> “Death is a great price to pay for a red rose. But love is better than life.”

Brown cotton stockings from Salzar’s General Stores fell into holes before one had worn them twice: yet they cost four and sixpence a pair! Almost as much as spun silk ones at home, I reflected, as I sat mending mine under the thorn tree. But was it possible that I had ever worn silk ones? Could it be true that I had once worn diamonds on my garters, and done many other absurd things! Had I really ever been Deirdre Saurin, the petted and pampered and bejewelled heiress who had announced to her mother, showering laughter:

“Life shall never make a tragedy of me!”

I smiled a little idle smile, that at least was free of regret, for the petted and bejewelled part of the story; but I could find it in my heart to sigh for the girl who came to Fort George and was scratched by all the cats, and scratched them cheerfully back. I should like to have been that girl again, for half an hour, just to see how it felt to be care-free and *insouciant*, with the whole beautiful world made expressly for one!

> “Give me again all that was there,
> Give me the sun that shone—”

Ah, that hurt! Better leave that—think of something else quickly. How far off those days were! And the people in them all passed away or passed on! Judy in Australia, happy with her cad. Mrs Rookwood settled in Johannesburg—George had got rich in the mining world and was now a king of finance, and she a leader of society. Elizabeth Marriott was still in England with her boy; gold had been discovered on her property in Matabeleland, and a brother had come out to look after it for her until the boy was old enough to come into his own. Other Fort Georgites were scattered far and wide. I heard sometimes from Colonel Blow, in Buluwayo, and Gerry Deshon at Umtali; but people in Africa are always too busy with the interesting people round them to have much time for remembering those who have passed on elsewhere. Annabel Cleeve’s husband had died in England a few months after their marriage, and left her a rich widow. Mrs Valetta was still living in Mgatweli.

I had never been to call on her, for I made few calls except the official ones required of me. Even if I had not heard that she was too ill to receive visitors, I could not suppose her anxious to renew so painful an acquaintance as ours had been. She had never been well since the Fort George days, they said. Fever! Malarial fever covers a multitude of ills in Rhodesia. Would she get better when—Ah! that hurt—think of something else quick!

But I could not think of *anything else* for long. Back, back, my thoughts came always to *that* as my eyes went always back to the hills. Maurice had been gone a week. No news yet. But sometimes when all was still I seemed to hear the beating of horse’s feet over the soft veldt grass.

I missed Makupi’s red blanket against the blaze of the zinias, where he was wont to sit, expelling the melancholy of his soul with the throb of his weird *tom-tom*, and hiding in his heart through all these months a secret that changed the face of life for three people!

Down in the camp a trooper, sitting outside his hut, was at the same business as myself—darning his foot-wear—and save for his idle song there was no other sound to break the hot, tranquil silence of the afternoon. Along the town road a boy with a letter held aloft in a cleft stick was approaching, with the peculiar rhythmical motion affected by letter-carriers. Everything was very still. The world had a pregnant, brooding look to me.

The boy with the letter had reached the camp and given his letter to the trooper, and the trooper had given it back, pointing to me. Carefully the boy replaced it in his stick, as though he had still many miles to go, and resuming his rhythmical step came up the winding path to me.

I did not know the straggly writing upon the envelope, nor at first the signature at the foot of the brief note —*Annunciata Valetta*.

“*Will you come and see me. I am too ill to come to you. I have something to tell you*.”

At last I realised that Nonie was short for so beautiful a name as Annunciata, and that it was the woman I had been thinking about who had written to me. It is strange how often these coincidences occur! While the boy sat patiently on his heels at the door I scribbled a note to say I would come.

I cannot tell what instinct made me beautifully arrange my hair, and put on my loveliest gown that night. I am very sure it was not vanity. Many waters cannot drown love, but there are fires in life that can burn out of a woman the last root of vanity; and I had been through those flames. Some vague idea possessed me, perhaps, of hiding from the cynical eyes of Nonie Valetta the scars the furnace had left on me. I had always felt it to be due to Maurice, as well as myself, to cover up the hollowness of our life from curious eyes, and I think no one had ever suspected what we hid under our pleasant manner to each other in public. In the last few months, especially, I believe ours had been cited as a very happy marriage. But I feared the probing glance of Nonie Valetta.

I wore a white silk gown, and threw about my bare shoulders, for the night air was dewy, a long theatre-coat of black

satin that was lovelier within than without, for it was lined with white satin, upon which had been embroidered, by subtle, Parisian fingers, great sprays of crimson roses. So skilfully had the work of lining been done that every time I took a step a big red rose would peep out somewhere, and if I put out my arms I seemed to shower roses. I had designed it myself in the blithe long ago. Betty used to call it my passionate cloak.

After my marriage she had gone to our various homes and gathered up all my belongings—stacks of gowns, cloaks, kimonos, embroideries, and laces that I had forgotten I ever possessed; together with pictures, china, music, draperies, and curios; all the things I had collected in happy-go-careless days and thought little of, but which were now something in the nature of treasure trove. She had despatched them in case upon case, and they had arrived within the last few months. The huts were crammed with odd and lovely things, and I boasted a wardrobe the like of which no other woman in Rhodesia, perhaps in Africa, possessed. I had reason to be thankful that my taste had always run to the picturesque rather than to the *chic*. Most of my gowns and all of my wraps could never go out of fashion, for they had never been in it. They would be useful and picturesque until they fell into shreds.

I went down through the zinias, which now I did not hate any longer. Like the hills, they had become part of my life. I should take the memory of them to Australia with me, and wherever I went they would go too. In the moonlight their garishness was dulled to a uniformity of pallor. They looked like armies and armies of little dreary ghosts.

I did not have to ask the way to the big thatched house the Valettas had taken possession of. In a small town like Mgatweli one knows where every one lives even though one does not visit them.

As I came to the deep, chair-lined verandah a man with the air of one of Ouida's guardsmen threw away his cigarette and came forward looking at me curiously. He seemed surprised when I asked for Mrs Valetta.

"My wife? Yes, but she is ill," he answered hesitatingly, evidently knowing nothing of her note to me.

"I heard so, and have come to see her," I said. "She and I knew each other long ago in Fort George. I am Mrs Stair."

"Ah! Will you come in? I'll tell her."

He led the way into a sitting-room, and in the light gave me another enveloping stare full of the bold admiration men of a certain type imagine appeals to women, not knowing that really nice women very much resent being admired by the wrong men.

After one glance at him I turned away a little wearily. Early in a girl's life these handsome, dissolute faces have their own special *allure*. But I knew too much. Africa had educated me, and my mind asked for something more in a man's face now than much evil and a few charming possibilities for good.

Men who have reached the Rubicon boundary, which lies between thirty and forty, should have something more than possibilities stamped upon their faces.

"Is that Mrs Stair, Claude?" a very weary voice called from the next room; the weakness, the terrible slow lassitude of it horrified me.

"Is she so ill?" I asked in a low voice, after he had called back:

"(Yes: coming, dear.) It is only a matter of days with her now," he answered laconically.

And when I saw Nonie Valetta lying there, her pallid hands plucking at the blue and white stripes of her coverlet, I knew that he had spoken truth. Her hours were numbered. Pale as ashes, she lay there watching me with her strangely coloured eyes, the old weary bitter curve still on her lips. She too had eaten of the aloes of life.

I took her hand, and for a moment or two, as long as the nurse was in the room, we murmured the little conventional things that always lie ready on women's lips while the eyes are probing deep, deep for the unspoken things. But as soon as we were alone she smiled her twisted smile at me and said:

"I see why they call you Ghostie."

"It is very impertinent of them if they do," I responded, smiling a little too.

"But it is true. You are the ghost of your old self when you came to Africa. You were very lovely then. I knew the moment I saw you that my life was over." I felt myself paling.

"Do not speak of those days. That is past grief and pain. We are all much older and wiser now."

"You do not look a day older—only as though you had been burnt in a fire, and there is nothing but the white ashes of you left. Yet if anything you are more beautiful—there is something about you no man could resist—something *unwon*—they'll lay down their lives and burn in hell for the unwon. I am glad Tony Kinsella cannot see you to-night looking like a white flame among red roses—What are all those red roses? Yes—I am glad he cannot see you to-night."

I put my hand to my heart.

"What was it you wanted to say to me?" I asked. I felt that I could not bear too much.

"Why did you marry Maurice Stair?"

The unexpected question bewildered me. But she was too ill to be told that my reason was one I would discuss with

no one. I said at last, for I had a part to play in life, and meant to play it to the end:

“He is a good fellow. We are very happy.”

“So I hear—and I want to know how you dare be happy—you whom Tony loved—with a knave like Maurice Stair?”

My heart hurt. Oh! how my heart hurt. I wanted to get away from this cruel dying woman whose pale hands dug up old bones from their graves and strewed them in the path. I wished to go, but I could not. I had to stand there listening.

“You won’t tell me why, but I know—it was because he persuaded you with a blue ear-ring that Tony Kinsella was dead. Well! I want to tell you now that—that tale and that proof were both false. He never found the ear-ring, but had it made in Durban from a design with which I supplied him. I have waited until you were happy to tell you this. It is my revenge on you for taking Tony Kinsella from me.”

Her hand picked at the pale blue stripes of her quilt. I stood appalled at the strength of hatred that could reach out at me from a death-bed.

“Ask your husband—ask your reformed character whom you have made a Sunday-school boy of—and see what he has to say.”

I had an instinct to rush from the room, but I overcame it.

“Shall I go now?” I asked presently. She was staring at me with her haunting eyes.

“You are well-masked—or can it be possible that you don’t care!—I misjudged you, then. I thought you honoured honour in men and women above all things—Tony thought so too—he said, ‘she is like a clear stream of water—and I am thirsty for clean water.’ Tell me if those were cruel words to hear from the lips of a man I had loved and given all to, Deirdre Saurin.”

Given all to! Was this what I had come to hear from the arid lips of this cruel woman! Was my faith to be shattered at last! But my heart rejected the thought even before she spoke again.

“Given all that was best in me. He was no saint, but because in long past days on the Rand he was Claude Valetta’s friend he would not steal Claude Valetta’s wife—charmed that wife never so sweetly, and loved he never so deeply. For he did love me—as he never loved any of the others—and in the end I should have won—I saw the day coming—felt it close—when he would have taken me from my wretched life to some other land. Then he went to Ireland—and came back a changed man.”

This again found me gazing at her amazed and bewildered.

“Ah!” she mocked. “You think you were the first girl he loved—it is not so. There was a girl in Ireland—a girl at a ball, who first dragged him from me.”

“*A girl at a ball—*”

“She took him back to old dreams, he said—her beauty and her purity—but he was married, and she was not—so he came away quick—he went back to his dreams on the veldt for many months after that. Poor Tony! how he loved a woman he could put in a shrine!—his trouble was that they wouldn’t stay there when he was about. And the women out of shrines had their call for him too.—After the girl in Ireland Rhodes got him for awhile with his dreams of Empire—but he was coming straight, straight back to me—I knew it from his letters, when he met you—where did he meet you?—Oh! what brought *your* feet straying out to Africa to trample on my hopes!”

What could I say? I was bitterly sorry for her and glad for myself—and broken-hearted for myself! What could I say? I was silent.

She was lying back against her pillows now, deadly pale, eyes closed. I made a step to the door to call her nurse, but she detained me with a few more words like shrivelled-up dry leaves blowing through the room.

“His wife died about six months before you came to Africa.” Ah! That was something. Spikenard in that to lay upon an old wound. A streak of gold to embroider in a banner of belief I had always waved in the faces of those who cried him down. I would not even thank her for confirming my faith. She looked in my face and read my thought.

“Oh! yes—your faith was great enough to remove the mountains he had piled up round himself. You weren’t like Anna Cleeve who thought she adored him, yet at the first word of doubt failed. When I told her of his marriage I did not know of his wife’s death—he never told me until *you* were in Fort George. He came straight to me when he returned from the Transvaal, and told me, and thanked me then, for my ‘kindly offices’ with Anna. Cleeve—for saving him from a woman who had so tawdry a belief in the inherent decency of a man—but, he told me too he would have no more interference—he had found ‘a stream of crystal clear water’—he needed no more ‘friendly offices’ of me. I understood very well what it meant when I saw him looking at you on the tennis-court. Good-bye, Deirdre Saurin. You and I will not meet again.”

I don’t know how I came to be on my knees beside her bed. Perhaps my thought was to cry some prayer for her and myself and for all women who love; but though many words were in my heart none came to my lips. And presently an unexpected thing happened. I felt a hand on my hair, and a voice most subtly different to that I had been listening to, said brokenly, and softly, some words that sounded almost like a blessing.

“Why should I mind that he loved you best? If I had ever had a son I should have wished him to love a girl like you.”

Mr Valetta was waiting for me in the verandah. He said:

“I think I must insist on seeing you home, Mrs Stair. There seems to be some disturbance in the town.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t exactly know—but I have seen men running about in an excited way, and there has been some cheering. I fancy I heard your husband’s name. Is he in the town to-night? At any rate all the ruction has moved over in the direction of the camp. Look at the lights flashing in your huts.”

I looked and saw: and even as we stood there, another wild burst of cheering came echoing across the open. Then I knew.

Gathering up with shaking hands the draperies of my cloak and gown I prepared to speed my way home and to my share of the terror and beauty of life waiting there. But before I went I said to the husband of Nonie Valetta:

“Is it true that she is so near death?”

“The doctor holds out no hope. It is not so much the actual fever, as the complications that have set in. And her heart is all to pieces.”

“Well—let her depart in peace. Do not allow any news to reach her that will disturb her at the last. I want you to promise me that.”

“I promise, Mrs Stair, solemnly. Shall I come with you?”

“No, no. Go to her,” I said, and sped away on swift feet.

Long before I reached the camp the cheering and all sounds of exultation had ceased, and a strange stillness supervened. At the foot of the kopje, trampling on the tennis-court and among the zinias, were many men, their faces all turned towards the huts, talking among themselves in low voices. As I passed by a muffled silent figure, I caught a word or two.

“By God! That dirty brute of an *Umlimo*... Keeping a man like Kinsella—all these months! Nearly two years!”

“The trouble with the natives won’t be long coming now... Stair ought to get the V.C. Who would have thought he had it in him!”

There was no mistake then—Maurice had been successful! But why were these men standing out in the inhospitable night? What was going on in the silent brilliantly lighted huts? What subtle note of regret had my ears caught in the low spoken words?

Dimly, amidst the press of overpowering emotions that surged upon me, I apprehended that something was wrong. Fear crept into me, numbing my limits and detaining my feet: but still I stumbled on up the winding path.

There were lights in all the huts, as though some one had been searching in each. Doubtless Maurice had gone from one to the other looking for me. What an ironical trick of Fate that, after awaiting him every moment of every hour since he left, in the very moment of his triumph I should be absent!

There were men in the dining-room hut; but some instinct guided my feet to the drawing-room, through whose half-closed doors I heard the murmur of voices—and again, in the *timbre* of those voices, came the suggestion of trouble—pain—loss. I knew full well now that something was wrong. Something had gone hideously awry: and I feared, I feared!

At last I found courage to press open the door.

The heavy odour of a drug came out like a presence to meet me, and mingling with it, piercing through it to my inmost senses, was some other scent that brought terror and dismay. A dimness came over my eyes, so that I could not distinguish any of the faces about me. I saw only the prone figure lying against pillows on the couch that had been dragged to the middle of the room.

It seemed to me there were many red flowers spread about that couch, and on the doctor’s hands, and on his shirt sleeves. It was the scent of them that had met me at the door, piercing my senses—the strange pungent scent of the red flowers of death. Around me in the quiet room I heard some curt words gently spoken.

“It is Mrs Stair... just in time... clear the room... nothing more can be done.”

“Deirdre,”—a faint whisper dragged my leaden feet forward, and I went blindly towards the couch, my arms outstretched. The crimson roses of my cloak joined all the other crimson roses spread everywhere.

All was very still. No sound in the room but the echoes of softly departing feet, and a laboured, puffing sound like the panting of some far-off train climbing a steep hill. Yet there were no trains in Matebeleland. After a little while I knew that the sound was there beside me on the couch. When the mists cleared away from my eyes I looked into the face of the dying man.

It was Maurice.

He was whispering wordlessly to me, and looking up into my eyes with his that were full of chivalrous fires and some

other wondrous light that had never been in them before. From his lips came the little panting laboured sound.

Supporting his head—pale and lean, but with the old intent strong glance, the little blue stones in his ears, and a great white scar gleaming along his forehead back into his hair—was Anthony Kinsella.

We took one glance of each other, while the world rocked beneath my feet. Then I gathered my husband’s head to my breast.

“Maurice! Maurice! This is all wrong—what has happened? You must not die!”

A smile of triumph lit his face. He lay there like a dying Galahad with the beauty of death on him: nobler and more gallant than he had ever been before. Like the sad music of old remembered bells I heard Anthony’s voice telling the brief tale.

“He put up a splendid fight with those two Imbezu fellows. I could do nothing to help until he had disabled them and unbound me. We got clear away then, after hard riding. All yesterday we travelled hard, and were certain no one was following. But this afternoon, about two hours’ ride from here, just as we were moving on after a short ‘off-saddle,’ a single shot was fired from behind a bush—it was meant for me of course—a last effort to pot me before we got in. But—God! Stair, what can I say?—You have given your life for mine! What can I say—or do!”

Triumph flickered once more across the death-dewed face of Maurice Stair; and his pale half-smiling lips whispered faintly back:

“That’s all right old man... Kiss me goodbye, Deirdre *... I have told him everything*.”

With his hand in Anthony’s and his head on my breast he died.

The End.

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