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Author: Hume Nesbit

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EMPIRE MAKERS: A ROMANCE OF ADVENTURE AND WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA ***

Hume Nesbit

"The Empire Makers"

"A Romance of Adventure and War in South Africa"

Preface.

Africa is still the home of mystery, in spite of the many explorers who have revealed much of its wonders. This romance is concerned mainly with the adventures of three young men who went out to South Africa, got into trouble with the Transvaal Government, and afterwards discovered an ancient nation in Central Africa.

On their return they were able to take a little hand in this present war of Justice and Right, where so many of our best and bravest are shedding their blood.

I wish I could have shown my readers the wind up of this vile oligarchy of Pretoria tyrants. Yet I dare say no real Briton can doubt but that the end must be the triumph of our glorious Empire and the ultimate civilisation of those ignorant savages, the Boers.

It has cost us dearly—it may cost us more—yet never let a true lover of liberty be biased by the friends of the oppressors. Africa must be a free country, as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada are. Like those great countries, Africa must become a loyal and faithful daughter to her beneficent mother, our Empire, and enjoy the fruits of emancipation as those other sisters do.

These fruits are Liberty, Equality, Justice, and Fraternity to all races over which waves the glorious Red, White, and Blue Flag, the Union Jack.

The boons which we are at present fighting for will cause many a hearth to mourn for the brave sons who lie under the cold stars and the fierce suns of Africa. But as the human parts of these sons enrich the veldt, so will their heroic actions cause countless generations of Boers to bless their coming. They have fought—not out of revenge, but for duty and love of their brothers. They have died for a noble cause, and Africa will yet think of them with pride. While, therefore, we drop a tear over their sacred graves, let it be one of gratitude and pride. Who would not sooner share the grave of a soldier in Africa than grasp the hand of a pro-Boer in England? Who would not sooner lie beside a hero on the veldt than be placed near the statesman who caused all this waste of blood?

That you may forgive all the shortcomings in this book, and be interested in it and its pictures, is the most earnest wish of the writer. If it can keep an Imperialist steadfast when persuaded by crafty traitors, if it can induce a wavering pro-Boer to be once more a faithful son or daughter to Justice and our Empire, then it has more than fulfilled the desires of

ITS AUTHOR.

Yorick Club, 30, Bedford Street, London, W.C.

Chapter One.

At Shebourne Academy.

Three braver, franker, and more chivalrous hearts never beat in male breasts than those that beat under the jackets of Ned Romer, Clarence Raybold, and Fred Weldon.

Ned Romer, the long-acknowledged hero and captain of the school, was about seventeen years of age. He had won his supremacy, as all lads must do at schools, by hard fighting and expertness in outdoor games and sports, as much as by general proficiency in his studies.

The boys expected him, of course, to be dux in the schoolroom; they could never have respected a duffer, no matter how smart he may have been on the field. An ignorant booby could never win schoolboy respect, no matter how great a fighter he proved himself to be.

To become the leader of a school requires many perfections in a boy. He must have the same qualities which form a leader of men—personal force and self-control, the power of controlling and influencing those about him. He must be always prepared and ready to face unexpected difficulties, be tireless in his work, willing ever to help his followers in their task, and thus win their admiration, by proving that he knows much more than they do.

He must be prepared to act as champion for the school, if called upon; to be the best batsman and bowler, the most tireless runner and swimmer; in fact, to be constantly on the qui vive.

Schoolboys are very keen critics, and don't give their admiration blindly. True, once their allegiance is given, it takes a good deal to destroy the prestige of their hero. Unlike grown men, they do not easily forget Ned Romer had all the natural qualities of a hero. Physically, he was tall for his age, handsome, strongly formed, and absolutely fearless.

A well-posed, firm head rested between square shoulders. His hair was crisp, curly, and light brown. His eyes were those bright and blue eyes that look frankly and bravely out upon the world, and never shift when appealed to. When boys or men possess those kind of eyes, a lie direct is an impossibility with them. They cannot prevaricate. It is not the despicable meanness of a lie that prevents them; they do not consider such ethics or reasons. Like George Washington, they simply cannot tell a lie. To do so would be a physical impossibility. The liar and the craven are natural products, and go together, as real courage, magnanimity, and truth are ever found united.

His habits of constant exercise had made Ned Romer an athlete. A natural aptitude for study and thirst for knowledge made his tasks a pleasure, and easy to acquire. He was ambitious to shine, and could not endure defeat. To him an obstacle meant an enemy to be overcome and destroyed, and until he achieved this, he had no peace of mind.

This was his last term at school; and during the years he had spent at Shebourne Academy, he had learnt that the most precious of all a brave man's possessions is the habit of controlling his temper. He had a fiery temper. Now, a temper is as needful to boy and man as a pair of strong arms, but, like strength, this must be kept in reserve for occasions when force is required, not dissipated in senseless outbursts. As our story progresses, the reader will find out more about the characteristics and temper of Ned Romer.

Early in life he had been left an orphan, under the guardianship of his late father's solicitor.

This guardian was a bachelor, who evidently considered it to be the beginning and end of his duty to pay the school fees and other expenses of his ward.

Thus Ned had never been invited to visit his guardian during his holidays, the master of the college, or academy, Dr Heardman, LL.D., M.A., etc., being paid to look after the boy during the holidays. In consequence of these arrangements, Shebourne Academy was the only home that Ned Romer had ever known, and his schoolfellows were his only friends.

Some lads would have felt lonely and have pined under the monotony of such a life; but Ned was not one of the brooding kind. The country all round the academy was beautiful, being in the heart of Devonshire, and within sight of Dartmoor hills. What money he required, in reason, his guardian freely sent, and as Ned had lived here ever since he could remember, his needs were not extravagant, with such Spartan tastes as he had.

Books he had in profusion, for the doctor's library was at his disposal. He found amusement enough during the vacations in studying botany and reading books of travel and exploration.

When asked by his guardian what vocation he would like to take up in life, during one of that gentleman's rare visits, Ned had answered promptly—

"I mean to be a traveller."

His guardian was pleased with this reply; at least, he seemed to be so from the way his foxy face beamed and the manner in which he rubbed his hands together.

"Yes, Ned, I think such a life would suit a bold, strong lad like you exactly. You might go to Australia or Africa, and make a fortune in no time."

"Oh, I don't care much about the fortune," replied Ned, carelessly. "As long as I have enough to live and keep clear of debt, I'll be satisfied, so that I can do some good and help on civilisation and the glory and power of England."

"Like the great Cecil Rhodes, eh—the Empire-maker?" said his guardian, slyly.

"That is my ambition, Mr Raymond," answered Ned, calmly.

He was not very familiar with his guardian, and although he could not say that he disliked him, yet he always felt better pleased to bid him good-bye than to welcome him at the beginning of his infrequent and short visits.

"Hum—yes; I think we shall be able to advance your views in this respect. Your father was not a rich man when he died, Edward. However, I need not go into that matter now, as I shall tell you all about it when you have left school.

But I dare say—as I have been careful of what he did leave—that I shall be able to provide you with a comfortable start in life.”

This conversation had taken place on the last visit of Mr Jabez Raymond to Shebourne Academy at the beginning of the finishing term. Since then Ned had diligently pursued his studies, and was pretty well prepared to face the world, as far as theory could prepare a young man. Experience must hereafter be the finisher of his education.

Clarence Raybold and Fred Weldon ranked next to Ned Romer in proficiency and expertness. They were both bold fellows, who had moulded themselves, as far as they could, on the pattern of their leader and hero, Ned.

Both had battled and worked their way upwards to their present proud position. The other boys owned their superiority, but—as will chance so often—while being good and faithful chums, there was not a little rivalry between them as to which should stand next to Ned Romer. Some of the boys boasted that Raybold, the Africander, was the strongest and best; some vowed by Weldon, the Australian.

A school is somewhat like a ship; there cannot be two first officers any more than there can be two captains, if perfect harmony is to be maintained.

Affairs had been long brewing towards an open contest between these two friendly rivals for the supremacy. They were very nearly the same age; Weldon was only a month older than Raybold, both being in their sixteenth year.

They were both tall and strong, Raybold an inch wider in the chest, while Weldon was two inches taller. Raybold was the best batter, Weldon the best bowler. They could both swim and dive like fish. In this exercise they surpassed Ned and every other boy round about the countryside.

The favourite study of Ned was botany; Fred Weldon was an authority on chemistry, and Clarence Raybold on astronomy. In these accomplishments they stood apart and equal.

In their other studies they were also reckoned pretty equal. If one excelled in one branch, the other excelled in some other department.

There was only one way left to decide the question at issue, and this was, as Nature decides the same question of supremacy, by fighting.

It may seem a barbarous thing that boys and men cannot settle such disputed points in any other way except by battle. Savages settle it thus. Civilised races do the same, and amongst healthy boys it appears to be as strict a necessity as amongst men.

Thus it happened that a Saturday had been fixed upon for the grand tournament between those rival knights, with the entire school as spectators and Captain Edward Romer as umpire.

There was no personal bitterness between the two colonial boys, for although there had been of late considerable friction, this had occurred more between the supporters than the principals.

A mass meeting had been called, and the contest between Australia and Africa decided upon. The two champions were moved alone by ambition and the desire to settle their future position, once and for all. They had likewise agreed to abide by the decision of the umpire and the school, without any further appeal.

It was to be a friendly enough contest, yet all knew that it would not be a drawing-room or stage play. It was to be a real, not a sham battle.

The ground fixed upon was about three miles from Shebourne, down by the river, at a spot where the banks were level and the water deep. This was their usual bathing-place.

It is not my intention to describe this fight, further than to say that it was fought according to recognised rules, without prejudice, and decided in thirteen rounds.

The umpire watched keenly, and stopped each round when it was likely to become too fierce. Thus, although some claret was spilt, it wasn't in serious quantities, and could easily be washed away without leaving any palpable traces. Clarence Raybold came out of the "mill" with a swollen upper lip and some bruises on his biceps, and Fred Weldon with a flowing nose.

Raybold was declared victor, while Weldon accepted his defeat with a good grace. Africa had beaten Australia by only two seconds of time, yet both had fought so splendidly that the audience, without exception, declared that the defeat was nearly as good as the victory. Both had conducted themselves so temperately yet sturdily, taking and giving such real strokes, and warding off with such rare skill, that the supporters of Weldon were as proud of his actions as were the Raybold section of his deeds of daring.

With loud acclaim they were unanimously declared worthy champions of "Shebourne," of whom the academy ought to be proud.

It was a glorious day in early summer. The leaves were lushly green and fresh, the sunbeams warm, and the water in front of them most inviting.

Therefore, after Ned had delivered his unalterable decision, young Africa shook hands with his brother young Australia, and they all finished up the fun by casting their clothes on to the grassy banks and plunging into the transparent river, like lively tadpoles.

After this eventful day there was complete concord at Shebourne Academy. Fred Weldon took his orders from Clarence Raybold, who submitted to the wise and experienced authority of Ned Romer, and the long and happy days of schoolboy life flew on unheeded towards their close.

Chapter Two.

The Compact.

The hours which the three school leaders were spending in study and merry sport were bringing great events into their lives.

On the same day that Fred Weldon fought with Clarence Raybold by the side of that Devon river, his father, the reputed wealthy Australian, died a bankrupt, leaving his family almost paupers.

He had been involved in the disastrous land boom, and forced to mortgage all his stock and estates. Indeed, for the past five or six years he had only been able to carry on his station through the leniency of his creditors. When death overtook him, he had been threatened with foreclosure, which took place directly after his funeral.

It was a couple of weeks before the expiration of the last term for the three school friends, when a black-edged letter came to inform Fred about the death of his father and his own penniless condition. A double blow that was, which prostrated the poor Australian boy, and took the sunshine out of his life.

He dearly loved his father, although he had not seen that father for the six years he had spent at Shebourne Academy. To know that he should never again on earth see the kindly face of that loved parent nearly broke his tender heart.

He had been brought up under the belief that, as far as he was concerned, the seeking for a living was not a consideration which need occupy his attention. He might go in for a profession as an amusement to fill out time, or study the wool markets in London, and afterwards take up his father's gentlemanly occupation as a squatter. Money had never hitherto troubled his young mind. A liberal allowance had been regularly paid to Dr Heardman for his use outside his school and clothing fees. Up to this date he always had the most lavishly lined purse in the school. Not being a cad, he never paraded his riches in the least. He was free and open-handed, and ready always to give without considering or remembering; but with the instincts of generations of gentlemen in his blood, he gave or lent delicately, and without allowing his right hand to know what his left hand did.

He was in consequence universally liked and respected, instead of being hated, as ostentatious givers generally are.

A bluff, offhand manner covered a very warm and tender nature, as the brown freckles covered his clear skin, until the original tints had to be guessed at. He had speckled, brown-grey eyes, a good deal resembling the colour of the iron stains so plentifully bespattered over his face. This monotony of yellow-brown gave him a bark-like appearance that did not add to his beauty at first sight.

It was a good and a brave face, however, that of Fred Weldon, in spite of its dingy tones. When he opened his mouth to laugh, he exhibited a fine set of strong white teeth that made him almost beautiful. His laugh also was a ringing and a hearty laugh, which went straight into one's heart when heard. By-and-by also, when one began to examine his points, it was wonderful how many excellences and beauties were disclosed. Nicely shaped ears, although often skinned and roughened by the weather; well-shaped hands, although tanned by the sun; hair with a golden lustre and a sinuous waviness; delicately shaped lips; and a nose bold, fine, and straight, with nostrils sensitive as those of a well-bred horse. Fred Weldon decidedly improved on acquaintance, for he was polite, considerate, and of a singularly happy disposition.

When the evil tidings came he showed his grit and breeding by at once facing the difficulty instead of bemoaning it idly. He had no longer any expectations beyond what pocket-money he had saved, and fifty pounds which an uncle had sent him, to pay his fare, second class, out to Australia, if he cared to go.

This uncle told him kindly, but frankly, however, in his letter, that if he cared to go anywhere else for the present, it would be as well, for Australia could not hold out much-prospect for a penniless young man for some years yet to come.

His mother and sisters were provided for, as this uncle had taken them home to his station. He need, therefore, suffer no anxiety on their account. He had only himself now to consider.

It is a sad moment in the life of a boy when he loses his natural protector, even although he may step into his father's property. This desolation becomes intensified when, besides his father, the boy loses home, and, with what makes home attractive, all certainty of the future.

Fred Weldon felt now, for the first time, that he was no longer a passenger in life's bark, but had been forced into the position of the formerly utterly trusted and lost pilot. He had now to steer where formerly he had left that responsibility to others.

It would have been a most wretched time, those last two weeks at Shebourne Academy, for poor Fred Weldon, but for the kindly sympathy of both teachers and fellow-pupils. These made him feel that misfortune has its compensations, when it brings out these traits of kindness and friendship.

The entire school united in showing to Fred how much he was cared for during this period of grief and uncertainty.

But his two chums, Ned Romer and Clarence Raybold, did more, for they gripped the future with firm and energetic hands, and rendered it a definite plan. As long as man or boy can map out his course with definite lines, he has something worth living for. It is the groping through a damp and dark mistland after a formless ideal which rusts the mind and saps the vital forces. As long as we can trace a path, so we can follow it; as long as we know our direction, difficulties are almost pleasures. Without his two chums, Fred might have fallen into an inert condition and given way to despair. Without this sudden calamity befalling him, those three friends might have parted on that vacation and gone different ways, to idle and dream abortive things. Now it knitted their lives together, and while they discussed his affairs, they settled their own.

Fred had received his letter on a Friday. On Saturday afternoon the three friends were lying on the banks of the river near the bathing-pool.

Fred was in the centre, lying on his back and looking at the sky. His friends reclined on each side of him, resting on their elbows, and plucking daisies and buttercups aimlessly.

That was their way of exhibiting their sympathy. They would not look at him, for they instinctively felt that he would resent being watched just now. He could not help his eyes filling now and then, as he saw pictures of his lost Australian home with his father in that upper patch of dark blue sky, but he would have hated his chums to see him crying like a girl. So also would they have despised and detested themselves for watching these signs of weakness. To cry is human, and sometimes cannot be kept under—a man will own this with shame; but it is abominable to be seen at the pitiful game, and no real friend would ever own he had seen his chum at it. This is one of the sacred obligations of man-friendship.

"I say, Raybold," cried Ned, speaking over the silent Fred, "I've been thinking lately of making my exploration ground Africa. Do you intend sticking to Johannesburg when you leave here?"

"Not likely, Ned; the pater wishes me to move about and see the country before I settle down."

"Well, what do you say to making a company affair of it?" continued Ned, cheerfully. "England, Australia, and Africa against the world."

"I am agreeable," replied Clarence.

"What do you say, Fred, to this partnership?"

"What partnership?" asked Fred, waking from his melancholy reverie.

"That we should go to Africa and become bona fide explorers. The company to be called the Clarfredned Company of explorers and gentlemen adventurers."

"With the last first, of course, Ned," added Clarence, modestly.

"Well, yes; I suppose I do know a trifle more than you pair of scientists, having a year's advantage of you. And I haven't the slightest objection to be your chief, on one condition."

"And that?"

"My condition is, that I provide the first expenses."

"Again agreeable," replied Clarence Raybold, with alacrity. "My pater, since the Jameson Raid, hasn't had too much cash to spare. What with confiscation, fines, and taxes, the life of an Uitlander is not an enviable one in the Transvaal. Therefore I willingly accept your terms, and declare you to be my captain."

"What do you say, Weldon?" asked Ned, calmly looking at the water pool.

He did this because there were indications of a girlish breakdown on the part of Fred. His eyelids were twitching, and he was gulping something down that appeared to be choking him.

"Some fellows go and pay a lot of money to be allowed to join an expedition of this sort. I regard these fellows as fools to pay for what should be paid for. The leader always gets the kudos, therefore he ought to pay the costs. Now, boys, I'm fond of kudos, and I mean to have as much of it as I can out of this affair, therefore I reckon it is only fair that I should pay the piper."

Ned spoke musingly, and flicked with his stick at some grass-stalks.

Then Clarence Raybold took up the cue with the instinctive feelings of a gentleman.

"Those are my sentiments also, of course, when partners go for equal shares in profits as well as adventures. I think, as a kind of guarantee of good faith, the subordinates ought to give a little. Now, I would pledge myself to the extent of twenty pounds, and leave my leader to do all the rest. What do you say, Weldon, old fellow, to contributing twenty pounds each, and letting Ned do the rest?"

Fred crushed back into his eyelids a couple of tears, and then, gulping down a big sob, like a huge pill, with the indifference of a Stoic, he said—

"I'd give fifty pounds willingly to go with you and Ned; but if you decide on twenty as the sum, all right, only I have an amendment to propose."

“What is that?” asked both Ned and Clar, suspiciously.

“If we should discover any diamond or gold-mines, or other treasures, that the expenses be then fairly divided, and deducted from our shares of profits.”

“Done!” cried Ned and Clar, in one breath.

Then the lads shook hands solemnly, and the compact was made, which gave them a grand object in life, and sent them forth in search of the adventures which are now to be related.

Chapter Three.

In the Den of the Lawyer.

The next two weeks were spent in maturing plans by the young men for their intended expedition. Maps were consulted, and books of travel—Livingstone, Stanley, and other authorities—devoured in such leisure times as they had from their finishing studies.

At last the day arrived—their last day of school life; their last day under the fatherly control of Dr Heardman. The good doctor was proud of his three crack pupils, and prophesied great futures for them. The younger schoolmates went off to their different homes in deep dejection, wondering how they were ever to get on, the next term, without their heroes and champions.

Of course their places would quickly be filled up, for heroic souls and talented minds are common enough products of British soil. Infatuated adherents of Disraeli, Gladstone, and Salisbury are apt to fancy that chaos must come when they have gone from their posts. Yet the old state coach rumbles along pretty much as it did in the days of former drivers. The ocean nibbles away at sea-coasts, and encroaches every year in some parts, while it retires from others in the same proportions. Continents have been submerged, and ancient cities buried under the brine; but other continents, cities, and nations have risen and taken the work of civilisation upon them. The earth has not become a fraction smaller, the ocean has not increased by so much as a drop of water.

Heroes have risen and carved their names on the monument of history, but mankind has not suffered by their passing away. It benefited, perchance, through their living, as the grain-fields benefit by the passing rains; yet as the moisture returns to the clouds, and comes down again and again, so do great deeds repeat themselves amongst men as in nature. The drop of rain is nothing after it has done its work; the man is of no more consideration after the emergency has passed for which his strength was produced.

For a time the renown of those three champions would hover over Shebourne Academy. The acts of the new claimants would be criticised and compared with what had been done before by those doughty heroes. Then the hour would arrive when their successors appeared to overtop them in the eyes of the young censors; then they would fade into oblivion with the majority, and be remembered by a few as demi-gods. In every school there are minds formed to lead and natures made to admire. Wisely, the majority of mankind are those who exist for the present, and trouble themselves neither with the past nor the future. Their hero is the one who serves their interests for the time. Thus mankind goes on, trampling the road smoother which old footsteps have partly made, leaving the dreamers and the regretters to linger on the side pathways.

Filled with hope and laden with their prizes, the three boys bade farewell to their old life, and set forth to interview the present arbitrator of their lives, Mr Jabez Raymond—the man who held the sinews of war.

Ned had written to this gentleman, and in his reply Mr Raymond gave them a warm invitation to visit him and consult over matters at his place.

Mr Jabez Raymond was, as we have already stated, not a family man, but he had a good practice in the cathedral town of Abbotsmore, about one hundred and thirty miles from Shebourne.

His sister acted as housekeeper to him, and although it was not a very large house, yet Ned Romer wondered that he had not been invited before during his holidays. There were bedrooms enough to accommodate him and his comrades. He excused his guardian, however, as being a bachelor, and not caring for the company of youngsters.

Mr Raymond's house and offices faced the main street, with the cathedral in front of it, and a large garden leading down to the river at the back. It was an old-fashioned and somewhat dark house inside, filled with passages, recesses, cupboards, and unexpected nooks. The walls of the dining-room were oak-wainscotted. The offices also were lined with the same enduring and time-blackened material.

It had been a great family house at one time, as the crests and ornaments on the ceilings showed. The small-paned windows likewise told of its ancient history. The furniture also was old and solid, with little of the modern superfluities to lighten it up. It was a comfortable house, but not one where youth would be likely to bud out with exuberance.

Both Mr Raymond and his austere sister suited the appointments of the house. She was an elderly spinster, stiff, precise, and most severely orderly. He was a sharp-faced man, who appeared wedded to his legal documents, and possessing a mind never far out of his office.

It was late in the afternoon when our heroes arrived, and, after spending a few hours in the society of their host and hostess, they were not sorry when bedtime came.

“There is no good lingering here any longer than we can help, lads,” said Ned on retiring. “Tomorrow I intend to

tackle old Raymond, and see what he purposes doing for us.”

That night the lawyer had a final look over the papers relating to the affairs of his late client, Mr Romer. He did this after the boys and his household had retired and behind locked doors.

A fox-like man of about fifty Mr Jabez was, with thin hair and side whiskers, originally dark red, but now grizzled and grey. Much poring over documents had reddened his eyelids and sharp long nose, and taken the red out of his long parchment-like jaws. His mouth was thin-lipped and wide, which gave him an unpleasant grin when he smiled, as he was doing now, his eyes also were yellow speckled, like Fred Weldon’s, but, unlike Fred’s open eyes, they were shifty and half hidden by the reddened, scantily lashed lids.

“Hum, these will do, I think. It is not at all likely that this boy will dispute my accounts or ask outside aid to understand these professional mysteries. I’ll have it over tomorrow with him, while he is eager to get away, and make him a liberal offer, to be rid of him at once and for ever.”

It will be seen from this muttered soliloquy inside the door of Mr Jabez Raymond’s study that he was of the same mind as his unsophisticated ward—to get into and over business as rapidly as possible.

Next morning, therefore, after the customary breakfast of bacon and eggs, he forestalled Ned by asking the three boys into his sanctum.

“I intended to postpone going into particulars respecting your late father’s affairs until you had gained your majority, Mr Edward; but as you have already mapped out your career, I think it will meet your views if I do so at once.”

He grinned, what he considered to be an indulgent smile upon the young gentlemen, while instinctively they wished he had not done so; that widening of his thin mouth somehow spoilt the effect of his words.

“I do not suppose you have any desire to go very deeply into your family history. Yet you had best glance over these documents after I have told you briefly their contents, and see how at present your fortune stands.”

“Your word will be quite sufficient, Mr Raymond,” replied Ned, hastily. “My father trusted you, and that is quite enough for me.”

The lawyer once more grinned, and spread out his hands in a deprecating fashion, as he answered—

“You must not do this, my young friend, with every one you meet, or you may live to regret it. Your poor, noble, and generous-hearted father trusted too many people for his own welfare and those coming after him, otherwise I should have had more satisfactory accounts to give you.”

“Yet if others deceived him, I am sure you could not, Mr Raymond.”

“Thank you, Edward. I may say that I have tried my utmost to prove a just and faithful steward, but alas! I found matters in a sad muddle, which have taken me all your years to disentangle; even now the unpleasant task is far from being done. Listen, and I’ll try to give you a summary of how you stand.” Clarence and Fred were moving off towards the window, thinking that they had no right to listen to these private disclosures, when Mr Jabez stopped them.

“Please sit down and listen also, young gentlemen. Four heads are better than two, even although one happens to be that of a lawyer, in a business of this kind. Besides, we may require you as witnesses.”

The two bowed and returned to their chairs.

“When your father inherited the Romer estates, Edward, he was, as you are, an only child, and, like you, had been left early an orphan.

“My predecessors, Messrs Skinner and Bland, had been the family solicitors of your grandfather, and although the property was a wide-spreading one, with many prosperous farms upon it, yet it had been considerably mortgaged for the two past generations.

“Ostensibly your father’s income was eight thousand, but really, at the date of his succession, six thousand five hundred of this went yearly to pay the interest of the old mortgages.

“This was bad enough, yet it might have been improved with care, economy, and a wealthy marriage. Your dear, chivalrous father, however, did not come from a cheese-paring race, and he was too noble to sell himself for money.”

“Dear father,” murmured Ned. He was too young at that father’s death to remember what he was like, but this testimony to his generous and disinterested nature touched a kindred chord in the boy’s heart.

“Ah, yes!” continued the lawyer, softly. “You were too young to remember what your father was like, yet in outward appearance you resemble him, and doubtless you have the same fine and gentlemanly disregard for money. It runs in the blood.”

As Ned did not reply, Mr Jabez went on—

“Some, as I have said, might have tried by marriage or strict economy to better their condition. But Mr Romer did neither. He married the lady of his choice, who had nothing; then, after marriage, he kept up the old style at Romer Court.

"After a few years his income had dwindled down to nine hundred, and then he tried, by speculating, to regain what he had lost. His speculations were not lucky ones. The friends he trusted failed him at the finish, so that when he died, twelve months after your mother, he was responsible for more than the small income left him, and had only mortgaged property to leave behind, a large number of personal debts, and nothing else to leave."

"Then where did the money come from to keep me all these years at school, Mr Raymond?" Asked Ned, quickly.

The lawyer flushed a brickly flush as he answered—"Well, I am coming to that subject, my dear young friend. When I undertook your father's affairs, I went to work energetically and justly, yet without sentiment—lawyers do not work often in that vein. I mastered the debts of honour and the extent of the mortgages, and managed to scrape sufficient to pay for your education."

"Then there is nothing left for me?" Asked Ned, blankly.

"Softly, softly, my dear boy. In ten or twelve years from now I hope, D.V., to have a good balance for you at the bank, and an income of five or six hundred pounds for you. I have almost settled all the personal debts, and am now working to reduce the mortgages."

"Yes. But how about the present? Can I not realise any money?"

"I have made some arrangements with my own bank, and can let you have a lump sum of say five hundred pounds on your note of hand, only if I do this it will mean drawing your income until you are of age."

"I am quite willing to sign any document you like if you can do this without inconveniencing yourself, Mr Romer," said Ned, eagerly.

Mr Jabez Raymond gazed upon his ward for a few moments silently, while he appeared to think. Then he spoke.

"It is not exactly professional; but as you wish to try your fortune in Africa, while from all reports, Africa is the coming land for fortune-making, I think it can be done. I wish you first to read over carefully these documents, in which all I have told you is written, and also examine carefully this parchment, which I have drawn up for you to sign—examine them and consult together about them. When you have done this, if you decide to have the money down now, instead of drawing it quarterly for the next four years, you can let me know on my return at lunch-time."

Mr Jabez rose as he said these words, and leaving the boys to study the pile of parchment, he went out to attend to his other business.

They had been accustomed to difficult problems at Dr Heardman's Academy, but those were simple to solve compared to the understanding of these legally obscured documents. After a long hour of bewilderment, Ned laid them down respectfully in a heap, and turned dolefully upon his trusty but equally befogged comrades.

"Well, boys, what do you make out of these mysteries?"

"Nothing, except a dry throat and an aching head," replied Clarence Raybold.

"Let's go for a walk, and get some gooseberries. I'm not going to attempt the impossible," cried Ned, decidedly.

This proposal was grateful to the others, so together they went out to the sun, and enjoyed themselves till lunch-time. After lunch the lawyer read over the document which required the signature of Ned. It sounded all right, although terribly garnished with obscure phrases. There were blank spaces to be afterwards filled up, such as the amounts received, with the terms of repayment, dates, and conditions, which Mr Jabez explained as he read in his most fatherly tones.

It sounded all right, therefore Ned put his name boldly at the bottom in the presence of Miss Priscilla Raymond and his two friends, who afterwards signed theirs as witnesses.

This document dried, and locked with other papers into Mr Raymond's safe, the lawyer drew a cheque in his own name and went to the bank to get it cashed.

Chapter Four.

Stephanus Groblaar.

Five hundred pounds seemed a big fortune to the three young adventurers, who had hitherto been more than passing wealthy on an odd half-sovereign. It was a vast sum to think about, and its possibilities seemed limitless.

They felt likewise, as they talked over matters, that appearances were unjustly against Mr Jabez Raymond, and how his face and manners belied his real nature. If he had the face of a fox, and that peculiarly slinking manner generally ascribed to false natures and treacherous dogs, his present actions all went to prove that he was entirely the opposite to what these outward signs betokened. Ned remembered how the ancient physiognomist had misread the great Socrates; and how the good philosopher confirmed his opinion, by telling his disciples that he might have been the degraded being the physiognomist said he was, but for his power of self-restraint. Perhaps Mr Jabez Raymond had the gift of Socrates, and had mastered his original tendencies. If, therefore, he looked and grinned like a wily fox, while he listened to their plans, and heard them joy over their store of cash, he certainly showed that he had full faith in their discretion by placing this large sum so freely at their disposal. He also exhibited the active side of his appreciation and sympathy by aiding them in every way that he could.

Indeed, older heads than theirs might have been a little surprised at the extraordinary zeal he showed in advancing them on their journey. He devoted himself so entirely to the lads during their short stay at his house, that more experienced people might have grown suspicious.

But to the young fellows, this exclusive attention, which prevented them from talking with any one outside the lawyer's household—this eager zeal that made him accompany them to London and attend to their comfort while there, were so many signs that he was their best friend and well-wisher.

Their first unpleasant impressions faded quickly away, and they even forgot to shiver before that long and crafty grin. Why should any man be distrusted because at times he may remind one of a beast of some kind, when his acts are those of a benefactor? It is by their actions people prove themselves, not by their looks. Mr Jabez Raymond took one of his rare holidays from business and accompanied them to London.

He took them to a staid and respectable inn in Holborn, and went with them to the best theatres, music-halls, and picture-galleries during the week. On Sunday he took them to hear two of the most celebrated preachers.

During the day he accompanied them to the shops where outfits were to be had, and insisted on getting for them the best that could be purchased, paying for everything himself without a murmur. They had considered him to be a hard man at first sight, but now they were forced to alter their opinions when they witnessed his generosity.

He introduced them to the Dutch agent of a big South African firm at the Cape, who was called Johannes Groblaar, and who not only gave them much sage advice, but told them that his nephew was going out in the next steamship, and would accompany them if they liked. This friendly offer they gladly accepted, as Stephanus Groblaar was a native of Pretoria, and knew the country thoroughly. Thus they found everything made easy for them at the start by this benevolent and generous guardian, and after a pleasant sojourn of eight days in London, they bade farewell to Mr Raymond at the East India Docks, and prepared to enjoy three weeks' sea-voyage as saloon passengers.

Everything they could think about, even their passage-money, had been paid from the purse of Mr Raymond, in spite of their protests, and they were carrying their store of funds untouched. By this time their hearts were completely won, and they vowed that old Raymond was a jolly fine fellow.

This jolly fine fellow stood on the deck until the bell rang for the tender to return. He rubbed his lean hands together when not engaged spreading one hand over his wide mouth to cover a yawn. Then, with a hearty handshake, he returned to the train, while the steamship proceeded on her voyage.

To amuse himself on the journey back, he took out his pocket-book and added up the expenses he had been put to for the young gentlemen.

The grin had left his jaws at the last wave of his handkerchief. He now looked grim, yet on the whole not dissatisfied.

"Priscilla will grumble at the large outlay," he muttered; "but it was necessary to keep the young cub in a proper mood, and leave a good impression. Now he can have no suspicions, and I have four years to turn myself about, even if he ever comes back to claim his own, which is extremely doubtful."

Ned Romer was going away full of faith and loving-kindness towards this knave who had been robbing him systematically for years. What he had given had not been a quarter's interest on the money due to Ned, therefore no wonder that he felt it needful to expend this sum—particularly with that document in his possession.

The trusting father had left him entire control of the estate, with the possession of all papers and deeds; thus he had not many fears about his peculations being discovered. The parchment which Ned had signed was really a deed of sale of all that he had inherited from his father. Being a minor, it was as yet useless in a legal sense, but as the dates were not yet added, Mr Raymond was prepared to advance these dates by four years, if what he expected happened. If Ned added his bones to the number of those who had left them in the wilds of that fatal country, this could easily be done without any dispute. Indeed, Mr Jabez would hardly require any deed to step into the property which he had already marked out as his own. Yet possible heirs might turn up unexpectedly, and it would quash their claims. If Ned returned, more wide awake than he had left, the wily lawyer had all these years to prepare for him.

"I don't think this cub will come back, and it is not likely that he will make name enough for his death to be much noticed."

Mr Jabez Raymond belonged to the singular sect of Bedlitionians, and amongst them he was a shining light as a local preacher. The thought of what he had done, and what he planned, did not disturb his conscience in the least. He possessed the not uncommon quality of being able to separate business entirely from religion; therefore the following Sunday evening he preached a very edifying sermon to his brethren, and went home to sister Priscilla as full of rectitude and self-righteousness as any local preacher could be. Humanity is crammed with such anomalies.

Stephanus Groblaar, the new companion and shipmate of our heroes, was a pleasant and affable young Boer of about twenty-two. As a specimen of his countrymen, he impressed them most favourably.

He was straw-haired and grey-eyed, with skin suntanned to a warm amber tint. Tall, burly, yet well formed, he was a picture of rude strength and solid resolution. In repose, his heavy features gave him rather a morose appearance, however.

But he could be very frank and engaging when he liked, and as he set himself to win the friendship of the young men, it was not long before he did so.

They passed a very pleasant time going to the Cape, and the river and coast scenery made them decide to keep

diaries.

These diaries began all right with a description of the river Thames and coast as far as Southampton, but long before they reached Madeira the diaries were laid aside, and never again taken up. Jotting down ordinary events did not appeal to our three heroes. They resolved to give their pens a rest until they had killed their first real wild beast.

Stephanus Groblaar spoke to them sensibly and sagely. While they listened to his prudent advice, they felt they could not do better than act upon it.

“You will find that five or six hundred pounds will not go far in Africa. It will be best to bank it, and try to make your way without breaking upon your capital, or rather work for money to add to it.”

“What do you think we should do?” enquired Ned.

“Anything that turns up. I may get you a bullock team to help to drive up to the Transvaal. That would show you a lot of the country, and give you plenty of experience as well. It is rough a bit, and will take you some time, but you don't mind that, I suppose?”

“Not at all; it will train us to rough it in the wilds, and we can afford to spend a little time getting colonial experience.”

This conversation took place between Madeira and the island of Tenerife.

A curious, and what might have been a tragic adventure had happened to Ned Romer just outside of Funchal, while they were seeing the sights of that lovely and precipitous island of Madeira.

The three young men had gone inland with Stephanus Groblaar. While standing on the edge of one of the cliffs with a sheer drop of seven hundred feet, Stephanus had suddenly made a stumble and lurched against Ned with his full force.

The guide, who was near at hand, saved our principal hero from a horrible death, by what seemed like a miracle.

Ned was just going over, when the guide caught hold of his coat-tails, and by a sudden and powerful tug, landed him on his back over the body of Stephanus, who had fallen on his face.

It was a considerable shock to Ned's nerves, and he rose a little chalky about the gills. But his pallor was nothing to that which overspread the face of the young Boer, making his bronzed skin look like old ivory. He shook as if he had the palsy, and for some moments could not utter a word. When he did find his voice, his expressions of regret and self-reproach were painful to listen to, considering that it was only an accident.

He said he had been seized with a sudden giddiness which he could not account for. The guide listened to his explanation and apologies with a stolid expression, but took good care during the rest of the journey to keep a firm hold of his arm when they were near any dangerous ledge.

It was while they were lying at Tenerife that the second attack of giddiness seized Stephanus, and once more Ned was the object against which he fell.

A portion of the ship's rail had been removed, and Ned was standing by the open gap, looking over the moonlit sea.

It was a lovely night and hot. Ned had come on deck in his pyjamas to have a cool down before turning in for the night. The deck at this part was quite deserted, as it was past midnight. Clarence and Fred had walked over to the engine-room, and Ned fancied that he was quite alone at that moment.

Suddenly he felt a violent push from behind, and next instant he was in the sea with a splash.

When he rose to the surface and cleared the water from his eyes, he found a rope within reach, and very quickly clambered on board, nothing the worse for his unexpected bath.

In a few more moments, Stephanus Groblaar with Clarence and Fred were also pulled up safely from the shark-infested waves. The two friends had seen the accident which caused Ned and Stephanus to tumble overboard, and without a pause they had sprung in also.

It was lucky for the Boer that they did this, also that they were such expert swimmers, as it appeared he could not swim a stroke. Indeed, he was almost drowned before they could get hold of him. It had happened as before, through his unfortunate giddiness; this time Ned had instinctively made a clutch at him and pulled him over, otherwise he might only have fallen to the deck.

When Stephanus recovered his senses, he enquired anxiously who had saved his life, and, when told that it was Clarence and Fred, he expressed his gratitude in a few heartfelt words, and vowed that he would never forget this great service.

He also said how sorry he was to have imperilled the life of Ned, and hoped he would forgive him.

Ned treated the matter as a first-class joke, but told Stephanus that he should avoid open spaces near the sea, since he could not swim, and mountain ledges, since he could not fly.

“For myself, I am as much at home in the water as on dry land; so also are my chums. It was much more dangerous, however, at Madeira.”

“I trust this may be my last attack of giddiness,” answered Stephanus, huskily. “It is the extra fine living on board

ship which must have made me bilious, I think.”

“Funny, isn’t it, that you should have been seized twice when near me?” remarked Ned, unsuspectingly.

The young Boer shot a rapid and furtive glance at Ned, but seeing how open he looked, he smiled and held out his hand.

“It was lucky for me both times that you were in front of me, if not so for you. In a sense you have also saved my life, Edward Romer.”

“Not at all; only you ought to learn to swim.”

“And fly,” added Fred, who was standing beside them.

For the rest of the voyage Stephanus had no more giddy attacks, and his young friends quickly forgot the accidents. The Boer, however, did not forget his obligations. He was more profuse in his expressions towards Ned; yet if quieter towards the others, he attached himself more to them, and showed by many signs that he liked them better than he appeared to like Ned.

Thus the days passed pleasantly until they dropped anchor at Cape Town, and went ashore to begin their new life.

Chapter Five.

Amongst the Cape Boers.

The first week at Cape Town shook them up more than years of living in England could have done. They had been only boys when they first sighted Table Mountain, but in a week’s time they felt and acted like men.

“It is a queer place, this Cape Town,” observed Ned, as they walked through the streets, and looked about them.

It was queer because it was all so strange and new to these English-bred lads. The sandstorm that greeted them on their landing did not surprise the two colonial boys as it did Ned Romer. They endured the infliction philosophically, while Ned groaned, and wished for a few moments that he had stopped in dear old England.

But this gust passed, and, being the first of his experience, it seemed the worst. In a short time he became accustomed to sand, shortness of water, and the lack of a host of conveniences which had appeared as necessities to him at one time.

Stephanus Groblaar continued his protection and friendship to them all the time they were at Cape Town and its surrounding districts. He took them to his uncle’s house, and so saved them the expense of living at any of the hotels, which was a great saving to them.

The South Africans are a hospitable people, and the town-educated Dutch very different from their country cousins, the Transvaal Boers.

The lads were delighted with their reception and generous treatment. They explored Table Mountain, and passed several happy days before they had exhausted the sights of this ancient African capital.

The uncle of Stephanus was the owner of a large and prosperous vineyard in Stellenbosch, and he had half a dozen fair, plump, and lively female cousins, ranging from seven years of age to twenty-three. Stephanus was engaged to the second oldest, a girl of nineteen. They had also eight brothers, all living at home and assisting in the different departments of the wine business.

It was, therefore, a large household, and when the day’s work was over, a merry, home-like party in the evenings.

It seemed to the lads as if they were transported back a couple of centuries while they rested in this vine farm. The buildings were nearly the same age as the great oak trees that surrounded them and shaded the roadways. The tiles and bricks with which they were built had been made in and brought from Holland. Everything was quaint, old-fashioned, and picturesque. The master of the house was patriarchal with his family and servants, and the mother was a real mistress after the good old style.

Morning and evening the old Bible was brought out, and every one was forced to join in the religious exercise. The master did not greatly believe in his coloured servants having souls, yet as this had come to be a disputed question amongst some of the advanced Boers, Van Groblaar gave them the benefit of the doubt, and made them also attend family worship. He was a strict and severe master with these dark-skinned bondmen and bondwomen, yet his patriarchal system appeared to be the right one as far as they were concerned. On this farm they did their work much better than they would have done under the English system.

The girls had been educated at the best Cape schools. They could play on the piano, and had all the other accomplishments of young ladies.

Yet this did not make them disdain household and farm work. They were all able to milk the cows, make butter and cheese, and do all the other duties expected from a Dutch housewife. They reserved their fancy accomplishments for the evenings, and were up to their daily work long before the sun rose.

Although it was a remarkably enjoyable life which the boys led at Stellenbosch, they quickly wearied of it, and began

to long for something more exciting. The riding lessons which they took with the sons, and the gun practice were all very useful, yet humiliating also, since they could never hope to compete with those born marksmen and centaurs. It is almost impossible for a true Africander to miss his mark or be unseated from his horse.

As soon, therefore, as they had learnt something about the managing of cattle and Kaffirs, and had found their way about the country, they began to find the society of their puritanical burgher friends slightly irksome. The charming scenery became monotonous, and the tinkle of a piano almost as hard to endure as a barrel-organ is to some ears.

The desire to trek had come upon them, and whenever men or boys get that desire, no fertile oasis, no earthly paradise, can hold them back from the desert.

Stephanus, who was in their confidence, had a private conversation with his uncle Groblaar, and communicated the result one morning to them as they were moping amongst the ripening grapes.

It was not easy for the young ladies or the stolid sons of Van Groblaar to understand how any human being could be melancholy as long as there was plenty to eat and drink. In their own placid minds three of the daughters had decided that Ned, Fred, and Clarence had the makings of very good farmers and husbands in them, and for this felt gratified to Cousin Stephanus for bringing them.

They were considerably startled, therefore, and not a little distressed, when they saw how our heroes brightened up after they heard the result of that family confab.

The old Dutchman, who took a long time to decide upon anything, had been persuaded to send up his yearly consignment of wines and brandy to Johannesburg without any further delay. It would go by road as usual, and the new comrades were to go with the waggons.

By doing this they would see the country, while the journey would not cost them anything.

This offer was gladly accepted by the young men—for they were now, in their own and the estimation of the young ladies, such. They no longer wondered how time was to be killed, but eagerly began to prepare for the long and slow overland journey.

The Groblaar wines and brandy were greatly prized, and fetched big prices everywhere in the market. In the Transvaal particularly they were vastly appreciated. The age was to be depended upon, and the quality; while the grower considered that the contents of these matured hogsheads would be ruined if transported by any other mode than oxen.

Another reason they had for going by road instead of rail. There were numerous customers to be served en route, at places outside the line of the railway.

Three of the eldest sons were deputed to go on this trek along with our heroes and Cousin Stephanus, and as they looked upon this journey as their annual holiday, they provided themselves with everything needful to enjoy themselves.

Twenty teams were required to carry the stores, provisions, and merchandise. The oxen were all specially selected, and the waggons and drays reliable as well as strong; so that when they mounted their horses and inspanned, they were a very smart and prosperous-looking caravan.

Our heroes made their farewells joyously, for they were heart-whole. They did not notice the sad looks that followed after them. Yet three of Van Groblaar's young daughters did not display their customary appetite at dinner that day, nor did they seem much inclined for supper either that night. Next day, however, they all made up for their unusual fast.

Ned was a little surprised when he came to say good-bye to the young lady who had given him most of her company during his stay, by her saying to him, in a slightly tremulous voice—

“You are going out to a strange land, where there are many dangers. Take care!”

“Oh, I'll look out for number one, you bet, Miss Santa.”

“Take care of the wild-beast traps.”

“Oh yes, I know; open gaps, and that sort of thing.”

“Yes; and”—she flushed scarlet while she whispered softly—“and look out also for Cousin Stephanus; he does not like you.”

She turned from him swiftly as she gave this warning, and ran indoors, while he mounted his horse, wondering what she could mean.

Then, as he rode slowly on, he recalled the accidents on the outward voyage, with other signs which might have escaped his notice but for this last whisper from the young Dutch maiden. He was not quite so guileless as he had been a few months before. Whatever the reasons were, he felt himself forced to the conclusion that Stephanus Groblaar did not care greatly for him, although he seemed attached to his two chums. Stephanus avoided him as much as possible while they had been on the farm, and he had caught sundry sullen and furtive glances which looked almost like hatred at times.

Well, forewarned is forearmed to some extent. Ned shook the momentary uneasiness and depression from his heart,

and soon was riding along merrily with the others.

Not being a fool, however, he resolved to keep a wary eye on this supposed evil-wisher, and look out for any more awkward fits.

It is nasty for any one to feel that he is disliked, much more so if he has done nothing to incur that disagreeable sentiment. Ned Romer was guiltless of anything as far as he knew. He was the most generous and happy of the party. As yet he had never entertained a single animosity towards a human being. Everything that he saw entertained him and provided him with amusement. He had no fear, and tried to make friends with every one.

Besides, he felt specially obliged, in many ways, to Stephanus Groblaar, and therefore would have sacrificed a good deal to be his friend.

But a new instinct had been roused in his nature by those parting words of Santa. The first seeds of suspicion were sown in that generous soil. This seed would grow until it destroyed the unwise trust of boyhood, and make of him a vigilant and discriminating man in the future. Truly he had left adolescence behind him when his horse walked under the shady oak avenues of Stellenbosch.

Nothing occurred, however, to mar their harmony as they moved slowly upward through the populated portions of Cape Colony.

Day after day went along with varying incidents and amusements. When they were able they spent the night at some friendly settler's homestead, and were most hospitably welcomed and entertained. These were, without exception, Dutch farmers, and old friends of the Groblaars, so that they saw little enough of the British members of the community.

They had mastered enough of the Cape Dutch and "Kitchen Kaffir" idioms to understand what was said, as well as express themselves to be understood by those they were so constantly thrown amongst by this time. As every one was alike free and kind, if a bit rough and homely, they took the most favourable impression possible of this industrious if slow-going and bigoted race.

It was not nice to hear Englishmen so constantly spoken about with such contempt as a nation of cowards and oppressors; yet as the Boers gave their opinions good-naturedly, and exhibited such an utter want of knowledge in their statements, the lads could not help laughing also as they listened.

The farther up they travelled the more crassly ignorant and prejudiced they found their hosts to be; yet, although they universally insulted and tried to bespatter the Union Jack, they universally made their English guests as heartily welcome as were their Dutch friends. The rites of hospitality were most generously observed. It was not that these Dutch Afrianders were all uncouth and ignorant men and women. The majority of them were as well and even more highly educated than are these classes in England. A large proportion of them had likewise travelled and seen England and the Continent. It seemed the fashion to be prejudiced against England. They had taken their preconceived notions along with them wherever they went, accepting only such evidences and historical facts as suited their own side of the disputed question. "The English are a nation of liars, and don't know much about anything useful. They are no use anywhere, and they are almost done for."

This was the universal opinion of the Dutch natives of Africa, and no argument could move them one iota. They all spoke banteringly and with good-tempered irony, as one might speak of something settled and past curing or dispute. They despised the English as a nation, abhorred Cecil Rhodes, and laughed at Gladstone as a friendly old imbecile. But they did not object to individuals.

The boys listened and laughed with their bigoted but generous friends, and took all this talk in the same good part.

Chapter Six.

The Secret Message.

There were many incidents on this overland journey, both humorous and adventurous, which might have formed subjects for future talk.

But the after events dwarfed these minor adventures so completely that they were hardly ever mentioned.

Small game was plentiful on some of the open parts, and afforded them good enough sport after a tame fashion. Here the Dutchmen displayed their wonderful skill as marksmen, and won unqualified admiration and respect. When they saw the unflinching and deadly precision of that shooting, and how little lead was wasted, the lads no longer felt any surprise at the surrender of Dr Jameson at Krugersdorp. Surrounded as he had been by such sharpshooters, he had not a chance of holding out, almost shelterless as he was. The Dutchmen were all mightily proud of the achievements of their friends in the Transvaal, and not at all delicate in their boasting. They were never tired of hearing and speaking about "Bronkhurst Spruit," "Laing's Nek," and "Majuba Hill," as well as this latest defeat at Krugersdorp. As for Johannesburg and its craven citizens, long before the lads saw this golden city of the veldt, its degradation had been forced deep into their hearts by this contemptuous banter.

Stephanus Groblaar altered his manner in a most marked degree as they progressed up the country. On the voyage out and at Cape Town he had seemed one of the most advanced and liberal-minded of young Boers. He even appeared to take the part of the Uitlanders then, and thus had won their respect and confidence.

But now he became the loudest and most insulting of the despisers and denouncers of everything British. He lost the

small amount of humour that he seemed to have possessed, and which his franker cousins still retained, and grew savage instead of bantering in his expressions.

He was returning home to Pretoria, after two years of social intercourse with Englishmen, as full of race hatred as any of his untravelled countrymen.

Clarence Raybold saw this new phase with silent surprise, and listened to his exasperating observations with tightly closed mouth and lowering eyes.

At last one night matters were brought to a crisis. They had crossed the Vaal river, and were outspanning on the open veldt.

Eight of their heavy-laden teams were all that remained with them. The contents of the other twelve drays had been disposed of on the way up, and the teams sent down the country again with chance loads. The eldest of Santa's brothers alone remained with the young men and Stephanus to look after the Transvaal business. He was a stolid, good-natured fellow, who did his utmost to keep peace in the camp, and turn his cousin's ill-timed remarks into jokes.

But Stephanus seemed bent on a quarrel that night, although with whom it was not easy to say.

Clarence seemed to feel the insults the most keenly. Ned Romer, however, sat quietly, and watched the young Boer while he listened and waited. For the first time a strong desire to measure his strength with this Dutchman came upon him—the kind of desire that young Zulus have when they want to wash their virgin spears.

A full moon shone over their heads and lighted up the level landscape with pale but vivid distinctness.

"Well," at last observed Clarence, with a lisping drawl; he always spoke slow and lazy-like when primed up for fighting—"well, not being in Johannesburg during the time you speak about, Stephanus Groblaar, I cannot contradict you as to the colour of their flag; yet if I had been, I think I'd have done my best, young as I am, to show that there was an equal mixture of red and blue as well as white about it."

"Hold on till you get to Pretoria. There we make Uitlanders walk with Kaffirs in the middle of the street."

"Is this the rule in Pretoria?" asked Ned, gently.

"Yes, for the like of you; and we'll make them do the same in Johannesburg before we have done with them," cried Stephanus, turning on Ned with an ugly scowl.

"Nonsense. I always like the side path, and I shall use that wherever I am," answered Ned, laughing.

"Will you? Why, curs like you could not use this veldt as you like unless with our permission, far less the sides of our streets."

"Ah, indeed, Mr Groblaar," said Ned, rising to his feet slowly. "Is there any particular portion of this place that you as a free burgher might prohibit tonight?"

"Yes; I defy you to pass me now."

They were all standing now with the exception of the cousin Groblaar, who lay on his back snoring.

"Wait a moment, Ned," said Clarence, softly. "I think Stephanus only meant to stop me from walking past him."

"No," growled the Boer; "I did not mean you. I don't want to interfere with you, nor with Fred either, for you are both colonial born and bred. It is this cur of a John Bull that I'd teach to keep his place."

"Good," answered Ned. "Then this cur of a John Bull accepts your gentlemanly challenge, and will show you that he knows his place, and that place is, whatever spot of the earth he finds it expedient for the advance of civilisation to tread upon."

He walked steadily up to the Boer with his arms held limply down; then, before the other could put up his fists, Ned suddenly gripped him and sent him sprawling some feet away, while he stood where Stephanus had been.

"This is Imperial ground, you Dutch Boer, upon which the Lion of Britain permits your people to play for the present."

It was a grand speech, which Ned felt proud to give voice to, and which his chums cheered. Another clear voice behind them cried, "Bravo, young cub!" but none looked round to hear who spoke. Stephanus did not give them time for that.

With a hoarse roar he picked himself up, and made the rush like a wounded buffalo. He was a powerful young man come to his full strength, whereas Ned Romer was only ripening.

But he was heavily built, and slow in his movements in spite of his rage. He had not had the training nor discipline which Ned could boast of; and lastly, he had been drinking "Cape smoke" that day, which rendered him stupid and careless. Possibly also the overweening conceit and insolence of his race made him contemptuous of this slender lad.

Ned, on the other hand, was in splendid condition, as lithe and agile as a young panther, and as quick in the glance as he was active and cool. The past three months of horse exercise and open-air life had made his muscles like steel.

As Stephanus rushed upon him with swollen features and blood-charged eyes, Ned waited quietly; then, with a sudden spring aside, he shot out one fist, and landed the Dutchman a thumper on the bridge of his nose, which

caused him to see a perfect flare of fireworks, while it made him stagger in his tracks.

For an instant he paused, and put up both hands to his bruised organ; then as he turned once more and removed his hands, a dark stream burst from his nostrils, and deluged his chin and shirt-front.

"First blood, and well drawn," cried the clear voice again. "Go it, my hearty; you have shown him the red, let him have the blue next stroke."

Fred and Clarence glanced round, to see a tall, broad-chested stranger in a light suit and soft felt hat standing behind them, with his horse beside him and its bridle over his arm.

As he spoke Ned got in his second blow, and as the stranger had advised, smote his adversary higher up and right between the eyes. It was a loud-sounding smash, which completely blinded Stephanus, and made it apparent to all the onlookers that he had received his blue badge.

"These will be pretty peepers tomorrow morning," said the stranger; then, making a hasty step forward, he raised his heavy riding-whip, as he exclaimed, "Ha! you would show the white next, you treacherous dog, would you? Drop that knife instantly."

As he spoke he brought the stock of his whip smartly upon the wrist of Stephanus, causing him to utter a loud yell, while his glittering sheath-knife dropped gleaming to the ground. Holding his damaged wrist with one hand, the Transvaaler staggered blindly back, and abandoned the field to the calm and victorious Ned.

"He has had enough of your fists, young man, for the present, I expect, only be on your guard with him for the future. Boers don't forget blows, neither do they care much about fighting in the open. He will try a bead on you next from behind a kopje."

He was an immense figure of a man who had come out of the veldt so unexpectedly, considerably over six feet in height and broad in proportion. His skin was ruddy, with bold features, light, keen eyes, and he wore a small, fair moustache. As the boys looked at him, they each thought they had seen him somewhere before, but where they could not at the time remember. There was about him an air of kingly authority which fascinated them.

"Have you any coffee left?" he asked gently.

Clarence went instantly to the half-empty billy at the fire, and brought a pannikin filled. The stranger took it with a nod, and slowly sipped the contents, looking at them scrutinisingly as he drank.

Cousin Groblaar still lay sleeping heavily within the shadow of one of the waggons. Stephanus had moved away to some considerable distance to brood over his defeat and bathe his eyes and nose at a water-hole. The Kaffirs were also sound asleep on their side of the fire, therefore they had this contested part of the veldt to themselves.

"You managed that onslaught in very good style, my lad, and have made for yourself a pretty dangerous enemy, or I am much mistaken in my reading of faces."

"An avowed enemy is better than a secret one, sir, and I have good reasons to suspect Stephanus Groblaar of being one before this night," replied Ned.

"Ah, Groblaar is his name! Any friend of Groblaar, the vine-grower, of Stellenbosch?"

"His nephew, sir. Yonder lies his son asleep."

"Let him sleep," said the stranger, hastily. "Then the young man you punished must be the son of Burgher Groblaar, of Pretoria?"

"I believe so, sir. At least, his home is in that city," answered Ned.

"Hum! thanks for this information. Then take my advice, part company with this Stephanus Groblaar as soon as possible, and also—don't air those Imperial ideas too freely when you are going to Johannesburg. They are not fashionable there at present."

"I will never hear my nation insulted without resenting it, sir," replied Ned, boldly.

"Better swallow insult than run the risk of imprisonment."

"No, sir; I cannot endorse that sentiment."

"It is the sentiment generally held by the Transvaal Uitlanders."

"I do not care. It shall never be mine."

"Nor mine!" "Nor mine!" cried Fred and Clarence in chorus.

"Good lads," said the stranger, in feeling tones, holding out his large hand to our heroes, who grasped it by turns. "I like you for your pluck and freshness. Tell me your names, so that I may remember them if I can serve you at any time."

The lads at once produced their cards and presented them. The stranger smiled humorously as he took the pasteboards.

"Ah, you are fresh from England, I see. All the better. You will see some sad and humbling sights in Johannesburg. But keep up your pluck, and don't forget that you are sons of a mighty nation of free men."

"Depend upon it we shall never do that, so long as the great Cecil Rhodes stays in Africa, at any rate." The stranger started, and a dusky tint seemed to overspread his face. Then he smiled and looked at the cards.

"Edward Romer! I knew a Paul Romer, of Devonshire."

"That was my father, sir."

"Indeed! Then I must do something for you. Clarence Raybold. Ah, I know your father, if he lives at Johannesburg."

"He does, sir," answered Clarence.

The stranger looked at Fred with the others intently and silently for a few moments, then he drew nearer to Ned.

"You can save me a journey tonight, young Romer, for I think I can depend upon you as well as upon your companions."

"I trust you can, sir," replied Ned, modestly.

"On your discretion as well as your loyalty and courage?"

"I hope so, sir."

"Then I shall trust you."

He glanced round, and seeing the veldt clear and Stephanus still by the water-hole, he pulled a leaf from his pocket-book, and wrote something hastily upon it. This small note he folded up and addressed, then he gave it to Ned.

"Put that inside your boot, and keep it there until you reach Johannesburg. When you arrive there, look at the address, and deliver it to the person it is for. You will find him easily. Meantime, be secret about it, and show it to no one except the person it is for. Much depends on its safe delivery—more on it not being taken from you or lost on the way. If you carry it safely, you will have rendered your country and the man you appear to admire a great, a very great, service."

He sprang on his horse as he spoke, and, taking his hat off, waved it to them as he rode swiftly away.

"Remember that you are trusted by Cecil Rhodes. So long. We shall meet again."

He was off at a gallop, while our heroes looked after horse and man with open mouths.

"What a slice of luck, Ned! Who could have expected it?" whispered Fred and Clarence, as soon as they recovered from their astonishment.

Ned did not reply. Kneeling down he took off his boot, and secreted the precious bit of paper inside; then he rose up with a bright and proud light gleaming in his eyes.

"It is, indeed, a piece of luck which we must all try to live up to," he said at length, in a solemn voice. "My first skirmish with a Boer has resulted in an easy victory, and it has been witnessed by the greatest hero who lives. Let us hail it as a good omen."

Chapter Seven.

In Johannesburg.

Stephanus Groblaar did not patronise the camp. Either he was too much ashamed or too sulky to show himself so soon after his ignominious defeat. While our heroes remained awake, his distant figure could still be seen bending over the water-hole.

After that frustrated and cowardly attempt to draw his knife upon Ned Romer, even Fred Weldon, who had been the most friendly disposed towards him, gave him up. Neither English nor colonial-bred Britons could take the hand of a would-be assassin. All the instincts of their race are against this, as they are against using the feet in a fight. Only a Spaniard can endorse the one weapon, and a Frenchman tolerate the other mode of getting an advantage. Spaniards stab, Frenchmen kick, and cats scratch when they quarrel; Englishmen clench their fists and strike, or grip and throw.

Inspired by the charge which had been given to them by their illustrious visitor, and influenced by his timely warning, our heroes resolved to part company with Stephanus and his cousin as soon as possible. Meantime, to ward against possible treachery, they also resolved to be watchful and wary. Therefore it was agreed that, while two slept, one would keep guard over the waggon. This they did by turns faithfully until they reached Johannesburg.

Stephanus came to the waggon about midnight, while Fred was on duty. He did not speak to Fred, nor did he go inside, but ordered one of the Kaffirs, whom he roused up for the purpose, to bring out a rug for him. With this he sullenly retired to the shelter of one of the wine-drays, and there he spent the night. He was taking his beating in a nasty and Boer-like spirit.

In the morning he appeared at breakfast wearing a large pair of smoke-coloured sun-spectacles, and his nose

considerably enlarged. He did not make any remarks about the preceding evening, and his good-natured and unobservant cousin never noticed that there was anything amiss. The boys took their cue from this sulky Dutchman, and made no allusion to it either.

As they were about to inspan, a party of armed burghers came on the scene, and gave them a foretaste of what they had to expect during their stay in the Transvaal.

They represented the mounted police, or border tax-collectors. Well mounted and armed to the teeth, they rode in and delayed the start for a couple of hours, while they examined every packet most thoroughly.

They were particularly rude and insolent to the three young Uitlanders, tumbling their packages about roughly, and scattering the contents over the ground in a reckless and wanton manner, as if desirous of destroying what they could not seize. All the ammunition and arms they took possession of, telling the young men that they would be sent on to Johannesburg, where, if they could gain permission from the authorities there, they might get them, or part of them, returned.

The police gave no promise, however, neither did they favour them with any list of what they had taken. In fact, as the boys felt, with raging hearts, they were being treated exactly like prisoners in an enemy's country. They were fleeced and left utterly defenceless, with the exception of their belt-knives.

This was all the harder to bear when they saw that Stephanus and his cousin were permitted to retain their rifles, revolvers, and cartridges. It was privileges for the Boer, and none for the Uitlander.

They protested against this gross injustice, but were told roughly that they ought to be thankful that they were not taken in charge for bringing arms of any kind into the country. Also, to their indignation, they were subjected to a close personal search, and every paper they had in their pockets opened and read. Ned now understood why he had been told to place that missive inside his boot, for even their shirts were felt over to see that they had nothing concealed inside. They were certainly at last inside a land of suspicion and gross tyranny.

"So this is the result of democracy," said Ned, with a bitter laugh. "I suppose every man here is either a tyrant, a traitor, or a spy."

"Take heed what you say, young fellow," grunted one of the Boer policemen. "Remember you are not in England now, but in a country where wagging tongues are silenced pretty quickly."

"Ah! you need not remind me that I am not in England. Your actions have proved conclusively that we are subject to the glorious laws of the Republic. By Jove, though, I wonder what my countrymen would say if a foreigner was treated to this usage in England? Oh my! wouldn't there be a public conflagration!"

"We are free men here."

"You are, whatever your visitors may be."

The policeman looked at Ned with a suspicious and most unfriendly scowl.

"Are you going to stay long in the Transvaal, younker?" he asked.

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Because I fancy, if you were, that you would be likely to spend most of your time in the tronk and the stocks. That is where your sort mostly find a home here."

Ned prudently did not reply. His shirt had been examined and his pockets turned out. He did not want to have to unlace his boots next.

"I'll report that younker as a dangerous character. Keep an eye on him as you go along," cried the chief to the Groblaars, as he rode off with his men.

Stephanus took no part in this conversation, while his cousin only chuckled good-naturedly, as if it were a good joke. He was an easy-going fellow, and did not let anything trouble him much beyond the keeping of the wine cool and the oxen in good condition.

It was about four o'clock the third afternoon after this that they lumbered into Johannesburg amidst a cloud of dust, and unharnessed for the last time together.

Our heroes said good-bye with all friendliness to the vine-grower's son; and with a cold word or two to the still sullen Stephanus, they went off together to the house of Clarence Raybold, senior.

Taking it all through, their journey up-country had been an educating and a pleasant one. They had passed through a prosperous land, full of variety and strangeness. They had met all sorts of people, both white and coloured, and every description of pastures. They were brown with the fierce sun and covered with the white dust, and totally changed, outwardly and inwardly, from the schoolboys who left England such a little time ago.

They had killed puff adders and other deadly snakes on their way, and had got over their shuddering horror for those obnoxious reptiles. They had also seen the best side of the Boer character, and had commenced to experience the other side—the Boer in power, with their countrymen under his feet.

It was a new and a disagreeable experience to those proud young Britons to find their countrymen in the condition of

serfs and door-mats, with clumsy and ignorant clowns tramping over them ruthlessly. As they walked through the streets of Johannesburg, and saw at every step evidences of the misrule of that hypocritical and false tyrant, Kruger, they felt a natural and deep disgust towards the Englishmen who had permitted such a condition of things to exist.

They met gangs of Boers swaggering about fully armed, and jeering at the unarmed citizens. They saw Britons, or what looked like their countrymen, sneaking about and meekly eating the leek. Their generous young blood boiled within them as they looked up at the guns which the hoary tyrant of the Transvaal had planted on the fort to overawe the city. They felt as if they were inside the walls of a big prison, and every instinct within them moved towards rebellion.

From the moment they caught sight of that fort, with the guns dominating the streets, they were filled with a hatred towards the Boers and a quenchless desire for slaughter.

"I wonder what our people out here are made of to stand this sort of thing?" murmured Ned, as he looked at his chums' blazing eyes. "Surely some of them have enough of the old blood left to risk it for the sake of liberty."

"I'll not be able to stand it long," answered Clarence, with a deep-drawn breath.

"Nor can I," said Fred.

"It will be a lark if we are destined to light the spark," continued Ned, musingly. "I think we could get over these walls some dark night without much trouble. Oh, let's get on, boys, or I'll be after having a try now," he added impatiently, as he strode hastily forward.

"There, now, who do you think you are shoving against?" he cried angrily, as he ran against a pair of burghers who were coming round a corner.

It was Ned who had been at fault in his haste. In any other place he would have apologised, but seeing that they were Boers, he pushed them off the footpath and then turned to abuse them. It was the natural protest of a free man against unaccustomed tyranny. With those Krupp guns behind them, politeness looked like submission and fear. Fortunately for the safety of that billet in Ned's boot, which he had for the moment forgotten, these burghers were good-tempered and stolid Dutchmen, who didn't mind either a push or a cross word. They merely laughed boisterously, and passed on their way.

Now, Ned felt both aggrieved and rebuked by the good nature of these Boers, who doubtless considered him to be a foolhardy fellow rendered extra brave through "Cape smoke." Then he remembered his charge, and became utterly ashamed of his uncalled-for rudeness. He would have run after the burghers and apologised, only that might have made matters worse; besides, they had both gone into some building.

"That is not how Cecil Rhodes acted when he was being badgered by some of the commissioners, nor what he advised," Ned muttered to himself, as he bent his head with shame. "I must try to remember always that I am a gentleman, and not act like a clown."

At this moment Clarence proposed taking a cab, as the easiest and quickest mode of finding out his father's house.

Mr Raybold was one of the prominent citizens, and the moment the Jehu heard his name he knew where to drive to.

"You have most chance of finding him at his private residence, if you want to see Mr Raybold personally."

"Yes," answered Clarence. "Drive us straight there."

What a wonderful city this was, which had grown from nothing within the last six years! Grown up also in the teeth of as much discouragement and injustice as ever civilisation had to encounter, from narrow prejudice, extortion, and bigotry.

Our heroes drove along streets fifty and ninety feet in width, with trams running through them, and massive, handsome shops lining them, with plate-glass windows, looking for all the world like some of the best West End London shops.

It was a city where money was spent with lavish prodigality. There were crowds of flash hotels and clubs, and more than the ordinary number of low public-houses and canteens, every one crowded with thirsty customers.

They passed banks, stores, and palatial-looking offices, with electric globes and gas lamps ranged over them. They passed crowds of fashionably dressed men and women, all seemingly busy and lively enough. In spite of those earthworks and guns which covered them wherever they went; in spite of the constantly blazoned fact that they were completely at the mercy of their armed masters, who patrolled the city as warders do a penal settlement,—they were allowed to earn and spend as much money as they pleased, after paying the exorbitant taxes, dress as they please, and drink what they could pay for.

But they had no more civic rights than convicts or slaves have. They had no means to defend their women or children from insult. The male portion wore beards and dressed like men, but they were only men in outward appearance. They might as well have had chains upon their wrists and ankles. They were voluntary slaves and shadow citizens. They were just what their rude masters called them—Uitlanders—and on the same level as the vanquished and down-trodden Kaffirs.

Yet they called themselves British, afraid as they were to show the Flag of England or to sing the National Anthem; all they could do was to dress, drink, and make money, and, like the servile clients of ancient Rome, bend their supple backs to their arrogant and uncouth patrons, and thank them for permission to live. Sixty thousand souls who had

been born free, for the sake of gold bent the knee before sixteen thousand uncultivated retarders of civilisation.

Their condition was ten times worse than that of the Scots when Edward enslaved them with his overpowering hosts. More degrading, because they were children of the nineteenth century, who had consented to be driven by a race who had not advanced past the benighted and rusty prejudices of the dark ages of bigotry and superstition. More shameful, since they outnumbered their tyrants five times over. No wonder that these Boers regarded Britons with contempt, and the Empire as a fallen tree.

Chapter Eight.

Mr Philip Martin.

England was powerless to help the Uitlanders as long as they chose to remain inert and submissive under the yoke. Dr Jameson and his dauntless band had demonstrated that no outside heroism could lift the yoke from their shoulders while they bent beneath it so passively. Only from their own ranks must the Wallace and the Bruce rise to free them.

Ned and his chums had already read some of the literature of these Uitlanders, explaining and excusing themselves for their inaction during the Raid, or even supporting the tyrants in their oppression. These books and pamphlets had, before they reached the country, made them grind their teeth with fury. Fancy a Wallace and a Bruce waiting for the sanction of the Government before they took up their swords! Fancy their supporters waiting for permission before they rose to help their heroes!

Our heroes, although consuming with those high-souled ideas which all brave and romantic boys must feel, and which the men of Johannesburg had apparently outgrown, still watched with wonder the mighty edifices they passed.

Their wonder increased as they came to the suburbs, and saw the avenues and tall, shady trees which had all sprung up like magic out of the bare veldt—stately groves, over a hundred feet in height, all created in six years; beautiful gardens, luxuriant shrubberies, costly and artistic villas, grassy lawns, orchards, and tropic climbers covering up unsightly places with cool and exquisite loveliness. It was as if Aladdin had rubbed his magic lamp, and lo! his enslaved genius had done the trick.

The Uitlanders were the enslaved genii that had wrought this miracle upon that treeless veldt. Their civilised skill and educated intellects had accomplished what would have taken centuries to achieve under the Boer system. Yet the ignorant Boers were the masters, and ruled over intellect and civilisation. This, to our heroes, seemed even more incongruous and wonderful than the marvels which were spread out before them. However had it come to pass? However could it have gone on so long? How much longer could it possibly continue?

They were still trying to solve the problem when they drove up through a delightful avenue of trees, and stopped in front of a large and stately mansion. It was the Transvaal home of Clarence Raybold.

Everywhere they looked, the evidence of wealth and lavish outlay stared them in the face—in the grounds with its trees and lawns, which had been forced and kept green by expensive irrigation; in the vast columns and carved work of the masonry. Mr Raybold had expended a fortune on the rearing of this suburban palace as a testimony to his wealth. Even Clarence was impressed as he led the way up the steps and knocked at the heavy, polished front door.

Mr Raybold, although surrounded by so much luxury, was a bluff and hearty man, who put on no airs of dignity. He welcomed his son with affectionate warmth and his two friends with genuine hospitality. Clarence had written about their intentions from Cape Town, so that they were expected, and found their rooms all prepared.

While they were having something to eat to keep them going till dinner, a man was sent with a trap to bring their luggage.

Mr Raybold heard the account of their arms being taken by the Boers with a grim smile; but he made no other comment than to say he would do his best to have them returned, or kept safely for them until they left the Transvaal.

It was only when they were leaving the dining-room to have a bath and change their clothes, that he closed the door carefully, and said in an impressive undertone—

“Be very careful how you express any opinion about the Government, outside or inside. Also trust no one, however friendly they may appear. Remember always that we are as much under surveillance here as people are in Russia. Paul Kruger has his spies and secret detectives everywhere.”

“But this is most horrible,” cried the boys together. Mr Raybold merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled the same grim smile.

“Careless words are sometimes very costly in Johannesburg, and a silent tongue is worth a great deal more than its weight in gold here. We don’t talk much in society here, and never about politics.”

“But your wrongs?” asked Ned, “We leave that to the newspapers to air, and to those who have no money to be confiscated in fines.”

The heart of Ned sank as he listened to these wise and prudent words of this successful citizen. Gold was the chain which the Uitlanders had forged for themselves; and while the supply continued, it seemed hopeless to expect them to make any effort towards deliverance.

The three lads went off to dress themselves sadly and silently. Clarence hung his head with shame for all the splendour which appeared so many tokens of his father's fall from independence; while his chums, out of sympathy and pity for him, refrained from looking at him.

It is terrible for a brave and generous boy to feel ashamed of his father. Poor Clarence went into the sumptuous room appointed to him, and, after locking the door, he flung himself on a couch and groaned in the bitterness of his heart.

He remembered his father before he had come to the Transvaal and before he was quite so rich. Thus he had good cause to look up to him with pride, for he was a strong, fearless, and self-reliant man, who could never have uttered such words as he had done that afternoon. What a change those six years of tyranny had wrought in him! He looked older now by a dozen years. His eyes had lost their straight, outward look, and his face had become softer and flabbier, while his voice had no longer its decided ring. All this was not the father he expected to meet.

He did not remember much about his mother, for she had died while he was very young. Somehow he felt glad now for the first time to think that she had died before the Transvaal migration. It would have utterly broken his heart had he seen the same servile look on her face as he had seen on his father's.

All at once he pushed those wretched feelings from his heart, to replace them by an increased hatred for the Boers who had wrought this evil—the old obstinate baboon of Pretoria, who stood and with his darkened mind stemmed the tide of civilisation. Ah, how Clarence abhorred Oom Paul Kruger that afternoon!

Fred Weldon bathed and dressed himself quietly, thinking all the time upon poor Clarence, and wishing that he could comfort him, as Clarence had done when he lost his father. He felt now that death was not the worst calamity which could happen to a boy with his father. Time cured that; but what could cure the death of respect?

"Perhaps he is only lying low, like Brer Rabbit, and playing Indian for a special purpose. That would be quite fair in a game of this kind. I must give old Clar this idea and hope."

He grew cheerful after this, and very soon persuaded himself that such must be the case. Indeed, before he had finished dressing he was mentally regarding Mr Raybold as a dark conspirator, only waiting events to ripen, to blossom out into a daring hero of the William Tell order.

Ned, when he got into his room, also locked his door behind him; then he unlaced his boots, and putting his hand inside, pulled out the folded sheet of paper.

It was not so clear as he should have liked, but the address was readable and the paper intact.

He was too honourable to open the missive, although, had he done so, he would have been no wiser, as the contents were written in cypher. The address was as follows:—

"Mr Philip Martin, Johannesburg."

Having read it, and noted the name, he wrapped it up within a clean piece of notepaper, and placed it for the time within his purse.

He meant to ask his host that night if he knew this gentleman, and if so, he would call upon him after dinner.

But by good luck, when he got down to the library, where Mr Raybold was waiting for his young guests, he found the very man he wanted. He had come to dine with Mr Raybold.

Ned looked at the man whom the great empire-maker had written to with interest, nor was he disappointed in his ideal.

Philip Martin was a strong man, and looked a bold one also. He was about five feet eight inches in height, with a deep, wide chest and a massive neck. He had a good deal the air of a sailor about him, which his navy-blue serge suit and turned-down collar helped. His eyes were dark and piercingly bright, while over them were thick black eyebrows. His beard was cut short and pointed, and his features were pronounced, while his complexion was swarthy. He was quick and decided in his motions, and had a sonorous voice that loomed through the room. Altogether he looked a man of strength, character, and indomitable will. Just the sort of man that Ned could admire.

Ned opened his purse, and took out his note, removing the outer covering without being observed. Then, watching his chance when he was left alone with Mr Martin, he approached him, and said—

"I think this is for you, Mr Martin. I got it from a gentleman on the veldt three nights ago."

"Thanks."

Mr Martin opened the note carelessly; then, as soon as he saw the contents, he started, and crushed it quickly into his pocket.

"You have not shown any one this note, have you?"

"No; I was told to be careful about it, and give it only to you, sir."

"What kind of man was it who gave it to you?"

"It was the Honourable Cec—"

"Hush! I am satisfied. It is all right. Do not say any more."

He went over to the fire, and after reading it carefully, he put it amongst the logs, and watched it burn; then he stirred the ashes with his foot, and turned once more to Ned.

"You have done a great service in giving me this so promptly, and I shall be happy if I can serve you in return."

"I was too proud to be entrusted with it, sir."

"Then you are one of the writer's many admirers, I presume?"

"Yes, sir. There is no man I admire so much or would like to serve more."

Mr Martin looked at Ned keenly for some time without speaking, then he said—

"The writer of that note tells me I may trust you and your companions. He is seldom wrong in his reading of character, and in this instance my own opinion agrees with his, respecting you at least. I haven't seen your chums yet."

"You may safely trust us all to the death, sir, in anything honourable. We have sworn to stick together."

"To the death, you say! Well, I may even want as desperate a pledge as that. But can I trust your temper and discretion?"

Ned blushed as he remembered his afternoon fit of passion, but he replied firmly—

"I hope so, sir."

"Had you that note on you this afternoon when you assaulted those two Boers?"

Ned hung his head guiltily. Yet he answered truthfully—

"Yes, sir. The sight of the fort made me lose my head for a moment, but it shall not occur again."

"You ran a frightful risk," answered Mr Martin, severely. "The incident took place just opposite my window, and I saw it all, and expected you to be taken in charge. If you had been, that paper would have been discovered, and more damage done to the cause of freedom and federation than you at present could imagine. There, I shall not lecture you any more; only remember that to provoke a street row is not the way to qualify for a patriot. Say no more about this now, but after dinner I shall take you and your friends for a walk, show you some of the town by night, and perhaps also let you see how you may help the Uitlanders and—you know who else."

He pressed our hero's hand warmly, as a token of his forgiveness, and at once began to ask him questions about his journey up the country.

Mr Raybold came back while they were conversing, and then shortly afterwards Clarence and Fred. Almost at the same moment the dinner-gong sounded, and together they went in to dinner.

In the lobby Mr Martin whispered something in the ear of Mr Raybold, who at once turned and looked with interest at Ned. That look cleared up the doubts of Ned like magic, so that he laid hold of Clarence, and said to him tenderly—

"Cheer up, old chappy; your dad is all right!"

"Do you think so, Ned? Fred is of the same opinion."

"I don't think—I know, and so will you before the night is over. Take his advice and mine. Be discreet, for silence is golden. Just you wait a bit."

"Thank God!" answered Clarence, softly, a sudden moisture coming into his rich brown eyes.

Chapter Nine.

Johannesburg by Night.

Mr Philip Martin was an intelligent and entertaining speaker, with enough of the boy still about him to make him understand and interest our heroes.

His age was thirty-two, and he had both travelled and read a great deal. A South African by birth and descent of three generations, all his sympathies and hopes lay in his native land. England, or rather Scotland, had been the original home of his ancestors, and their traditions of liberty and independence were not forgotten. But it was Africa, not Scotland, which held all that was most sacred to him.

He had come to Johannesburg to superintend one of the mines, the same one from which Mr Raybold drew most of his immense income. Philip Martin was therefore a man with no personal vested interests in the Transvaal beyond his salary. He could therefore leave whenever he liked this inhospitable soil to Uitlanders.

He could also plot and conspire, without the same risks that Mr Raybold ran. This perhaps rendered him more daring and independent than his host.

During dinner, when not talking about the market, they conversed on indifferent subjects. Mr Martin seemed chiefly interested in hearing all about the life the lads had led at school.

Ned had a notion that this bright, strong, swarthy man, with his air of interest, was drawing them out for some purpose of his own, and was reading them all the time he asked questions and listened to their replies.

But he did not mind being studied, as his record and those of his companions were clean ones. Besides, he found it a pleasure to give his confidence to this man, for already he liked him very greatly, and felt that he would not be misjudged.

So the three lads rattled on, recalling incidents of victories won in the class and in the field, while Mr Martin listened with his keen, bright eyes glowing upon them alternately, as if in his heart he was moving again with them through those merry past times.

Mr Raybold also sat looking at them and listening with the indulgent smile of a genial host, who is pleased to find his guests enjoying themselves.

It was a good dinner, and the lads did full justice to it, in spite of their chatter, for they had brought with them good travellers' appetites. The solids disappeared rapidly as they were placed before them, without in the least spoiling their zest for the dessert. The wines, however, they did not touch, which Mr Martin also abstained from. Mr Raybold was the only one who indulged in anything stronger than water.

"What do you drink?" asked Mr Martin, during a pause.

"Water," answered our heroes.

"Right you are. That is my tippie also when I can get it; but in Africa one has to grow accustomed to moderate their desires even in this indulgence—particularly when on an exploring expedition."

"And that was our intention in coming out to Africa."

"You'll have your chance, never fear. There is plenty of ground yet left to explore, and lots of big game to bag up-country."

Clarence looked wistfully and affectionately at his father during the dinner, who returned his glances with tenderness. The abject expression which Mr Raybold had seemed to have worn in the afternoon had now been replaced by an air of placid content and kindness. Clarence felt greatly relieved, and began to regain hope and confidence.

"Are you going to the club tonight, Philip?" he asked.

"Yes; I'll look in there about ten o'clock. Shall you be there?"

"Yes; I think so," replied the capitalist, quietly. "I have a few calls to make first."

"I suppose you don't object to me taking the youngsters, to show them about?"

"Well—no. If you consider them old enough, I don't greatly object."

There was not much heartiness in Mr Raybold's tones, and he looked in the direction of his son with a slightly troubled eye, while he rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Oh, I'll vouch for them, and take care that they do not get into any scrapes also," answered Mr Martin, confidently.

"Very well; I'll trust them under your wing. Come into my sanctum and have a cigar first."

Mr Raybold rose and led the way with a pleasant smile; then, dismissing the servant who had followed them with coffee, he locked the door, and turned round to Philip Martin with a stern face—

"Look here, Philip, I don't like this! I am risking the biggest part of my fortune, and possibly my own life, to help on the cause, but I draw the line at giving up my son also."

Clarence sprang forward with a joyous cry, and flung his arms impulsively round his father's neck.

"Oh, father, how happy you have made me by those words! So you are not, after all, a tame serf?"

"Wait, Clarence. I am speaking to Mr Martin at present," said his father, gravely, at the same time pushing him away gently.

"I have learnt enough from these lads, Mr Raybold, to know that no power on earth will keep them out of the fun if they live in Johannesburg," answered Philip Martin, calmly. "If we don't show them what is going on under the surface, they are too recently from the home of freedom to be able to endure the life here."

"I can send them away."

"Where? To Rhodesia, where they will be picked up and utilised by our friends outside?"

Mr Raybold remained silent, as if he had not a reply handy.

"Best get them initiated first," continued Philip, "and then they will be able to hold their own. Cecil Rhodes has

already seen them, and trusts them, young as they are; and you know he is not the man to make many mistakes. Besides, think of your son's feelings. He must respect his father. Just give him a chance to speak for himself."

"Yes, father; let us go with Mr Martin. I want to be proud as well as fond of my father. We all want to help to shake down this horrible tyranny, and we can be trusted."

"Those are our sentiments, sir," echoed Ned and Fred—"to be of some service to the British, and help to wipe out those ugly stains that now lie on our flag."

"My lads," answered Mr Raybold, gravely, "it is not that I do not trust you, but that I fear to risk you. What has to be done is our business, not yours—men's work, not boys'."

"Where a father goes, surely it is a son's duty to follow," said Clarence.

"We'll take the risk. And if we are boys, we are able to fight as well as most men, and run a good deal faster, if running is the game," added Ned, with a flash in his eyes.

"Besides," said Fred, quietly, "we know too much already not to know more."

Philip Martin laughed, and cried—

"That clinches it, I fancy. Come, Mr Raybold, I'd rather have these three youngsters in our ranks than a dozen of some fellows I know."

"I must yield, I suppose," answered Mr Raybold, with a regretful sigh. "Only I wish I could have kept you out of this hornets' nest, Clarence. Be careful, though, now that you are about to become conspirators, for we have a very wily enemy to hoodwink."

He went over to where the cigars were and took one, which he cut and lit, while he offered the box to Philip.

"I'll call the committee meeting for half-past ten. That will give you time to look round the town, Philip."

"Yes; that will do nicely. Come, boys, if you are ready we'll start."

They found horses already saddled waiting for them at the front door, and together they cantered down the avenue and out to the main road.

The moon was just rising as they started, and very soon it was shining upon their faces and casting long black shadows behind them. The three boys were filled with eagerness, not so much to see the town as to be introduced to that mysterious club.

They had about four miles to ride before they reached the centre of the city, and through most of this distance they were passing private villas and gardens. The mines were situated on the other side of the city.

Under the silver lustre of the moon, with the dark mystery of shadow which the shrubs and trees cast, these suburbs appeared to be centuries old. From the window-blinds of the mansions shone the mellow lamplights, while the sounds of singing and music all added to the charm of that warm and radiant night.

Many people were out on the road, enjoying the beauty of the night—parties on horseback, lovers, natives, and not a few children. They all appeared happy and careless enough.

Soon they came to the more crowded parts, all brightly lighted up with electric globes and gas-jets. Many of the shops were still open and doing a thriving trade. The hotels and canteens were, as usual, crowded, while the side paths were filled with pedestrians. All the citizens of Johannesburg seemed to be on the streets at this time, and a strange gathering of nationalities they were.

"We have some of the worst blackguards on the face of the globe here," observed Philip, as they rode slowly along Pritchard Street.

"And some of the greatest cowards also, I should say," replied Ned.

"You are right; blackguards are very seldom brave men, although, of course, there are exceptions to every rule."

"I see Israel is to the fore here."

"Yes; that is one of the causes of our past failure. A Jew will never risk his property nor person for any cause outside of business. We don't admit Jews nor Germans into the club where we are going tonight, nor, of course, Dutchmen either."

"I suppose we must not ask any questions about your club now?" asked Ned, timidly.

"No; we shall dismount here, and leave our horses for the present. One thing I must ask of you, and that is, whatever you may see on the streets, do not interfere. This is a rough city, after dark particularly, and swarming with the vilest of both sexes. Yet restrain your generous instincts and do not pause either to remonstrate or protest. You will see and hear much to raise your just indignation, but keep your feelings under, or you will be of no use to the cause."

It was a timely warning, and the boys acted upon it, although their chivalrous feelings were sorely tried during that night walk. Almost from the moment they turned from the hotel, where they left their horses, to the time they entered the club-house, their eyes and ears were affronted by evidences of unbridled licence and brutal tyranny.

All the inhabitants appeared to be more or less under the influence of drink, women as well as men. They were generally all well dressed, most of them overdressed, while on shirt-fronts and bare necks blazed out flashing diamonds.

"Are there no respectable people in Johannesburg?" asked the boys in astonishment.

"The respectable people mostly stay at home on nights like this," replied Philip. "What you see are the scum of nations drawn here by the scent of gold, as vultures are to a battlefield. These are the camp followers of the great god Mammon, greater foes to freedom and progress than are the Boers. They are nearly all either thieves, spies, or reasonless beasts."

It was a gay sight and for ever changing. The women with their shining dresses and flashing diamonds looked like fireflies as they flaunted along under the electric lights from canteen to canteen. Tram-cars, Cape carts, cabs, and horsemen filled up the centre of the streets, while black men, and whites, showing prominent noses and smoking enormous cigars, passed to and fro incessantly.

And amongst them swaggered shaggy-bearded and badly dressed Boers, scowling or jeering coarsely at the crowd they pushed so rudely through.

They heard one drunken fellow begin to shout out, "Rule, Britannia," but he was immediately seized by a couple of Zarps and dragged off to prison. No one interfered on his behalf, nor did our heroes feel much pity either; he had such an atrocious rasping voice that they were almost grateful to the Boers for silencing it. At last they turned down a quiet street, and soon reached a house where the front door stood wide open, and where the first-flat windows were lighted up.

"This is our club," said Philip, as they entered.

There was an office in the hall where lay a visitors' book. In this he entered their names, with his own. Then, with a nod to the silent hall-keeper, he showed them upstairs.

"Our reading-room," Philip said, as he ushered them into a large room comfortably furnished.

There were a good number of gentlemen assembled, reading papers and magazines, or writing. Philip looked about him keenly, and, nodding to several, took a chair and touched the electric bell. Almost immediately a waiter entered from another room.

"The committee are waiting for you, sir," whispered the waiter to Philip.

"All right. Excuse me for a few moments, boys. You will find all the latest magazines here, and I'll not be long."

He went out of the room, and left them to amuse themselves as they best could amongst the papers and magazines.

They had not very long to wait, however, before he returned and said—

"Now, boys, come with me, and I'll show you the other parts of these premises."

Chapter Ten.

The Three Aces.

There was nothing about the premises of the Three Ace Club so far to show its character. It was entered as a non-political club for British Africanders. As drink and gambling were strictly prohibited, and its object was more for reading than social intercourse or discussion, it was regarded as a very slow affair by the majority of the community, and only patronised by the most staid and respectable. A considerable number of members, however, were entered upon its books, and as far as subscriptions went, it was in a flourishing enough condition.

It had been organised since the fiasco of 1896, and although Uncle Paul had regarded it with suspicion at first, its respectable and sleepy character had allayed even his suspicions.

Philip Martin led the boys up to the second landing, and then, taking them into a bedroom, he shut the door.

"I am about to confide in you, my lads, a secret which you must promise never to reveal to any one."

"You may depend upon us."

"I feel I can, otherwise I should not have brought you here. You may have read about the insurrection of 1896, when the Boers disarmed the citizens. They were disappointed in only finding four thousand rifles instead of the thirty thousand they were led to expect."

"Yes; it was generally thought that the reformers had been boasting."

"That was the general impression, and so I also thought before I came to Johannesburg and was initiated."

"Had they this number of weapons?" asked Ned.

"Yes; more than that number, as you will see presently."

"Then why did the cowards hold back and allow Dr Jim to be defeated?"

"Because, firstly, they had a majority of cowards amongst them; and, secondly, because they were not properly organised, and the leaders were afraid to trust their men. Now, however, we have altered all that. Come with me, and you will see our arsenal."

He opened the door of a wardrobe which stood at the side of the wall, and, pulling out the drawer first, he touched a secret spring, and immediately the bottom moved up and showed them a flight of stairs underneath.

"This is the way down. You go first, while I close the entrance."

He had only to pull back the drawer from the inside, and the aperture was securely fastened, wardrobe door and all.

He struck a wax vesta, and showed them their course down the steps, which were like the steps down to the stoke-holes of an ocean liner.

"These steps can all be raised and laid flat against the ceilings of each landing, as well as covered from sight, at a moment's notice," explained Philip, as they went down. "In the flat below, which we entered, is a press, through which we pass, with shelves that drop down when the ladders are raised."

"It is very ingenious."

"Very, and unless a traitor showed the working, quite impossible to discover. We are now passing through the pantry on the ground floor. Now we are below the street."

The steps they had used hitherto were composed of iron, felt covered, but now they were descending solid stone stairs, also carpeted with thick felt to deaden the sound of their feet.

The walls and roof were likewise composed of stone and covered with cement, while at regular intervals along the ceiling were electric globes, which gave them plenty of light.

They went down about forty of these stone steps before they came to level ground, and then, before them, they saw a long, straight, and well-lighted lobby with an arched roof.

"This is the secret of the Three Ace Club. We have to take precautions when we have the like of Oom Paul to deal with," remarked Philip, with a smile. "Here you may make as much noise as you like, for no one outside could hear even a gun report. We have stopped the echo."

"It must have cost something to excavate this vault," said the boys.

"Yes; a good deal of Rand money has been sunk here. But come and see our shooting-gallery, arsenal, and general meeting-place."

He led the way along the lobby until they came to a door, against which he gave three loud knocks, at the same time pressing a knob.

Immediately the door opened, and they entered.

An underground hall of four hundred feet spread before them, in which were assembled a number of men.

It was lighted like the lobby by electricity, and lined, floor, ceiling, walls, and doors, with felt. At the far end were placed three targets, and all round on racks, from floor to ceiling, were rifles. Not thirty thousand, but over a hundred thousand weapons, were here placed ready for use.

Along two sides were placed a row of maxim guns. Ted counted thirty to each side. He also noticed that there were several doors at different parts of this vast gallery.

Philip Martin saw their amazement, and smiled again.

"You see we are not altogether so much at the mercy of the Boers as they fondly imagine. That door to your right leads off to our magazine, where we have sufficient ammunition for our purpose. That other door on your left leads to a tunnel which we are at present engaged in boring. When finished it will take us into the fort where Kruger has fixed his Krupps. We are more than two-thirds on the way now. Those other doors are exits, and lead to different parts of the city. Oh yes, when next we rise, if we are forced, it shall not be against our wives and children that the fort guns will be discharged. We'll use them for another purpose, and be much obliged to Oom Paul for his valuable gift."

Philip Martin was treating these young novices as if they were sage men, which proved his knowledge of human nature. If you wish a boy to act like a man, treat him like a man, and respect his amour propre.

He was showing them round as if they were distinguished visitors, and opening his mind to them with a frankness that won their hearts completely. It flattered their self-respect and quickened their reflective faculties. They felt that they were expected to feel, speak, and act like the men they were amongst, and whose lives were entrusted to their discretion.

Then they become grave, attentive, and observant, and got into the proper mood for the work that lay before them. In England men are apt to underrate boys, therefore they grow slowly. Napoleon never made this mistake, but then he was young himself when he became a man, and moulded his ideas from the youthful heroes of the great past.

Philip Martin, like Napoleon, had the timely quality of being able to appreciate young men. He knew from experience

that heroism comes more natural to a youth than to a sage. Johannesburg had been chock-a-block with prudent sages during the last conspiracy, which had so miserably failed. He meant to work with enthusiasts this time—have men who needed curbing instead of urging.

The effect of this treatment was that our heroes, however much amazed they were at what they saw, managed to control their feelings, and look coolly about them. The only thing which caused them regret was, every arrangement had already been made, and they seemed to have arrived too late to be of the slightest use.

“Johannesburg seems to be already in the hands of your party, Mr Martin. I fear we can be of but small service to you,” said Ned, sadly.

“Don’t think such a thing, my lad,” replied Philip, warmly. “The message you brought in from Cecil Rhodes entitles you to our deepest gratitude, as you will know perhaps presently. It was too important a bit of paper to be trusted to an ordinary messenger, and as you are a new-comer and young, you and your friends are just the kind we most urgently require. As for Johannesburg being in our hands because we have weapons, and will soon be able to hold the fort, that is of very little advantage to us while the Home Government work with the Boers and forbid us to claim our rights. We are helpless, even with this arsenal in our midst, to do more than protect our lives if our masters wantonly attack us. We must wait for them to begin hostilities. Say, are you fair marksmen?”

“Not first rate, but we have had some practise in Stellenbosch.”

“Then go over to the rack there and select rifles, and amuse yourselves by trying to get some bull’s-eyes, while I talk to the committee about the news you have brought us. I’ll introduce you presently, and get you enrolled as members of our Three Ace Club.”

“What a strange name! Why do you call it this?”

“Because we believe we hold ‘three aces’ at present in the game we are playing against this rotten Republic. Oom Paul believes he holds all the aces. We give him credit of one, but that, we fear, is the trump. However, we don’t despair. With good luck and hanging on, I hope we may yet be able to call our party the four ace club yet. Then we can exhibit our hands.”

He took the boys over to where a party of young men were standing, and introduced them, telling them to fix them up with cartridges and have some practice. Then he went and joined some of the elders, amongst whom Clarence saw his father.

They were received in a very friendly way by the young fellows. That they were there at all was guarantee enough for their principles.

For the next half-hour their attention was fully occupied by the target in front of them. Out of a dozen shots each, Ned put nine into the centre, Clarence eight, and Fred ten, at the four hundred yards.

They were congratulated by their companions, and would have been fairly satisfied only that they found the others so much better. Out of six dozen of the other cartridges, only one struck the other edge of the mark; the other seventy-one went straight, one over the other, right in the centre. The man who struck the edge looked disgusted with himself.

As for those other nine misses, they could easily be counted on the white.

The self-satisfaction of our heroes died away at their own miserable display. They felt suddenly as if they were worthy only of contempt.

“It isn’t at all bad shooting for the first try at a new target,” said the young men, encouragingly. “You must remember that we spend most of our evenings here, drilling and practising.”

That was something in their favour certainly.

“You must join our squad; we go through our manoeuvres here every night from seven till ten o’clock. We have the very best instructors in the British Army to teach us, and I reckon we will make a good show when the time arrives to show our paces above the ground.”

Our heroes resolved that, while they remained in Johannesburg, they would fill out their evenings in this way.

While they had been shooting, Philip Martin and the council were engaged in another part of the hall discussing politics. The message which Philip delivered to them seemed to give them universal satisfaction.

But they were finished now, for Philip came forward and called the boys.

“I am happy to tell you that you have been accepted as members of this society. Come and be sworn in.”

They followed him over to a table, where the secretary of the society was seated with the roll-book in front of him.

“Young gentlemen,” he said, “I am pleased to welcome you to Johannesburg, and proud to accept you as volunteers to the cause of liberty and the rights of Englishmen. Our cause is a just and a holy one, which must commend itself to every loyal member of the British race, whichever home he hails from. Our objects are threefold: first, to uphold the power and honour of our Empire, which means the spread of civilisation and humanity; secondly, the harmony and unity of Africa, and the federation of all our colonies under the protection of this Empire of Great Britain; thirdly, the downfall of all tyrants and traitors to the Empire. Experience has taught us that the Boer Government is an

impossibility, and that while they, the Boers, have authority, there can be no peace or progress in Africa. They have denied us all the rights of human beings, and disgraced our name. They have shown us that they are our enemies and evil-wishers. They have cajoled us too often for us to trust them any more, for they have proved themselves to be crafty, cruel, and pitiless savages, utterly unworthy of a place among nations. Therefore we are banded together to destroy this Dutch Republic in Africa, and restore the land, that traitors to England gave to these enemies, once again to the Empire as it was before. We are banded to unite the whole of South Africa under one flag, and that flag must be the British flag. Are you prepared to swear that you will help us to achieve this end, and wipe away the stains which these savages have placed upon that flag?"

"We are," answered our heroes, earnestly.

"With all your energies—with the last drop of your blood, if called upon?"

"We are."

"Swear also that you will be faithful to the trust we repose in you from this night, obedient to the command of those officers who may be placed over you, and true to your comrades."

"We swear to be faithful, obedient, and true to the cause."

"These are the three aces which form our watchword—loyalty, obedience, and good faith. Now sign your names here, and receive your badge."

Our heroes went home with Mr Raybold that night proud that they were at least members of this noble brotherhood, and prepared to live and die worthy of the small joined aces which they carried in their pockets.

Chapter Eleven.

The Boer Paramount.

The life which our heroes led for the next few weeks in Johannesburg, although excessively useful, was not momentous. They learned to be sure of hitting the centre of the bull's-eye with every shot. Also, what would be of more service in actual Boer warfare, they mastered the science of taking a bead swiftly and hitting a rapidly moving object. Sword and bayonet exercises were not neglected, nor horse and foot drill.

They saw the miners at work on the tunnel that was slowly crawling towards the German-filled fort, and helped to carry the débris through one of the several exits. This was the most delicate part of the work, yet it was managed without much difficulty by the numerous members who composed the league.

During the daytime they walked about the city or rode over the veldt, getting gradually acquainted with most of their brothers, and learning whom to avoid amongst the inhabitants.

They no longer wondered why the former rising had ended in disaster. Amongst all the crowds who were called Uitlanders not a sixth portion were, even at this time, bona fide Britishers. At the time of Dr Jim's gallant raid they were not a twelfth part. The rest of the population was made up of Russians, French, and German Jews, with a large sprinkling of other nationalities. Germans mostly, however, predominated, and they made no secret of their deep and violent hatred of everything British. Not a single Englishman was employed in any public department either in Johannesburg or anywhere else throughout the Transvaal. The labourers even, who were employed by Government were either Germans or Hollanders when they were not Kaffirs. In the highest posts were placed Boers, Hollanders, and Germans exclusively. It was a clear case of "no English need apply" to any burgher employer.

The president, Paul Kruger, and his bigoted and ignorant Executive Council had got every concession which crafty greed and tyranny could get from cowardice and treason. They had introduced German soldiers wholesale into their country, and purchased nearly all the arms and ammunition which had entered Africa for the past two years. This, with blind and misplaced confidence, they had been allowed to do by the other colonists. Indeed, throughout Cape Colony and Natal, the Dutch Africanders had been openly spending all their spare money in arming themselves, while the colonials, as a majority, had been watching them doing this, and neglecting to take the same precautions. At the present moment, to all appearance, the Boers and their friends were the only effectively armed people throughout South Africa. We must except, of course, those who were under the influence of Cecil Rhodes—the men of Rhodesia and the Three Ace Club league. Affairs were in a fairly quiescent condition at present. The citizens of Johannesburg had given over asking for their rights, and accepted each fresh insult and oppression quietly, and without outward remonstrance. They knew such were utterly futile with that obstinate bigot, who regarded himself as an avenging instrument in the hands of the Lord.

Neither was it any secret what all these warlike preparations were aiming at. If the Home Government shut its eyes, not a man, woman, or child in Africa but knew that the old man of Pretoria intended nothing less than the subjugating of Africa to the Boers, as soon as matters were ripe enough. They would soon find excuses for their violence and treason when they were ready to begin. As for the anarchy and massacres that would follow, they were satisfied that they would find plenty of defenders amongst the reptile gangs of Little Englanders, who were at present doing their utmost to help them in their work of destruction. It was an open secret that the hated English were to be driven out of Africa, and the country torn from the empire.

This was to be the result of our clemency and weak indulgence to a race who understood only revenge and oppression. The remorseless principles and inhuman tenets of the Boer religion belonged to those dark ages which civilisation and the true knowledge of Christianity has swept from the other portions of the globe where the Bible is

known and honoured. Their colonial history is a long record of steadfast atrocity and abuse of power. Wherever they have trekked they have left a broad trail of blood and disaster. Wherever they have settled, progress has ceased to exist. They are, as a race, the most ignorant, the most remorseless, and the rudest of barbarians.

The history of Africa, from the most remote ages, has been one of conquest. There are, therefore, no aboriginal owners to restrain the hand of the taker, or lay bona fide claims to compensation for land seized. It has been, in the past, ruthlessly torn from the weak by the strong, and held only by force of arms. Humanitarians, therefore, cannot urge the claims of the Kaffirs over the white conquerors. From a humanitarian point of view, the race that has proved most worthy of advancing humanity and civilisation has the best of all possible rights to this open country.

For the sake of future races, it is only one of the great existing nations that dare take up this grave responsibility.

Neither Germany, France, nor Russia, so far as their colonial policy and history is concerned, have shown that they are adapted for this great work. England only has proved that she is equal to the task, as long ago, Imperial Rome did in a lesser way. Our great empire liberates and advances every land which she protects. She frees the slave, educates the savage, and makes the black man equal with the white. She welcomes the stranger within her gates, asks no tyrannical pledges from the Uitlander before she gives him employment and all the rights of her own children. She embraces all humanity as her children, without shackling them with conditions, either individually or tribal. Whatever king or chief they owe allegiance to—whatever flag they honour—makes, no difference to their rights as colonists and citizens while they live under and claim the protection of the British flag. This is our best defence for our right to extend and hold our empire in the face of envious enemies and internal traitors. What we give up, or lose, or forego is a distinct loss to civilisation, progression, and humanity. We are the only holders and dispensers of liberty. The German makes a good colonist under British control; so do the French, the Dutch, and many of the other clans on the earth's surface.

But when Germany seizes a land she treats it as the warlike Kaffirs did. She butchers the original owners, and insists on all outsiders relinquishing their private rights, and becoming subjects. As the Kaiser has truly said, "On whatever land the German Eagle fixes its talons, that land is German." This means, it is no longer free, only a German is entitled to civil rights.

The Boer, wherever he has possessed any authority, has pursued a similar policy, only, being more medieval and ignorantly conservative in his ideas, he goes many steps further in his candid tyranny than does his friend the German. His religion is a blending of gross superstition, narrowness, intolerance, and Judaism in its most relentless and savage aspect.

He honestly believes in the justice of the curse of Ham; but he believes more, for, like the Moslem with his women, he says that the dark races of the earth are like the beasts, soulless; whom to shoot down is no murder; whom to enslave is his right, as one of the masterful and heaven-favoured races.

He believes in revenge and hatred as sacred duties. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," are words which he gloats upon.

According to the patriarchal laws he is a good husband and father, and will fight for his own like any red Indian. Like all savages, however, he does not care for fighting in the open. He prefers to skulk behind rocks, and take his enemy at a disadvantage.

He is a mass of gross superstition; in this he even surpasses the Kaffir. He believes fervently in ghosts and omens, and dreads the dark with trembling horror. He is utterly devoid of chivalry, truth, or common honesty. A pledge in his estimation means only an expedient to hoodwink his adversary and gain time. He will make a promise at any time, and break it without the slightest scruple. He laughs at those who trust him, as fools. Like the wild boar, he hates to see his lair disturbed. He would much rather trek than live where civilisation is. He is rude, uncouth, and pre-eminently inhospitable, and prefers his own ignorance and superstition to enlightenment. By nature he is a morose and uncompromising savage who has no place among civilised races, and not the faintest conception of democracy.

His greed is sateless; his audacity boundless; and his sense of gratitude nil. Philanthropy and mercy are qualities which he despises, because he cannot understand them. He professes to believe in the Redeemer of mankind, but he draws his inspirations from the passages of Scripture that suit his peculiar temperament, and the ethics of Christianity do not. As a nation, he is as utterly impossible as the Turk, therefore is completely out of place in the Transvaal.

The past history of the Boers in Africa has proved this beyond dispute. They have slaughtered mercilessly, and oppressed their neighbours wherever they have settled. It is only by the strong hand that they have been kept so far within bounds.

Their principal grievance against us is that we freed their slaves, and they nurse this grievance with undying hatred. They have murdered our settlers ruthlessly, betrayed our statesmen, and mocked us for our weaknesses. They remember their supposed wrongs, and lose no chance of repaying them by brutality and treachery, and mock at our generosity in forgetting what they have done.

Ah! the gallant sons we have lost through trusting those ruthless murderers! England may forget, but what of the mothers, wives, sisters, fathers, and brothers of those who lie buried, and yet unavenged?

It is possible to pardon a brave enemy who has fought fairly. As Englishmen, we do this always—but only after we have wiped out the blot. But what true Englishman could forgive the bloody assassin who walks about boasting over his crime? What true Englishman could sit down tamely, and swallow insult and slavery, as well as murder?

These were the inhuman, hating, and ferocious enemies which some Englishmen delighted to honour, sympathise

with, and admire, for their treatment of those Englishmen who had saved their Republic from ruin, and poured wealth into their rapacious pockets. The tactics of their obstinate and superstitious president is world known. His shamelessness, greed, craft, and unblushing falsehood, his open enmity, his avarice, and dense stupidity, all these qualities are representative of his people, and what we are asked to admire and sympathise with. Standing as we do afar off, we are apt to forget the atrocious side of the Boer, and regard the ridiculous side with good-natured contempt.

But to those in the midst of it all, it was by no means a matter to laugh at. The constant reminders of those atrocities and disgraces, the wanton insults, the brutal treatment, the persistent turning round of the screw, without a moment of relaxation, were maddening even to the meekest and most long-suffering.

As we have already shown, our heroes did not come of a mute and lowly race. They had British blood in their veins— young English blood that was quickly heated. Since their coming to the Transvaal this blood had been at boiling pitch.

They tried to hearken to the words of prudence as preached by Philip Martin and Mr Raybold. They tried to obey their leaders, and shut their eyes to the daily outrages of justice which they beheld, and act in away which their hearts told them was base cowardice.

They saw ladies hustled rudely by rough and armed clowns from the footpath amongst the mud. They listened to coarse epithets shouted at their countrywomen if they looked indignant at this usage, and did their best to keep their hands in their pockets and their eyes on the ground.

They saw the German mercenaries knock down, kick, and baton the citizens without the slightest provocation, and the citizens take their unmerited punishment without remonstrance, knowing full well there was no possible redress from the Boer authorities. They saw Boers spit on the beards of Englishmen, and they only take out and use their handkerchiefs to wipe the hateful stains away. They saw children ill-treated because their parents were English, and the parents lift up their children and soothe them, without attempting to punish the wretches who had made those innocents weep.

They saw all this and grosser outrages constantly being enacted under their eyes, and while they looked they ground their teeth, and wondered how long they would be able to endure this horrible restraint upon their pent-up feelings.

“It will be our turn before long to be batoned,” remarked Fred, quietly. “We cannot expect to be allowed to walk the streets much longer without being molested.”

“The Boer or German who attempts to lay a finger on me had better look out. I’ll leave my mark on him,” replied Ned, grimly.

“We’ll be there at the same time with our signatures,” put in Clarence, cheerfully.

Fred was right in his prognostications of evil. Their independent bearing had already been remarked upon by the police, and their turn came sooner even than they expected.

Chapter Twelve.

Our Heroes are Arrested.

One morning they had come into town, to have their customary promenade, listen to the latest news, and keep their blood flowing by watching the sights. Like Paddy, they were trying how much they could stand of this music, and vainly hoping to get used to it by constant habit.

The city had been more than usually in a ferment during the past week. It had been the election week, and although none of the Johannesburgers had much hope of a change, yet until the affair was decided, there had been a good deal of wordy speculation.

However, as even the most credulous feared, Oom Paul Kruger had once more managed to keep his chair, thanks to his simple and direct management. While he was travelling the country canvassing for votes, the old hypocrite played with his people, as the man who wants to buy an annuity plays with the insurance company. He did the sick and feeble old man who had only a few months more to live, and appealed to the sympathy of those who were tired of him as a master. He played this rôle so perfectly as to deceive even his own intimates. As for the Uitlanders, he humbugged them so completely that they became jubilant about the nearness of their emancipation. Even for a little while the news of his return did not depress them overmuch. This they considered to be a dead certainty, with the ballot boxes in the hands of his supporters.

A rumour had somehow spread, on the day after the announcement of the result, that he was dead. For one whole hour Johannesburg lost its head, and became intoxicated with joy. Shareholders bounced inside the chain, while some were even mad enough to wire the happy event to London, where for another hour on the Stock Exchange Paul Kruger gained more popularity than he had ever gained in his life.

But, alas! they were not long left to this most unseemly joy. Hardly had they wiped their mouths after drinking to his safe translation to another sphere than the Grand Old Man of Pretoria showed them how dead he was.

He enjoyed giving them surprises, and the one he sprang on them now was the summary dismissal of Chief Justice Kotze, the only Dutchman who was above bribery or coercion.

Now, indeed, he was beginning his fresh tenure without any pretence of wearing gloves. Whoever dared to oppose

his autocratic tyranny, and stand up for any other laws than those which his will dictated, was to be swept out of the way. At this act of tyranny, worse than any that the Stuarts ever perpetrated, even Philip Martin looked anxious.

"It is the beginning of the end," he said. "Cecil Rhodes's last message was for us to hold on and lie low. How much longer will we be allowed to do this?"

Kotze protested against this unlawful outrage, and refused to accept his dismissal. But he gained no more by that than the Uitlanders had done.

The inhabitants of Johannesburg were struck dumb when they heard of this scandal, coupled with the tidings that the president's late illness had been all shammed. Even the Boers themselves were staggered, as this touched their rights as much as it demolished all safety for the Uitlanders. Throughout Africa a wave of expectant horror passed. What would this hoary tyrant not do next, now that he had demolished the law? He was supreme. Anarchy and massacre would possibly be the next order of the day.

Once again, as in the time of the Jameson Raid, men began to send away their wives and children, and prepare themselves for the inevitable.

On the morning that our heroes took their walk, they found the streets and between the chains blocked with people.

But no business was being done, neither did men venture to speak to each other. Every one suspected his fellow to be a spy. Business was at a complete stand, and they watched the Zarps hustling the pedestrians about, and inwardly speculated when the Krupp guns would begin their devastating work.

Anything might be expected now from Pretoria. With that first act Kruger had pitched the gauntlet straight in the face of England. Surely he must have already completed his arrangements with Germany.

Halfway down the street the young men met Philip Martin. He was no longer looking so anxious as he had been the past few days. He stopped for a moment and whispered to Ned.

"Hold yourselves in readiness to leave for Rhodesia tomorrow. I shall have a message for you to carry."

"Oh," replied Ned, a little disappointed. "Must we clear out before the fun begins?"

"Don't be afraid. Nothing will take place here yet awhile. This present buster will blow over. I have just had a bit of news which will make the old gentleman draw in his horns for a bit."

"That's all right," answered Ned, laughing.

Philip Martin had only turned his back on them when four Zarps, who had been watching them, came forward, scattering the people to right and left.

Their batons were drawn, and their purpose unmistakable. Doom had come upon our heroes.

"Look out, boys!" cried Ned, as he sprang to the nearest wall, and planted his back against it. As he did so, he saw amongst the onlookers Stephanus Groblaar.

Fred and Clarence ranged themselves alongside of their chum with alacrity.

"Now, then, come along, you white-livered Uitlanders!" cried the Zarps, closing in and raising their batons.

"Go with them quietly," shouted the onlookers, warningly, as they saw the boys were preparing to resist.

Philip Martin had by this time rounded the corner, without seeing what had happened.

"Yes; take your licking like true Englishmen!" cried Stephanus, mockingly.

"Don't be afraid—we shall!" answered Ned, casting prudence to the winds, as he darted to one side to avoid the falling baton.

It grazed his shoulder, while his aggressor stumbled forward with an ugly oath.

Next moment he was sprawling on his back, with a mouth filled with loose teeth and gore, while Ned caught the baton adroitly as it flew from his grasp.

As he caught it, he swung it round and landed it with crushing force on the jaws of the second officer. A sound of breaking bones was heard, while the Boer went down like a felled ox.

"Hurrah, boys! Go at it!" shouted Ned, leaping in to help his chums.

Clarence had been struck, and was lying also on the ground. But Fred Weldon was giving a good account of himself, dodging the baton of the Boer—an immense fellow—and getting in some facers, which made the baton strokes uncertain.

With a strong tap on the back of the Boer's cranium, which was bare, Ned quickly sent him alongside of his two mates.

Then for a moment the fray was over, for the remaining policeman had rushed to the outside of the ring, and was blowing his whistle for help.

"Bolt!" cried the crowd, opening a lane for them, although otherwise they did not offer to help.

"No, you don't," cried Stephanus, covering the two boys with his revolver. "Move a foot and I'll riddle you."

Ned looked down at poor Clarence, who was lying senseless on the ground, and decided that the game was up. He therefore glanced towards Stephanus and cried with a scornful laugh—

"I won't run away, Stephanus Groblaar, and you may have this useless baton." As he uttered the words he pitched the baton full at his enemy.

Stephanus fired as the baton left Ned's hand, while he ducked. Where the head of Ned had been the bullet struck the wall and knocked a piece of stone out.

But Stephanus had no time to fire again or evade the baton. Full in the face it struck him, and down he also went.

A faint cheer broke from some of the onlookers, while they turned and scattered, leaving the victims to their fate. The Zarps were coming in force.

Ned saw them coming, and, jumping over to Stephanus, he plucked the smoking revolver from his grasp, and quickly returned to the wall.

"We're in for it now, Fred. I guess we'll be hanged for this morning's work."

"What's the odds?" replied Fred. "We've shown them that English men are not curs."

"Stand back, you fellows, or I'll pot some of you. We surrender, only let us go gently."

"Ugh!" grunted the Boers, as they looked round them at the carnage. "Throw aside your shooter. We won't hurt you and spoil the gallows."

Ned flung down the revolver, while some of the police went for stretchers. The others contented themselves with closing round.

Seeing that they did not offer to molest them, the boys knelt down to look after Clarence. He had been hit over the head and stunned, but was now recovering. As they lifted him up he opened his eyes and groaned. Then he struggled up and looked round him, somewhat confused, for a second or two.

"Hallo! Is it all over?"

"Yes, Clar," replied Ned. "All over, for the present. The next scene will be prison. Can you walk?"

"I'd rather say so," replied Clarence, rubbing his skull gently. "By Jumbo! but that was a clinker I got. It has made a new bump as big as an ostrich egg. Ah yes, I can waltz along with you two."

To the surprise of our heroes, their captors treated them quite gently on their way to jail. They merely held them firmly by the arms, and did not attempt either to kick or jerk them about, as was generally done with prisoners.

Behind them came the stretchers with the wounded men who lay inertly, and after them followed a numerous crowd. The men kept silence, but the women waved their handkerchiefs and cheered.

Ned, Fred, and Clarence had won popularity. Even the Boers treated them with grim respect, and said—

"These pups can bite as well as bark. Ugh, it's a pity they are not Boers."

About a couple of hours after their incarceration they received a visit from Mr Raybold. He had come as soon as he heard about the affair, and although he looked very grave, yet he did not reproach them.

"I expected something like this from you young blades; but it is a serious scrape for all that."

"Any of them killed?" asked Ned, coolly.

"No, not quite so bad. You have broken one man's jaw, and spoilt the nose of young Groblaar. The other two are not much the worse, only they'll make the most of their bruises."

"I suppose so; when they make such an outcry over the couple of men they lost at Krugersdorp. What do you think will be done to us?"

"You'll be sent on to Pretoria first place. But what will happen next, no one can foretell. They may sentence you to death, or hard labour for life. I hope I may be able to get you off with a heavy fine, as the Boers love cash almost as much as they do revenge. What were you doing when they set upon you?"

"Absolutely nothing," replied Ned. "We had just parted with Mr Martin, and were about to move on, when four big scoundrels pounced upon us."

"That will not matter," replied Mr Raybold, dolefully. "Oom Paul has denied any hearing or trial for Chief Justice Kotze. He charged him with maladministration of justice, and swore in the Volksraad that he was a liar. When they can treat their own judges in this fashion, they are capable of hatching up any charge against you. However, we shall not have long to wait before we know."

"I hope you won't pay any fines for us, sir," said Ned. "I am sure we would all rather go to hard labour, or whatever else they like to sentence us to."

"We shall see," returned Mr Raybold, shaking his head sadly. "I wish this day had passed in peace, for tomorrow you would have been out of this tyrant's clutches."

"We are sorry also in one way, but our resistance has not made much difference. I fancy Stephanus Groblaar has got up some story about us. I had a quarrel with him out on the veldt, and for some reason he seems to bear me ill-will."

"Ah! tell me about that?" said Mr Raybold, quickly.

Ned told him about the fight, and the words he had used on that occasion.

"This is bad—very bad. They sentenced a man the other day to two years' hard labour for merely shouting on the Rand, 'Nobody gets justice in this country.' What that fine speech of yours may cost us, with the additions which this young Groblaar may put to it, it is hard to say. Never mind. Keep up your courage, lads. Your friends will not leave you undefended; and we are all mighty proud of you for your pluck."

Clarence took leave of his father very tenderly, while the others received warm hand-grasps. Then the Rand capitalist left them a good deal comforted by the interview.

They did not know, but to be able to see them at all had cost Mr Raybold a tidy sum in the way of palm-oiling. Like the Eastern prisons, as in every other department of this Republican Government, corruption ran very high, from the President to the meanest official.

On the following morning they were examined, and charged with a whole list of offences; then, after this preliminary farce was over, they were handcuffed and taken, closely guarded, to Pretoria to be tried.

Chapter Thirteen.

Tronk Life.

Although our heroes had been brought up amidst the comforts and refinements of better-class English life, they were not fastidious.

Their recent overland experience among the burgher farmers had taken a good deal of the fine edge off their susceptibilities as to eating, drinking, and lodgment. It had also opened their eyes considerably as to the inconsistency of humanity. Those bare, dirty, and barn-like homesteads which satisfied the Boers generation after generation, and compared to which many of the huts of the Kaffirs were fragrant—the cow-dung and blood-blended plaster and flooring—were, to say the least, peculiar in their aroma to the nostrils of strangers. Added to this, the strong flavour of the Boer tobacco, with which those dens reeked, rendered the atmosphere more powerful than pleasant to any except a Boer family. To them, however, it smelt home-like and grateful.

Outside, the approaches to a Boer farm were kept in a state of absolute and traditional disregard to all sanitary laws. The refuse and decay teemed with disease and abomination. No wanderer required a candle in the window to light them to these abodes of the dopper. Their olfactory organs would have been quick enough, even while suffering under the most virulent cold, for at least half a league distant. Wherever the Boer settled, that part of the veldt became a pigsty.

Our heroes had experienced all this, and become case-hardened against unholy perfumes and disgusting sights. Their digestive organs had also become used to the tough biltong, vile coffee, and unvaried nightly stews. Thus they were able to stand a good deal of dirt and discomfort without noticing details.

They had also gained a considerable insight of the Boers' other peculiarities. Their utter lack of humour and sullen stolidity; their merciless barbarity to their servants and cattle, joined to their stern and one-sided religious fervour. The Bible, the cowhide, and the rifle were always kept handy for constant use by those pious dopper farmers. The word of God for themselves and families. The cowhide for their cattle and servants, and the rifle where the cowhide failed to convince.

They had seen these farmers flog the Kaffirs within an inch of their lives for the slightest offence, or perhaps because the master was in a bad temper, and the Kaffir chanced to be in his road. They had seen them bring out their guns, if the braced-up and lacerated natives looked nasty, and deliberately shoot them dead, then go indoors immediately after, read their Bibles, sing their psalms, and thank the Lord of hosts for giving them grace. Their infernal cruelties never touched their consciences in the slightest degree, and they had no fear of the laws of the land condemning them. Each Boer made his own laws, and these were merciless. There was no justice for the native; he was a beast to be down-trodden and enslaved. His land and his life were theirs, the chosen people of the Lord, to abuse or murder as they pleased.

Yet they never neglected family worship. Nor would they permit the stranger to go from them without reading a chapter, and delivering themselves of an unctuous prayer. Sylvan life amongst the pious doppers was very unlovely and revolting.

Having already experienced so much, the young men hardly noticed the filthy and disgraceful conditions of the Johannesburg tronk, or jail. That they were crammed into a small cell of ten by twenty feet, along with twenty-five other prisoners, was nasty; yet they endured this fate with as much philosophy as they could.

Twenty-eight prisoners, waiting their trial, were immured in this suffocating, dark, and noisome den, which could be compared with nothing else than the hold of a slaver, or the black hole of Calcutta. A third of these were Kaffir women, and the majority of the rest, the vilest and most foul-mouthed scum in Johannesburg.

There was no separation of the sexes; they were all crushed together, regardless of their ages or offences. The atmosphere was horrible, for there was no other ventilation than what the opening of the door gave.

It was opened occasionally by the warders as they thought fit, to give the captives a little air and prevent suffocation.

The floors were cemented, and the roof of corrugated iron; but as water is a luxury in Johannesburg, and the Boers are averse to washing and also are regardless of dirt, weeks if not months had passed since last the accumulations had been shovelled out. The mind of an Englishman at home could not conjure up any idea approaching this abomination of stench and overpowering heat.

Here our heroes had spent their first night of Boer prison life, listening, or rather trying to shut their ears, to the groans, curses, and obscenities of their fellow-captives. Packed closely together, they were forced to stand still and upright, with the perspiration pouring from them, and swallow the poison that entered their lungs instead of air.

Many—indeed, most—of these prisoners had broken heads and other wounds, and these, clotted and untended, added to the disgusting horrors.

When morning came, and they were hustled into the Pretoria train, they felt almost half dead. Faint and breathless, they gasped as they were dragged into the court, and listened to the charges with dull apathy. There was little enough fight in them now.

By the time they reached Pretoria, however, their young constitutions, aided by the fresh veldt air, had restored both their appetites and their courage. In spite of their jailors' grunts of disapproval, they were laughing and jesting more from bravado than through good spirits.

"We must show them we are game, no matter what happens to us," said Ned; and his chums' loyalty backed him up.

In the same train, but in a different compartment, Stephanus Groblaar and the wounded and battered Zarps travelled to give their evidence. The boys caught a glimpse of Stephanus as he got out, and could not help enjoying the sight. The baton had smashed the bridge of his nose and spoilt what little beauty he possessed. He was marked for life, so that they would recognise him under any disguise almost. They caught his one eye glaring luridly on Ned, for the other was bandaged up, and they grinned broadly as they were pushed past.

They were marched along to the tronk, getting hasty glimpses of the Doppe Kirk, where Oom Paul sometimes preaches; the frowning forts and warlike batteries which he has erected at so much expense to his insolvent government, as a sign of the friendly disposition of the Volksraad towards the Uitlander, and the open gallows and stocks, which also were tokens of the social advancement of the constitution. That church obstructing the traffic was typical of the people's wisdom and foresight, as their town lying in the swamp was. They doted on mud and pestilential swamps, as they piously believed in obstruction, dirt, bad drainage, and public executions.

The Pretoria tronk—at least, the part into which our heroes were locked—was a shade more endurable than had been their lodging of the night before. Morality, if not sanitary arrangements, was slightly more observed.

Their cell, which was the same size as the last, was not quite so crowded, and they had white companions only, and of their own sex. Between them and the Kaffirs was a sheet of corrugated iron.

Small holes were bored in the sheet-iron walls; these were, however, close to the roof, and did not give them much fresh air. During the day the heat was intense, as the thin iron became almost red-hot under the sun glare. At night it was in proportion cold.

There had been thirty-five prisoners in this cell two days before, but eighteen of these had been removed; thus they had only seventeen companions waiting their sentences. Fortunately, also, the majority of these prisoners were respectable citizens, whose crimes were as yet to be invented. Like our heroes, they had been seized upon without any pretext, without being aware yet of the charges. They would learn all that at the time appointed by their tyrants.

Small straw mattresses were given to them to sleep on at nights; these were placed side by side along the walls, leaving a narrow gangway between. These mattresses had served hundreds of prisoners before them; they were dirty in the extreme, worn by holes, and infested by other inhabitants beside themselves, that not only did not sleep when darkness fell, but did their best to murder sleep. A Salvation Army night-shelter might be as lively, but it could not be worse than were those unhallowed beds. They were placed upon the ground, and each morning were taken out and aired in the exercise-yard. Otherwise the cells were devoid of furniture. There were neither seats nor tables.

All that afternoon the prisoners sat looking on the ground, as far away from the heated walls as they could get. As they had come in time for dinner, they got a basin of thin soup with some hard meat and black bread. This they devoured eagerly. At four o'clock they had a supper of mealie with salt and water. Then their beds were brought in, and they prepared to enjoy themselves. They were able to breathe; that was the sole comfort of that shivering night. Being dog-tired with their previous night's vigil, in spite of the tormentors that bit and stung them incessantly, our heroes soon fell asleep and forgot their miseries.

In the morning at seven o'clock they got another dose of mealie-porridge and salt with water. Then they were allowed to go and wash themselves in the muddy streams that ran through the yard. All the prisoners were turned out to the yard at the same time. Kaffirs, Malays, and whites, thieves, murderers, and political prisoners, they were all mixed up like their mattresses, and permitted to wash their clothes and themselves in the same muddy stream

together.

On this day they were allowed to stay in the yard until five o'clock, and as it was about one hundred and fifty feet, they were able to take good exercise and have fresh air. They were not long before they began to play leap-frog and some other games, including a wrestling match between Ned and Fred, which was watched with keen interest by the other prisoners.

At about half-past two they were pleasantly surprised by a visit from Philip Martin, who brought with him a Pretoria solicitor.

Both listened to the story of their arrest, and the lawyer took notes, after which Philip said—

"I think we shall manage to square the Zarps, so that they will let you off mildly. The man with the broken jaw we must give a golden plaster to; but your most bitter witness will be Stephanus Groblaar. He will have his knife into you, and swear anything against you. His father is a personal friend and tool of the president."

That night they did not sleep so well; on the whole, it was the most uncomfortable time they had ever experienced. They were glad when daylight came and the doors opened to let them out.

They were first in the yard, and took advantage to be the first in the stream before it was stirred up. After their bath they once more felt ready to laugh at their discomforts and woes.

They had hardly supped their porridge, when a couple of German policemen came and marched them off solemnly.

Outside the tronk half a dozen more stiff and wooden-looking bodyguards were drawn up, armed to the teeth with rifles, swords, and revolvers. They closed in upon our heroes without a word, merely pointing to the front as their way to march. Ned, Fred, and Clarence drew themselves up with dignity, seeing that no attempt was made to handcuff them, and dusting their clothes with their handkerchiefs, stepped out proudly in the middle of their formidable escort. Handcuffs sadly spoil the effect of dignity. They make a prisoner look too pathetic.

"I wonder where these Noah's Ark Johnnies are taking us to?" said Ned.

"To the court to be tried, I expect," answered Fred.

"No," said Clarence. "There is some other game going on with us. Don't you see these are not the ordinary Boer bobbies? They are the president's own bodyguards."

"By Jove! so they are. Perhaps old Kruger is going to interview us. I hope so, for I'd like to see the grand old humbug."

"Hush! These fellows are sure to understand English. All Germans do who leave their own country."

If they did understand what Ned had so rashly said, they showed no sign. All emotion seemed to have been drilled out of their big faces, as all free action had been drilled out of their tall figures.

Solemnly they marched to the word of command with heads jerked up and immovable eyes. Right, left, right, left, they planted their feet as one man, without making a single wrinkle in their coats. They were for all the world exactly like exaggerated German metal soldiers set working by mechanism, and newly painted.

Down through the centre of Church Street they marched, the automatic movements of the guards so infecting our heroes that they unconsciously fell into the same step after a few paces. Then only one distinct tramp could be heard, as each left or right foot crushed upon the ground. The people on the side paths watched them going along curiously.

Past the grand Government buildings, with that disputed statue to Liberty on its centre tower, they strode. The enlightened burghers greatly object to this statue, as they don't believe in a woman representing freedom, and think it must either mean Her Britannic Majesty or the Virgin Mary, both highly objectionable personages in a dopper's eye.

On they marched, until they reached the western end of the street, where a verandahed house stood with tall trees in front of it, and on each side of the gate a helmeted police-soldier. Then they knew where they were coming to, and felt a tremor pass over them. They were approaching the kraal of the savage and crafty tyrant chief of the Transvaal, Kruger.

Chapter Fourteen.

An Interview with Uncle Paul.

It was a respectable and fair-sized house of the ordinary colonial fashion, with a broad covered verandah in front, and fine shady trees inside the rails—a comfortable and homely place, with nothing special about it to denote the character or position of its owner, except those two heavily armed sentinels at the gate.

Yet our heroes shivered slightly at the thought of the coming interview, and wished they could have put it off.

They were not frightened physically of this avowed and relentless enemy of their countrymen. Whatever he might sentence them to, they were prepared to meet and endure bravely.

It was his craft that they dreaded, lest he should by some devilish artifice lure them into a trap, and so get something out of them which would hurt their friends. They were frightened of themselves, not of this wily and ferocious Boer of

Boers.

They were going to be sounded by the man who had been able to deceive and outwit the smartest British diplomatists, and instinctively they felt how powerless they would be in his hands.

That they were taken before him, prior to their examination by the landdrost, was a sign that he suspected them of being in the possession of some secret, which he would do his best to worm out of them. His scowls and threats they could defy, but his preternatural cunning they trembled to think about.

"Courage, boys, and caution," whispered Ned, as they paused for a moment outside the gate. "Let me conduct the palaver as much as possible with this ponderous Machiavelli."

"Right you are, Ned," answered his chum in awestruck tones. "I wish we were safe back in the tronk, though."

"So do I."

Kruger, the man who could spoof Great Britain, and drive his own people like a flock of sheep, appeared, before they saw him in their imagination, to be almost as colossal a character as their ideal hero, Cecil Rhodes. Throughout Africa these two giants stood facing each other, while the rest of the world watched and waited the result of their deadly duel. Kruger, the champion of everything that was despicable, oppressive, and false; Rhodes, the champion of chivalry, humanity, and progress.

Kruger had won his past triumphs by treachery and unscrupulous steadfastness. He stood like a rock, defying reform. Rhodes also was another rock, guarding the lands outside this camp of treason. Kruger had been able to humbug the Imperial Government, and get what he wanted from them easily; but he could not humbug this sleepless and powerful watcher.

Kruger had his agents and spies everywhere; so also had Rhodes. He was fighting this Boer with his own weapons.

Kruger was rich, but he liked to hoard his capital, and get as much as he could for nothing or by promises. Cecil Rhodes spent his wealth lavishly.

Kruger was working for his own hand, and with the malignant purpose of weakening his enemy and causing discord amongst the nations. Rhodes had devoted his life and his wealth for his country's welfare, and for the security of Africa. The one was a tyrant of the worst order; the other was inspired by the purest and most disinterested patriotism. The one was distrusted and disliked generally all round, even by a large section of his subjects; the other was universally respected and loved for his courage, brain-power, and unimpeachable honesty.

Our heroes had seen for a few moments the first champion of civilisation; they were now about to look upon his antagonist, the impious father of lies.

There was an air of stillness and depression about the place, which these two immovable policemen accentuated. The shady verandah looked dark almost in contrast with the blazing brightness outside. As the boys looked under the branches, the idea occurred to them that they were about to enter the web of a gigantic human spider. They could get in easy enough, but how would they come out?

They were not, however, kept long waiting at the gate. Their guards stopped suddenly, grounded their rifles; then, while the two gatekeepers saluted, they were pushed forward and entered the shadows. In another moment they were ushered, without ceremony, into the presence of the master.

It was a large reception-room in which Kruger sat, with a wide stretch between the door and the table at his side.

On the table were placed a huge silver tobacco-box, a large clasp Bible, and what the young men noted more particularly, the small "three ace" watch-guard tokens which had been taken from them with their other effects. There were also a few papers placed handy for, the president to reach.

He sat in a big, crimson-covered armchair, with a spittoon at his feet, and his pipe in his mouth. Behind him, on the wall, they saw through the tobacco mist a large and harshly painted oil portrait of himself. The room was smelling like a tap-room, while clouds of rank tobacco reek floated densely overhead.

Yet that portrait riveted their eyes, and forced them to look at it before even the original could command their attention—it was such an exaggerated and hideous reproduction of all his worst points. It was also so crudely and vilely painted that it seemed like a gross caricature. Indeed, it was hardly human, but rather as if it had been an imaginative attempt on the part of a house-painter, to depict a gorilla-like, semi-humanised monster.

A large red face, with swollen heavy features; narrow, bestial forehead; small, crafty, and sullen eyes, with a baboon-like fringe of white-grey hair running from the large flapping ears to below the heavy chin. The lips were shapeless, yet relentless in their downward curve.

A strange guttural and gurgling sound growled out, and drew their wondering looks from the portrait to the man himself. President Kruger was speaking; at least, they supposed that loud and deep mouthful of explosive gutturals and gurglings was his mode of expressing himself. It must have been an order, for as they glanced round, they noticed the guards quitting the apartment, and found themselves alone with the monster and his secretary or interpreter.

He was looking at them from under his sullen, pent brows, with ice-cold, piggish eyes that made them shiver again in spite of their efforts to appear brave. He was so horribly ugly, so revoltingly animal-like, and so utterly unsympathetic, that they instinctively recoiled before him. He grinned ogressishly as he observed this step backward,

and taking his pipe in his huge, hairless, flabby hand, he puffed out a volume of smoke and expectorated loudly into the spittoon. Then he resumed his pipe, and leaned back in his chair, still watching them intently. He had awed them, and he was evidently delighted with the effect which he had produced, for he chuckled hoarsely as he sent out another huge volume of smoke from his wide mouth.

That grim chuckle, with the undertaker-like costume and vulgar deportment of the animal, undid the first effect of his savage glare. The boys looked again, and saw only an unmannerly, brutal, and hog-like old man, with the ugliest face they had ever seen; with elephantine proportions and shapeless great feet, filling out a gimcrack crimson chair, while his fat, coarse hands gripped the sides. His portrait had not flattered him, yet it was distinctly like him, with all its artistic faults. The narrowness and dense ignorance were all there in both picture and sitter, so also the intolerance, obstinacy, and brutality painfully pronounced with his greed, cunning, and plebeian meanness. He was the same sort of Boer as those that they had seen on the farms ill-treating their servants and cattle, the same superstitious and rude dopper who read his Bible and doggedly shut out charity from his heart. All the rudeness, filthy habits, and moroseness of his race were here in unbending and irredeemable force, carved and cemented by age and habit into the hardness of cast iron.

They were no longer appalled by his ugliness; instead, they were looking at him with undisguised loathing and contempt. Was this the man who had hoodwinked men of intellect—this low-bred, stupid, and surly beast, whose only qualities were vindictive hatred and ignorant, stupid conceit and arrogance? Surely he could deceive no one who stood face to face with him, for that countenance was an open index of all the mean vices which make men abhorred and despised? He looked and acted as if his proper place was amongst hod-carriers, not politicians.

They had hit upon the keynote of his dangerous power in their misplaced contempt. It was this appearance of stupidity that threw keen men off their guard when dealing with him—this and his hypocritical cant. He looked no more intellectual than an ignorant local preacher, and as he was constantly preaching, they forgot to look under his words. Behind all these state platitudes, and copy-book texts, he plotted with the cunning and ferocity of a relentless savage.

After watching them for full five minutes with half-shut eyes, while he puffed like a steam-engine at his pipe, he made a motion with one blunt forefinger towards the table. His attendant at once rose and handed him the tobacco-box.

This was not what he wanted; still, while it was there, he filled his pipe and lit it afresh. Then he beckoned again. This time the secretary handed him one of the ace trinkets. He took it in the palm of his paw, and regarded it with suspicious eyes; then the lips widened and the cheeks bulged out, while another mouthful of harsh sounds were belched forth. The secretary explained this jumble of gutturals to our heroes.

“Why do you wear this badge? What does it signify?”

Ned explained that it was the badge of a club in Johannesburg, of which he and his companions were members.

The president broke out as soon as he had spoken, and the secretary went on with his questions.

“We know that well enough; but how came you strangers to be members of this club?”

Ned answered because they wished it. There was no law against Englishmen joining it at once on their arrival.

“Take care, younker, and remember where you are. Answer questions, but don’t make remarks. How many members are there?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is the object of this club? Take care how you answer. We know already that its object is against the State.”

“Then it is more than I do,” answered Ned, boldly.

“What is done there?”

“Magazine and newspaper reading and letter-writing. Some of the members smoke, some play dominoes, but not often.”

“And this design—what does it mean?”

“The ace of hearts, the ace of spades, and the ace of diamonds.”

“Yes?”

“That’s all.”

“Why not the ace of clubs as well?”

“Ah! I don’t think the citizens of Johannesburg have got that ace,” answered Ned, innocently.

A chuckle came from the armchair. Then President Kruger for the first time spoke in very fair English—the tongue he understood perfectly but hated so viciously. As he spoke he smiled a fat wrinkly smile that gave his face a simple and grotesque expression of good humour. His voice was thick and rumbling.

“You are a slim carl for your age, younker. How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” replied Ned.

“And you, my young brakjes?”

Not knowing that “brakje” was a term of contempt, they answered freely enough. Again Kruger chuckled, while he shook his ponderous head and pointed his clumsy finger at them.

“Far too young to be mixed up in conspiracy and treason. Young gentlemen like you ought to stay in your own country, and not come here breaking the laws and making riots.”

“We have done nothing, your Excellency,” said Ned.

“Do you call it nothing to knock down four honest burghers, smash the nose of one and the jawbone of another? Do you call it nothing to threaten my police with a revolver, and use the insolent language you have done?”

He had risen to his feet by this time, pulled himself out of the chair ponderously and by degrees. As he stood now towering above them like a hippopotamus, he impressed them with his physical strength. His eyes were beginning to lighten up dangerously.

“I have you in the hollow of my hand, you miserable brakjes, as I hold every dog in my country. What you have so foolishly spoken entitles you to hard labour for some years. The assault you committed on the authorities is punishable by death. Do you think I can allow my men to be injured in this way by boys—eh?”

“We were only defending ourselves. They struck at us first and without the slightest cause.”

“It is a verodomde lie. You belong to a nation of liars and vipers, allermachtij!” shouted Kruger, savagely, an ominous gurgle coming from his throat, while his right arm began to swing as if about to strike them, and his eyes became buried under the flesh of his upper lids.

Ned bit his lips and remained silently facing this ogre, with flashing looks.

“Ugh!” gurgled the president, controlling his rising temper as suddenly as it had been raised. “I can do all this to you, and no one dare stop me, not even your queen,” he added childishly. “I am master here, and what I will is fate. I can send you to my worst prison, where you will rot all your miserable days. But I can also be kind and merciful to those who deserve my clemency. Now, if you will be good younkens and tell me all that you know, I shall pardon you, and never send you for trial at all—nay, more, I’ll give you each a nice billet, where you can serve the Republic and make your fortune. Now, are you going to be good younkens and give me all your confidence freely, as if I was your father, or your tender-hearted uncle—Oom Paul, you know,” he chuckled unctuously—“or must I send you to rot in the tronk?”

“We are English, your Excellency, and sons of the Empire, not Dutch spies and traitors,” answered Ned, for his companions, proudly and without a pause.

“Then go and—rot!” roared Kruger, bringing his big fist down on the table with a bang that made tobacco-box and Bible jump. “Send these ruffians to the landdrost, and let the law take its course.”

The last our heroes saw, for that time, of the humane president of the Republic, was him puffing furiously at his pipe, with his ugly face distorted and his eyes out of sight.

“I guess he doesn’t like to be contradicted,” said Ned, as the police once more marched them off.

Chapter Fifteen.

At Nylstroom.

Tender-hearted and magnanimous Uncle Paul had not come best out of this interview, neither had he exhibited much of his vaunted diplomacy and character-reading. Indeed, he had shown himself to be what he was exactly—a densely stupid and tyrannical Boer, who thought to cow three lads with his threats, and make them his tools by a little clumsy and transparent cajolery. This was the only method he had, however, of dealing with people, and what his parasites termed his greatness.

His agents and whitewashes have called him a man of deep religious feeling, honesty of purpose, singleness of life, thoroughness of character, free from all vices and defects, of great magnanimity, mercy, clemency, and justice, and possessed of the simplicity of a child.

Yes; he had the simplicity of a very much spoilt, greedy, and vicious child. Our heroes had penetrated this side of his nature. They were now about to taste of his clemency and justice. They had thwarted his intentions concerning them, and, being a Boer, he could not pardon that from either man or child. No Boer was ever known to forgive or forget any rebuff. They never reason; they can only brood upon their side of the question and plan revenge.

Kruger showed his thoroughness in the way he pursued them with his witnesses and private orders to the landdrost. He did this with the thoroughness of a red-skin. Their advocate was snubbed, and ordered to sit down the moment he rose to defend them. No witnesses were called on their side, while people they had never seen came and swore to actions and words they had never thought about or said. Then the verdict was given without a pause, and their sentence delivered with vicious denunciation from the judge. As they listened to him they were almost persuaded that they were very dangerous criminals, and deserved the gallows, instead of hard labour and long imprisonment.

Boer justices, now that Kotze was removed and they had only one will to consult, did their work with sweeping and drastic force. They punished not only the criminal, but his friends as well, when they could be got at.

Their sentences were—

Seven years each, with hard labour.

2000 pounds fine each, or another five years.

A hundred lashes, to be spread over the first two years in the following order: twenty-five lashes after the first three months' imprisonment, and twenty-five each six months after.

Our heroes laughed at the fines, but they clenched their teeth and vowed that they would be free or dead before the lashes were inflicted upon them.

"If we get free and live, boys," whispered Ned, fiercely, "I hope that fiend Kruger may not die before I can kill him."

Mr Raybold and Philip Martin got a few words with them before they were led away.

"Don't you pay that fine, father," said Clarence.

"Not until you are at liberty, then I don't mind what it costs me," replied his father, brokenly.

"Don't be afraid, father; the Transvaal hasn't got a tronk that will keep us in for three months, now that we know our fate."

Philip stooped and whispered in the ear of Ned.

"We shall move heaven and earth to get you sent to one jail. After that, day and night we will work to help your escape. Keep up your pluck, and take advantage of all chances. We'll have you shadowed with friends and able horses."

Ned smiled, and pressed the hand of his friend as he answered—

"I will not spend all my time sleeping, you bet."

It was a desperate life our heroes led after this day, and might have broken even their spirits, only for the hope they had of accomplishing their escape.

After passing a week at Pretoria, they were sent up the country to Nylstroom, where some heavy road-making was being done. This they did not object to, as it was so far on the way to Rhodesia. They were glad also to find that they were not separated.

Here they were treated with all the ignominy and harshness that the stupid and merciless Boers could invent to make their captives sick of existence. They were put into a cell where only natives were confined, and not allowed any bedding whatever. If they could find space enough to lie down, that was all the comfort they were permitted to have.

This, of course, was intended to degrade them as far as possible, and doubtless would have been a terrible punishment to a Boer.

But our heroes, being more liberally brought up, did not find the company of those Kaffirs half the infliction that some of their late white companions had been. The captive savages were cleaner and more wholesome, both outwardly and inwardly.

They were men most of them, whose only crime had been that of conquered enemies. Tall, powerful warriors they had been once upon a time, with spirits still untamed, and hearts filled with undying hatred toward their harsh oppressors.

As soon as these prisoners discovered that Ned, Fred, and Clarence were English, and filled with the same hatred as they had, they received them into their ranks, and treated them with all the kindness and consideration which they were able to show.

Several of them formed a blood bond with our heroes, which made them allies and friends for life.

One clear benefit in this companionship was that these Kaffirs thus pledged would be faithful to them. Indeed, amongst the whole gang, there was not likely to be a traitor or a spy. These poor wretches had nothing to gain by treachery, for their condition would not be a whit improved. They all knew the Boers from bitter experience, and abhorred them as much as they respected their English conquerors.

By daybreak they were marched out to their work under the escort of an armed and mounted force of warders. The food served out to them was mealie-porridge with salt, and not too much of that. From the hour our heroes entered Nylstroom, they were constantly in a famishing condition.

Yet they had to labour as navvies all day long under the broiling rays until sundown, with hardly any intermission except the short time allowed for their midday meal. The overseers rode about abusing them in German and Low Dutch, and plying their cowhide whips over the backs of those who fainted or shirked their work. It was worse than slavery, as these Boers did not care whether the prisoners lived or died. If they resented the savage stroke by so much as a look, they were tied up and flogged almost to death. If they showed fight, they were at once shot down and flung to one side like carrion.

Our heroes could not have endured the whip even with their hopes of liberty buoying them up, therefore they laboured with a will, and gave the brutes no chance of chastising them. Sometimes the whip cracked over their heads, but fortunately for their future, it did not descend on their backs.

The reason for this was that their friends outside had managed to get at these venal wretches, and paid them a weekly sum to spare the young men that last outrage.

They were all the more closely watched for this very reason so that they might not escape. During the day this would have been impossible, as before they could have run a dozen steps, they would have been shot down.

They had passed a fortnight of this wretched existence, when, one day, as Ned looked up, he saw a party of horsemen riding past. Amongst them was Philip Martin, who, catching his eye, pointed quickly north, and then patted his horse.

Ned knew what that meant. They were to run northward when their chance came, where friends and horses would be in readiness.

His heart bounded as he read the signals and saw his friend gallop past him. Then he bent and plied his pickaxe with renewed energy.

In spite of their semi-starvation, the hard labour did not hurt our heroes. Already they had got over the utter exhaustion that made them so helpless when they reached their cells. They had lost flesh woefully, but their muscles were becoming tough and hard as steel, and their skins tanned and sun-proof. They did not fear but that they would be able to run once they got the chance.

Their cell was a small one, with corrugated iron on two sides and mud-cemented walls on the other two. Each night they were carefully searched before being locked in, so that it was impossible for them to smuggle in any tool.

Still, now that Ned had seen help so close at hand, he did not despair. What he could not get in himself might be sent to him from the outside.

That night he told his chums what he had seen, and their spirits rose wonderfully at the news.

"They will be on the outlook, I am sure, therefore we must let them know whereabouts we are located." After some consultation the idea struck them to hang out a bit of rag from one of the narrow air-holes. If they did this that night, it was almost sure to be noticed and understood by those on the watch outside.

There were fifteen Kaffirs in this cell besides themselves who would have to be trusted. The lads had seen enough of them to risk taking the lot into their confidence.

"Cocoeni," he whispered to a strong young fellow, who had vowed friendship with him, "would you like to escape?"

"You bet, baas," replied the Kaffir, who understood and could speak a little English.

"And the others, will they help us?"

"Yes, baas; you may trust us all. We shall all help you if you show us how."

"I have friends outside who, when they know where we are, will give us some instrument to break out of this."

"Good. And what can we do to let them know?"

Ned had torn a piece from his shirt while he was speaking; he now said—

"Give me a back up, Cocoeni. I'll push out this bit of rag. When the moon rises they will see it."

"So will the Boers," said Cocoeni.

"Oh, we must risk that. If they do wander round that side, they may not think anything about it. Besides, they are too lazy to do much knocking about at night."

Cocoeni willingly placed his face against the wall, and bent his back while Ned climbed up on to his broad shoulders. It was pitch dark inside, but they could see the stars through the slits near the roof.

After the rag had been pushed half through so that one end hung outside and the other inside, they agreed to watch and watch turn about. At the first appearance of day they would take in the signal.

Clarence took the first watch of three hours, while the rest lay down to sleep. By this time every Kaffir had been told by Cocoeni, and they were prepared to obey orders.

Nothing disturbed Clarence. The Boers never troubled themselves to visit their prisoners during the night, and doubtless not many bothered themselves to keep awake.

He saw, however, by the rays of silver that the moon had risen and was shining on the outer wall. It was a full moon, so that the rag must be observed if any one was on the watch.

Fred took the next watch, nor had he anything to report when Ned relieved him. The moon by this time had moved round to the other side.

Ned waited patiently for about two hours in the darkness, when, just as he was beginning to think there would be no answer that night, Cooeni touched him, and whispered softly in his ear—

“Baas, some one outside creeping gently.”

The keen ears of the savage had heard what Ned could not.

A few moments afterwards something heavy dropped upon his head, and fell with a muffled thud on the clay floor. He stooped to lift it, and to his delight felt the head of a small pickaxe wrapped in flannel. As he was unrolling it, another article came through the slit, and this he found to be the handle.

His friends had understood his signal, and this was their reply. He hugged handle and head in his arms with an ecstasy of delight. Now, at last, freedom was within sight.

It was too late, however, to do anything this morning. In another hour dawn would be upon them. They must defer operations for another night, and hide the treasure.

He explained what he had received to Cooeni, who woke his friends to tell them, while Ned did the same with Fred and Clarence. A deep grunt of joy spoke the Kaffirs' feelings, while our heroes fairly danced with pleasure.

To dig a small hole in the corner was the work of the next half-hour, after which they placed the articles side by side and covered them with the clay, which they pressed down, and moistening the top from their water-jug, they smoothed it as carefully over as they could in the dark.

One of the Kaffirs lay down on the damp clay and dried it with his body, while the others crawled about and picked up every portion of loose clay, which they swallowed as they found them.

Before the first streak of dawn crept in the floor was as clear of débris as it had been before, and the part over the pickaxe completely caked and dry.

Then Ned looked up to see and remove the rag. It was gone. The one who had brought the gift had removed the signal.

Chapter Sixteen.

Breaking the Tronk.

He is not a gregarious animal the Boer. Except for expeditions of murder or rapine, when expediency forces him to congregate, he prefers to wallow in his own sty.

He does not enjoy night-work, either. The night to him is thronged with “spooks” and other nameless horrors which he does not care to face. He can murder a Kaffir in the most atrocious fashion, and think nothing about it as long as the sun shines, but he dreads that Kaffir's “spook” after the sun sets. Even the uncertain light of the moon doesn't seem to comfort him greatly.

He has no humour in its sprightly and harmless sense. He can appreciate rough horse-play and clumsy practical jokes, particularly if there be a strong leaven of cruelty about them, and he is the joker. As a nation, the Boers have not wit enough to be sarcastic, although they can be bitter enough at times, and harsh always. But they are possessed, in its most childish, morbid, and undeveloped state, of imagination. During the day they are hard-headed, callous-hearted, keen-eyed men, ever on the outlook to best their neighbours and grab what advantage they can. Generations of previous warfare have made them quick and sure with their aim, perfect horsemen, and the finest skulkers in the world. By day they are impervious and vulture-eyed, and, according to their own uncivilised mode of conducting warfare, dogged and resolute, if not brave. We cannot call a man brave who slinks behind kopjes and circumvents his enemy only by treachery; yet, when driven into a hard corner, they will turn and fight with the viciousness of desperate rats.

But at night they are a most timorous and superstitious set of shrinkers. Every strange sound makes their flesh creep and their hair bristle. The kloofs, and veldt, and karri are packed with evil spirits, whose weird revels they no more dare disturb, than would a jackal a lion while he is feeding. Their God is the Lord of vengeance, their religion a hotchpotch of rank superstition.

Our heroes did not fear greatly that the cell would be disturbed while they were out of it. The prisoners were deputed to do the cleaning once a week, and Saturday was the day ordained for this duty. On Sundays they were allowed to rest, as according to the Transvaal laws, no trekking, or work of any kind, was permitted on that day.

It was Thursday now, therefore they were almost positive that after they were driven out, the door would be locked until their return at sunset.

How wearily the hours dragged on during that day which they fondly trusted was to be their last in this slavery!

It was dry weather, fortunately being the middle of the winter season, as Nylstroom in the summer was one of the most malarial districts. Yet the sun blazed fiercely down upon the exposed and shelterless place where they worked, and tried them all severely.

The mounted warders even became slothful with their whips as the morning advanced, and found smoking more to their minds than browbeating their charges.

Ned and his two chums toiled on even harder than they had ever done before. They were thrilling with suppressed excitement, and felt glad of the work that made the hours pass. They scarcely lifted their heads or rested until the call came for the midday meal.

Mealie-porridge for breakfast, dinner, and supper becomes monotonous; yet they were thankful enough even for this fare when it was served out to them. A mad longing for beef had been on them for some days past. The thought of it blended with their desire for liberty, so that they could think of little else.

"Oh for a grilled steak!" groaned Clarence and Fred, as they bolted their unsavoury mixture.

"We'll have it, if all goes well, for breakfast," whispered Ned, to keep up their courage.

It was a lovely dream, and they hugged it, and kept their tongues moist all the afternoon with the sweet anticipation.

It was astonishing to watch their companions the Kaffirs during that day of suspense. They wore their customary sullen and apathetic expressions, as if hope had no abiding-place in their bosoms. Not even by so much as a flash in their lurid eyes could any one have guessed that they were thinking of liberty. The only sign our heroes could note was their extra patience and endurance. When the cowhide ripped across their bare shoulders, they did not even give a quiver. It might have been a fly landing on the back of an elephant, for all they seemed to feel.

As afternoon drew on, Ned and his chums began to husband their strength. They dug the pickaxe and spades more lightly into the baked clay, and played themselves at working as much as possible.

At last the sun dropped to the horizon, and they were driven back to the trunk. As they approached, our heroes looked at the walls and building with keen speculation. The front was the portion occupied by the warders. A couple of men were supposed to watch the back from opposite corners, but, as Ned shrewdly surmised, they did not keep a very strict sentry, otherwise his friends could not have got over the wall as they had done the night before.

For the few moments that twilight remained in the cell, they examined the ground and gave their Kaffir friends directions. The poor fellows listened attentively to their chosen leader, Cocoeni, and showed that they were ready.

Then darkness came, and they began without delay. To prevent the sounds being heard, Ned and his chums began to sing; the others also made as much gabble as they could. In the other cells, which were divided by the iron sheeting, they could hear the prisoners quite distinctly. It was to prevent them hearing the pickaxe at work that they were making the row, but as for the Boers, they had no fear of them troubling to stop a wrangle or a ditty as long as it was not patriotic. Ned took care of this by starting and keeping up a few of Sankey's hymns which he knew. While they were singing they likewise prayed fervently for their deliverance.

Cocoeni took the pickaxe, as he was the strongest man there. With a few deft strokes he had broken the hardened surface of the floor; then, while he dug, the others scooped the earth out of the hole with their hands. He went down by the side of the wall until he had cleared the foundations; after this he began to tunnel.

It took them till long after midnight before they got to the outside of the wall; then they began to dig upwards. They worked very carefully at this portion, and carried the débris into the cell by relays.

At last they had reached the surface, and as some of the earth fell in upon them, they were able to see the stars. To their joy this side of the wall was buried in darkness, for the moon was on the other side.

Ned looked out carefully as soon as the passage was wide enough.

Halfway across the yard the shadow fell, leaving a patch of whiteness for some fifteen feet between that and the outer wall, which was about ten feet in height.

At each angle a sentry-box stood clearly revealed. As far as Ned could see, they were unoccupied. The sentinels had evidently left their post, and the passage was clear.

One by one they crept out, Cocoeni bringing the pickaxe with him.

As they stood by the wall, Cocoeni whispered softly to Ned—

"Wait, Baas. I creep round and see if no one about."

He crept off without a sound, while they watched and listened. In a moment more he was back.

"All safe that way, Baas. Now for the other side."

They saw his dark figure glide along the whitewashed wall till he reached the end, then he disappeared round the corner.

He was longer gone this time, and when he returned, he was carrying a heavy load. As he reached them, he laid his burden gently down and stretched himself up.

"One Boer done for, Baas. Just caught him in time and brought him along," he whispered. "You put on him clothes and take him gun, and it will be safe."

"Is he dead?" asked Ned, horror-struck.

"Yes, Baas. Me make no mistake with pickaxe. Other fellow court him gal on the other side. Quick put on him coat and hat, and go over to the box. You see other fellow from there. If he still wait, hold up hand."

Ned, repugnant as the task was, felt the wisdom of acting upon the suggestion of Cocoeni. Swiftly he drew off the coat and hat from the dead Boer and put them on; then, bracing on his bandolier and revolver-belt, he took up the rifle and boldly crossed the line of light to the sentry-box.

There were no windows to this end of the building, while from where he stood he could see the front gate, outside of which stood the figure of a stout-built woman pressing against the rails, while inside was the other sentry, with his face to her and his back to his duty. They were having their upsitting, or rather upstanding, in the moonlight, and seemingly totally oblivious to any one or anything else.

It was gruesome to think of that bleeding corpse within the shadow, and those ponderous lovers looking at each other with speechless and moonstruck admiration. Ned shuddered to think of it, and now he was wearing the blood-soaked hat at the same time.

However, there was no time to moralise. That Boer lover was likely to stand there until daybreak without budging, but some one else might come.

He put up his hand, and at the signal the seventeen figures left their shelter and glided across like spectres. Ned could watch them and the pair at the gate. He was also able to make out that ghastly figure which they had left behind.

Cocoeni bent his back and put his head against the wall, while one by one they clambered over him and dropped out of sight.

"Now, Baas, your turn," said the Kaffir, softly.

Ned laid down his rifle and walked over to Cocoeni.

"How are you going to get up?" he asked.

"Easy. You go first, I come after."

In a moment Ned was on the wall.

"Come on, Cocoeni."

"Wait a bit, Baas."

Cocoeni ran over to the sentry-box and snatched up the rifle, then he returned.

"Catch, Baas, and get down other side. I be with you presently."

Ned saw him run back a few yards and then take a flying leap. Next instant the Kaffir was beside him on the ground, and they were free.

So far all had gone well. Their danger now lay in the open country, which spread as clear under the moonlight as if it had been day. As they got away from the tronk wall they could easily be seen and potted by any of the authorities who might be posted about.

However, this had to be risked, and the only course they could pursue at present was beside the main track.

They therefore set off as fast as they could run, keeping to the grass, and making for the kopjes, which were some distance away. Ned had a notion that they would not have far to go before they met their friends, if their escape had not been already observed.

Cocoeni kept alongside of our heroes, and carried both the rifle and pickaxe, which he had taken a fancy for since the gory deed it had been the instrument of. The rest scattered and kept on abreast over the valley.

They ran past a couple of small houses, rousing the dogs, who started a chorus of loud yelps, but without disturbing the inmates, apparently.

They were clear of the township now, and with the open country before them, yet by no means out of rifle-range, when a most unlucky accident happened. Cocoeni, by some carelessness or want of knowledge, suddenly let off the loaded rifle with a bang loud enough to wake the dead.

Fortunately he had the rifle on his shoulder and pointing skyward, so that no one was hurt, but the effect meant disaster. It would rouse every Boer who heard it, and raise the tronk-keepers.

"You have done it this time, Cocoeni!" cried Ned. "Now it must be neck or nothing. Forward, boys, with all the wind you can put on."

There was no time to look behind and see what result that shot had produced. One and all spun over the ground like racers.

"Ping! ping! ping!" came the bullets after them. The burghers had got out of their beds, and were driving away at them from the windows of the two houses. One poor Kaffir flung up his hands and fell on his face. The death of the sentry had already been avenged.

Up the hillside they rushed; they were amongst the stones now, therefore better able to dodge the bullets.

For one instant Ned glanced back, and what he saw quickened his paces. From the trunk gates a body of horsemen were riding out, and spreading out upon the road.

"We're done for!" he gasped. "They'll be up to us in five minutes."

At this instant his ears caught a clattering of hoofs in front of him, and, looking forward, he saw half a dozen horsemen galloping along the road, with three empty saddled horses amongst them.

"Hurrah! we are saved!" he cried joyously.

"Not yet, my son; but jump up without delay, and we'll do our best," answered one of the riders, as they reined up beside the escaped prisoners.

"Halloa! you've got a tribe with you, I see," said the leader, as Ned and his chums sprang into the empty saddles.

"Yes; what about them?"

"They must run for it and take their chance; we have no more horses here."

"Never mind us, Baas. We know where to hide. You get along. The Boers will follow you."

"Good-bye, brothers," shouted Ned.

"Good-bye, Baas! I'll see you again by-and-by, never fear," cried Cocoeni in his full, deep tones.

Next instant the troop were riding at full speed, while the Kaffirs had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them.

Chapter Seventeen.

A Record Ride.

"Halt!" cried the leader, after they had ridden about a couple of miles at full speed.

The company at once pulled in their well-trained horses and stood stock-still. They had quitted the track, and were now just behind the crest of a kopje, so that their pursuers could not be seen.

"There, lads, change your prison togs for these more befitting rigs-out, and eat some of that tucker while we settle off a few of these accursed Kruger whelps. We have a ride before us which will beat Turpin's ride to York—for distance, at least—before we can next draw rein."

His men had dismounted while he was speaking to our heroes, and ran back to the kopje's crest. They were now resting on their stomachs and taking aim at the approaching Boers.

As he spoke he pointed to a bundle which was fastened to each of their saddles.

"Get into these as fast as you can slip, and put inside you what you find in the centre of each swag. We must be off again within the next five minutes."

Saying these words rapidly, he left them and the horses, and ran up to join his companions.

Our heroes were out of their saddles, and had the bundles unrolled before he had run half a dozen feet. By the time he had taken his place on the kopje-top, they had got the riding pants and boots on, and were buttoning up. In half a moment more they were bracing on their waist-belts and bandoliers, etc., ready for the journey.

Then they opened the saddle-bags and commenced devouring some biltong and biscuit, washing this down with modest sips of cold tea which they found in their water-bottles. Their teeth were sharp and their appetites keen with long fasting, therefore they made the welcome viands disappear as rapidly as they had dressed.

Meantime those on the mound-top were busy. The Boers had galloped up with somewhat rash confidence, thinking that they had unarmed men to cope with. Those in hiding reserved their fire until the Boers were within a hundred yards. Then they fired unanimously, and emptied six saddles.

There were only seven burghers left, and they drew rein in sudden consternation.

Bang! went the second volley, and only one warder was left upright. Without waiting for his quietus, he wheeled about with the utmost promptitude, and raced back to the trunk as fast as his horse could carry him.

They let him go, satisfied with the slaughter they had committed, and, rising, they ran back to their horses and mounted in hot haste.

"It is saddle and spurs now, boys, until we get over the border. This morning's work will raise the Transvaal. Forward!"

No more was said, but at their utmost speed they set off, and dashed over the country as if doing a race.

Mile after mile they sped without slackening rein for an instant. The moon went down by the west, and the stars grew dim. When the day broke they were at least twenty miles from Nylstroom, and in the midst of a wild and lonely scrub.

They had reached a fording-place on one of the tributaries of the Limpopo river, and were approaching a native kraal.

Here they saw a crowd of natives, and with them four horsemen, with a number of spare horses.

“You see we have made preparations for you youngsters; at every twenty miles we have relays waiting right on to Palla station. There we shall find a sufficient force to back us up if there is any fighting to be done.”

The natives, who, although under Boer control, hated them furiously, had beer and roasted meat ready for the newcomers. Galloping up, they flung themselves off their exhausted beasts and rapidly transferred their saddles and bridles to the fresh horses. The fagged steeds were turned out to grass.

Five minutes only they stayed at this kraal, and while devouring their meat and drink standing, they told the men who had been waiting about their last encounter.

“We must get through before the news can spread, and avoid, if possible, any more encounters; so here goes to beat the record.”

Together they all dashed on at the same speed as before. That morning our heroes had their first glimpse of some of the wild game of Africa. They saw in the distance a herd of quagga, and shortly afterwards sighted some giraffes fleeing away much more rapidly than they were doing.

It was a beautiful and varied country they were passing so rapidly through. But they were too deeply engrossed in the effort to get out of it to pay much attention to what they might otherwise have noted.

In another couple of hours they were joined by a fresh company of four, and again mounted.

By midday they had dashed across the border-line, having covered over a hundred and thirty miles in less than nine hours.

It was the longest and fastest ride at one stretch which Ned and his chums had ever taken, and by this time they were almost bent double with fatigue.

But they were safe from Kruger and his myrmidons. Clear out of the country, to which they vowed only to return with those who would terminate this vile oppression miscalled a republic.

It was their last stage. A few more miles, and they would be at the Palla Road railway stations, where they could wait for the up-train to Bulawayo.

They slackened pace now that they were so near the end of their desperate race. As they cantered along, they took out the remainder of their provender and emptied their water-bags; then, considerably refreshed, they began to converse.

There had been no leisure to see much of each other during this record ride.

Of the country our heroes could recall a flashing panorama of mountains, kopjes, and veldt. They had passed through the half-cleared portions of dark kloof, where tall trees were shooting above dense undergrowth. They had skirted mealie-fields and Kaffir kraals. They had crossed half-dried streams, with tangles of reeds lining the banks. They had startled quaggas, gnus, giraffes, and other tempting-looking game, and forced them to use their limbs over the wolds as the horses rushed along.

They had seen snakes spring aside from their horses' hoofs, and natives who cheered them on their course with friendly cries; all through that line the Kaffirs knew who they were, and why they were speeding so swiftly from the country of the Boers. These natives, who waved their arms like signal-posts, were scouts who would have warned them had there been danger in front. They had seen with instantaneous glances all that they wanted to see, and were fortunately saved from the sight of their deadly enemies.

But, until now, our heroes had hardly looked at the men who were risking their lives to help them over the border. Now, however, that they were outside Kruger's jurisdiction, they ventured to examine their brave rescuers.

Twenty-six men, fully armed, rode beside them. They were all tall and stalwart fellows, with the exception of the leader, who appeared short beside these six-footers. They were also all bearded like middle-aged Boers, and costumed like burghers when on field-duty.

Dust-covered as they were, and swarthy with sunburn, it was difficult to gauge their years. Judging from their faces and beards, they might have been any age from forty to fifty-five.

From their movements, however, and figures, they ought to have been much younger men.

“Well, boys,” said the leader, “you have had a bad time of it lately; but I think your Transvaal troubles are about over—for the present, at least.”

He had kindly brown eyes, and an open fearless look about him that greatly took with our heroes. Also, in spite of his late exertions, he did not appear to be the least bit fatigued.

“Thanks to you, sir, and these gentlemen, we have achieved what would have been impossible otherwise,” answered Ned.

“Yes; I own that Kruger's country is not easy to get out of, when the owners want to keep you. One thing this ride has

done, I fear—closed a good road in or out for any future trekker. By Jove! there will be a nice kick-up over this affair, and no mistake. You'll have to make yourselves scarce for a while."

"But surely we are quite safe in Rhodesia?" asked Ned.

"Well, that remains to be seen. Kruger will make a mountain out of this ant-hill. Cables will be sent to the Home Government, demanding their prisoners to be arrested and returned to them, and large indemnities for the potted burghers."

"And what will the British Government do?"

"Sacrifice you, without a pause, to pacify the old man of Pretoria, and us also, if we can be traced."

"Then we have got you into a bad fix, I fear," said Ned, regretfully.

"Oh, don't concern yourselves about us; we are ready with our alibis," answered the leader, with a merry laugh. "These gentlemen have been on the sick list in Bulawayo hospital for the past three weeks, while I have been looking after the health of my friend and chief, Cecil Rhodes."

"I say, Jim," said one of the others, "do you consider it safe for us to take the up-train to Bulawayo?"

"Perfectly safe. There will be a special waiting for us at Palla, and we will hang on till after sundown before we board her. A wire up to headquarters will prepare them for our arrival, then you boys can sneak back to your nurses, while we make our way to Salisbury. We shall have to disguise you for that journey, but my friends will be done with their beards by that time, so one of these each will do for you."

At last our heroes understood what had been puzzling them as peculiar about their rescuers. They had disguised themselves for this expedition.

Who could the leader be, who was at that time supposed to be looking after the health of the great empire-maker? They looked at him again more closely, and then light broke upon them.

Dr Jameson, of course! The hero next to Rhodes most worth following and worshipping in Africa.

He saw from their expressions that they had recognised him.

"Yes, boys; I am Dr Jim. But no one outside this company must know it. Your friend Philip Martin wrote to me the fix you were in, so we thought we might as well have a little outing and help you away. Now we must finish our task and make you disappear altogether from the ken of man. That, however, we can discuss with our chief when we see him."

Words failed our heroes; they could only gaze at this dauntless paladin with speechless admiration.

After a time Clarence ventured to ask about his father.

"Oh, he is all right! He was advised to clear out as soon as you were sentenced, as he could be of more use to you outside the Transvaal than in it. He has sold his property and transferred his shares in the mine, and moved his banking account to Cape Town. He is there also, and stands the expenses of this so far successful private raid. By the way, he writes to tell us you wish to do a little exploring."

"Yes," replied Ned; "that was our intention when we left England, but I don't know how we can do it now."

"It will be the very best thing you can possibly do, while the hue-and-cry is out for you. I think we shall be able to fix that for you at Salisbury. Meantime, as we are within three miles from Palla station, and it will not be dark for a couple more hours yet, we had better take a stretch here and breathe our horses."

They dismounted, and while their horses were left to feed as best they could on the veldt, they flung themselves down to have a much-needed rest. Pipes were filled and lighted, then most of them lay on their backs and smoked enjoyably while they looked at the deep blue space overhead.

No one spoke, they were too tired for that; possibly each one had plenty to think about as they lay there.

They had accomplished their purpose and wiped out a few of the general enemy. They had also taken time by the forelock, and had not much fear of being stopped on the railway, no matter what telegraphic messages were sent on before them. Kruger had his spies in Rhodesia as he had elsewhere, but these agents were known, and could be kept back by those who were working this affair.

Dr Jim had the most to think about, for after Bulawayo was reached he had a long distance to ride before he could drop his disguise and feel safe. Our heroes also would run most risks.

But they had a fearless and keen-brained man to guide them and think for them; they felt they had not much to fear.

The sky was rapidly changing from deep orange to ruddy violet when Dr Jim roused himself, and said—

"I say, Lawson, you had better ride in advance, and get things ready for us. We'll be after you in half an hour."

One of the Boer-like men rose lazily and walked over to his horse; then mounting, he cantered easily off into the dusk.

Half an hour later, the ebon sky was clustered with stars; then the company got up and resumed their journey.

When they reached Palla they found the station clear of all except the railway officials, and the engine ready for starting.

Their horses were put into a couple of boxes behind them. Together they entered the comfortable saloon, where a good supper was waiting for them. While they were enjoying this, the train was running along smoothly at about forty miles per hour, and all their troubles over for the present. They made no stops, but glided on smoothly through the night.

When they woke the train was slackening speed, and the bright morning sun once more lit up the level veldt and glistened on the zinc roofs of Bulawayo.

They had arrived at the present termination of the Chartered Company's latest and most gigantic enterprise.

Chapter Eighteen.

The Ride to Salisbury.

There was no chance of letters getting in before them, while as for telegraphic messages, it was too early yet for such to be delivered.

As they rolled into the station they saw no one about, except the station-master and one sleepy porter.

The town had not yet woken up, as they could see from the lack of wood smoke issuing from any of the chimneys.

Three of the men denuded themselves of their beards, which our heroes put on, transforming themselves into middle-aged men in a twinkling. They left three young fellows, with their handkerchiefs wrapped round the lower portions of their faces, so that no one could recognise them. These precautions were needful, even in loyal Bulawayo, for there were Boer agents here as well as elsewhere.

The horses were detrained, and led off by their owners to the stables of the Palace Hotel, where faithful grooms were waiting to receive them. After delivering over their steeds, each man went by different directions back to the hospital. As far as they were concerned the ruse had been entirely successful. As for the special train, it took on a fresh supply of fuel and water, and dashed off down the line again.

When the townsmen of Bulawayo would get up and resume business for the day, there was no one to tell them that a special train had arrived and departed.

"So far, so good," said Dr Jim, as he sent off his wire to Salisbury. "Now, boys, let us get on. We shall find relays all the road up, and, although we need not make tracks quite so quickly, for the first fifty miles we mustn't let the grass grow under us."

They had filled their water-flasks, and laid in provisions while on the train, so that now they did not wait to look at this rising city. They put spurs to their steeds and dashed away impetuously towards Gwalo.

At Imbembesi they had breakfast, having ridden through a lonely, undulating, and woody country. The landlord of the small inn there was prepared for them, and did not keep them waiting. After enjoying a good wash and substantial feed, they mounted fresh horses and went on at an easy gallop.

At Shangain they changed again, and kept on until Gwalo was reached. Here they rested for a couple of hours, while the doctor received and answered some telegrams which were waiting.

"As I expected," he said. "The hue and cry is out, but there is no one to stop us about these parts. We must keep on all night, though, as time with me is everything." As they rode out of Gwalo he said, "This is a most interesting locality from an antiquarian point of view: all round are ancient mine-workings. Some day, when you can spare the time, you must come back and examine these remains of past races."

They changed horses twice during the night, resting and eating at each place, so that when morning dawned they had reached Fort Charter, two hundred and fifteen miles from Bulawayo, and had only sixty-five miles more to traverse. At Fort Charter they had a bath, breakfast, and three hours' rest.

They rode easy for the rest of that day, and arrived at the Hamyani River Hotel about sundown. They were only twelve miles now from their destination. They were not at all fatigued, although they had been for thirty-six hours almost constantly on their saddles. Their horses were also quite fresh.

Yet their leader, for reasons of his own, did not wish to reach Salisbury until after midnight. They had, therefore, supper here, and afterwards lay down and had a few hours' sleep. At half-past eleven they once more took the road, greatly the better for that short repose and brush-up afterwards.

Their ride had been absolutely without human incident for the past two days, except for those people at the hotels. They had encountered neither horseman nor waggon. At the inns their coming had been provided for, so that they escaped any outside curious eyes.

Dr Jim was in a most contented mood now that he had escaped observation. It did not matter greatly after this if they chanced to pass or meet any one, since they were so near to the end. He had rescued three young Englishmen from the remorseless clutches of his enemy, and punished some of that enemy's satellites.

"You are in great favour with the chief," he said. "I don't know if he would have permitted me to leave his side at this time for any one else. But when he heard your sentences he swore a mighty oath that you should not taste the cat, even if he had to go himself and pull you out."

"We also made a vow that we should not be flogged," said Ned, quietly.

"You are plucky young fellows, and have stood this journey gamely. If you look after number one, and do your duty, there is a future before you. Cecil Rhodes, once he takes a fancy, sticks to it through thick and thin."

"We shall try to deserve his good opinion, and yours also, doctor."

"Be true to your country, faithful to your friends, and never shirk your duty, and you are safe to keep the good opinions you have already gained. Here we are at our destination."

As he spoke he turned into a gate that was held open by a young Kaffir boy, and walked his horse up an avenue of blue gums, that looked inky, with their pendulous leaves, in the light of the late moon. The bush spiders were yet busy spinning their silky traps for the unwary, early morning fly, and the dew lay heavily upon those gleaming meshes. They were entering by the back road to the spacious Salisbury abode of the ex-premier of South Africa.

On each side of them as they rode slowly along were the numerous outhouses and stables, all substantially built of limestone, and slated. The gum trees, which had been planted within the past three years, were already thirty and forty feet in height, and gave out a pleasant aroma.

In front of them they could see a wide-spreading building, surrounded by three tiers of verandahs, and terminated with picturesque pinnacles. It was like a large hydropathic rather than a private residence.

A solemn stillness lay over this building, plunged as it was in darkness, and rising out of the shrubbery and fruit trees which had been planted and forced up regardless of expense. Solemnly and darkly this combined mass of building and foliage, with the delicate filigree tracings of palm trees and other exotics, rose against the declining moon. There was not a light to be seen in any of the windows.

But in a corner of the garden was a small single-storeyed building, like a summer-house, and here in the two windows facing them gleamed a ruddy glow of lamplight.

"The master is still up, Pete?" observed Dr Jim, as they dismounted and gave their horses to the Kaffir boy.

"Yes, Baas. He is waiting for you."

"Then, we must not keep him waiting. Come, lads, and report yourselves."

He opened a little side gate, and strode through the shrubbery towards the lighted windows, with our heroes at his heels.

For the second time they were about to behold this colossus of Africa—the man who never turned upon a friend, or took refuge behind an excuse; the man who considered his vast possessions as only trust-money for the good of his country; the most powerful and striking personality of the nineteenth century. Our heroes did not tremble as they had done when entering the abode of the ignoble enemy at Pretoria. There were no policemen here to guard this potent life. He was hedged round by admiration and affection. Nor had he any dread of the assassin's bullet, for he was a man absolutely fearless. Yet they approached with timid expectation for all that.

Dr Jim tapped at the door, and a strong clear voice bade them enter. Next moment they were inside a small room plainly furnished with a table, a few chairs, and a small camp bed. They were in the favourite sanctum and bedroom of the modern Napoleon. He had been busy writing before they came, for the table was littered with papers. But at their entrance, he sprang up quickly, and, taking two strides, held out his shapely hand and clasped that of Dr Jim with a firm fervent grasp.

"Welcome back, old fellow, and you also, young gentlemen; let me congratulate you on your escape."

He pushed the spirit-decanter and a box of cigars over to Dr Jim, who helped himself. Then he looked at our heroes with a genial smile.

"You have been already adding a line to our history, and making yourselves famous in Africa," he said. "I have here my orders to look out for you, and hand you back to prison. Ah, there is a fine to do over this affair. Thirteen valuable burghers gone under, I believe."

"Twelve I am answerable for," answered Dr Jim, calmly.

"The thirteenth was killed by one of the Kaffirs who escaped with us," said Ned.

He had been wondering how they had got on, and now enquired if any of them had been captured.

"Not yet. Nor do I expect they will be. I suppose you made arrangements about their safety, Jim?"

"Yes," replied the doctor. "They will be passed on to their own people by the friendly Kaffirs, while if any care to come up here, the railway authorities have orders to forward them without delay."

Our heroes rejoiced to hear this news, for their Kaffir friends had lain heavy on their minds since they had parted from them.

"Then, by this time they are into British territory, for these fellows know their way about much better than either the Boers or we do. We shall have them up here in a few days. Now, I suppose, you are ready for your breakfast, and bed afterwards?"

Our heroes were ready for their beds at least, although they declined the offer of any more refreshments.

"Right you are."

Cecil Rhodes pressed an electric knob at his side, and in another moment the Kaffir boy Pete appeared.

"Show these young gentlemen to their bedrooms, Pete, and afterwards go to your own lair. I shall not require you any more this morning."

He nodded to our heroes as he resumed his seat at the table.

"We shall have a chat after you have rested. Don't hurry up before noon. Breakfast will be sent up to your bedrooms. Now, Jim, old fellow, you can do without sleep, I know, and there are three hours' hard work before us here to get over ere I can let you go."

Dr Jim drew a chair up to the table, and prepared to listen to instructions.

"I guess it is no sinecure that post of Dr Jim's," said Ned to his chums as they left the little house and walked after Pete towards the big one.

"When does your master sleep, Pete?"

"Never, I think," answered the boy. "He is always working and wide awake. When sun rises he will be off to the veldt for a long ride with Baas Jim, then all the day they will be working again. Sometimes he lie down on that little bed for half an hour after lunch, or he have a nap in his chair after dinner, but that is all he takes of sleep."

When they got inside, the boy set on the electric light in the hall and staircase to show them up to their rooms. There he left them, as they desired him, to manage for themselves.

Three nights before they had been slaves, with only a caked earth floor to lie upon. They were now the occupants of a sumptuous bedroom each, with every comfort and appliance that unlimited wealth could procure.

Full of heartfelt gratitude, they knelt and poured out their thanks to the God who had protected them and liberated them from the house of bondage. Neither did they forget to blend the names of those who had been the instruments in His hands of their deliverance. Lastly, they prayed that He might watch over and guard the dark-skinned brothers who had escaped with them.

After this grateful offering they crept into the comfortable beds, and very soon forgot all the troubles of the past.

Chapter Nineteen.

They start on their Adventures.

"Well, boys, at last we are having our desires and realising our wildest dreams."

Ned was the speaker, and Fred and Clarence the recipients of his sentiments. Six weeks had gone by since the night they first slept at Salisbury, and now they were encamped in the heart of unknown Africa.

Cecil Rhodes, their benefactor, had taken up their idea of exploring, and as he never did things by half or in a dilatory fashion, he had fitted them with every requisite on a princely scale. As it was dangerous, even with all his great influence, to keep them within the limits of civilisation, he packed them off promptly and secretly to the kraal of a native ally, and there they remained perdu until their carriers and luggage were sent to them.

They were young and lacking in experience, but, as Rhodes said, so was Joseph Thomson when he led his first expedition across Africa, and what the son of a Scottish borderman could accomplish, so ought these plucky and well-educated young Englishmen. They had all the rudiments of science needful for their purpose, and experience would teach them the rest.

He therefore drew out a careful chart for them to follow, gave them full instructions how to treat with the natives, and, what was of most service, sent with them a full complement of tried native hunters, guides, interpreters, and carriers. They had not a boy that was not faithful and trustworthy. Each of them knew the man who had sent them, and could depend upon being well rewarded on their return.

Amongst their servants, to their great delight, were Ccoeni and six of their fellow-prisoners. The rest had decided to return to their own people, but these, having nowhere else to go, volunteered gladly to join the expedition.

Ccoeni had some adventures to tell them of their perils by the way. Fortunately, however, they had all got clear of the Transvaal without disaster.

Their outfit was thoroughly complete to the smallest detail. A dozen of properly salted horses accompanied them, while they had eighty carriers to bear their luggage. A good waterproof tent was amongst the items, with medicines, beads, and bales of showy cotton to pay their way along.

As for arms and ammunition, they had every weapon that was wanted for the largest game, as well as for smaller kinds. They were also amply provided with the best and latest improvements in rifles and revolvers, and sufficient ammunition to last them for a couple of years.

Ned, of course, took the leadership, and his orders from headquarters were most liberal. He was given a wide track of yet unexplored country to traverse, with full licence to use his own discretion.

“Keep a diary,” said Rhodes. “And jot down anything that interests you specially. Watch carefully the lands you pass through, and their condition and possibilities, and make the best maps you can of rivers, mountains, and plains. Above all, look carefully after your own health and that of your boys, and avoid as much as possible swampy and malarious ground.”

For all the rest they were to do as they liked. Hunt, enjoy themselves, make friends as much as possible with the chiefs, and avoid anything like aggression.

“Go, and stay away for at least six months, and when you return, bring a good report of yourselves. And may the Lord watch over you.”

These were the final words of their commander, who, with his lieutenant, Dr Jim, had come to see them make the start.

It gave them great confidence to have this great man as their friend and backer. They knew that he had smoothed many difficulties out of their path, and also that he would not be idle in their behalf during their absence. Kruger would not have it quite all his own way with Cecil Rhodes at their back.

What a difference had those six months of freedom and responsibility made upon them! They were master men now in all respects excepting years. With this large following to look after and provide for, what remained of their boyhood, which the prison had not shown, now had left them for ever. Cecil Rhodes knew what he was about when he sent them off on their own account to face the dangers and trials of exploration.

“If they come back, as I firmly believe they will, we shall have three worthy successors to Selous. These boys have brains and good pluck, and their prison experience will be all to their advantage. I am pleased with them, and have every confidence in their fitness for the task.”

So Cecil Rhodes said, as he waved his riding-whip to them for the last time, and returned to his own heavy and multifold duties.

Filled with fortitude and high hopes, our heroes departed, leading their company of followers into the tropical forest. They were on the outlook for adventures, and from the first day they were not disappointed.

Every hour brought some fresh excitement, and opened new wonders to their eyes. They were passing through a land perfectly crammed with animal life, so that there was no fear of going supperless to sleep, so far at least.

Our heroes had been wonderfully particular in keeping their diaries for the first week or two. A good deal oppressed with the importance of their mission, and fresh to the work of note-taking, they cudgelled their brains to find far-fetched and varied expressions, so as to give their efforts literary style. Their models in style were those ponderous and laboured essays which generally find favour with dictation masters, where a word repeated is considered bad form. The result was that their descriptions were of the grand, verbose, and vague order, rather than the terse and realistic. Striving to produce effect and variety of language, they at times forgot the main object, which was to make themselves intelligible, and present the route vividly in few words. Redundancy is the failing of juvenile literature. Brevity the soul of experience as well as wit, and simplicity the gift only of poets and matured masters.

They went along, more often thinking of what they should write, than watching for material by the way. They pulled out their pocket-books when any particularly erudite words or expressions occurred to them, and jotted these down with supreme satisfaction, to drag them in somehow in the day's log. At nights, while sitting at their camp fires, they compared these high-falutin notes, and mutually congratulated each other over these jaw-crackers. It was a sweet joy to read them over aloud, and roll them round their tongues. They were most generous to each other in imparting their critical advice, and sharing their choice expressions, while, as they had all been educated in the same school, the three logs, rolled into one, was written down by Ned, and after great deliberation and corrections, was laid aside as the final copy.

This was composed and written, as they fondly imagined, for the printers. They were mighty particular, therefore, over it, so that it would read smoothly and roundly, and when done, they compared it with other travellers' works that they had read, with happy conceit. Herodotus and Mungo Parke, they admitted modestly, had done as well, perhaps. Joseph Thomson also was pretty fair with his wise and moral reflections; but as for those other slovenly writers like Stanley, Selous, and such-like, they thought their amalgamated journal would keep them at a respectful distance.

This juvenile mutual admiration and camp log rolling was a great solace to them for the first week or so. The journal interfered a good deal with sport and real business, of course. Thinking of it made them miss many a fine chance and good shot, and several times ran them into real danger; but it consoled them all the same, while the novelty lasted, for those other unavoidable mischances.

Their carriers did not object, as it gave them many opportunities for resting, which they would not have had otherwise.

But Cocoeni and the hunters protested often and vehemently against this waste of time and opportunities. The

hunters, who had started full of faith in their young masters, lost a good deal of their enthusiasm and respect, and might have turned heel altogether in disgust, if Cocoeni had not flagged up their weakening interest. Cocoeni was, however, their right-hand man and staunch supporter. He was an enthusiast in deeds of daring and destruction, and equally ready to wash his spear in wild beast or hostile man. If he grunted impatiently when he saw the note-book produced instead of the gun, he always did his best to excuse the weakness and explain the mistake away to his sable brethren.

“Bah! this is nothing,” he would say, when he saw the carefully tracked animal bound away unscathed, all on account of those note-books. “Don’t be afraid. This is only the beginning. By-and-by you will see our masters wake up and do great deeds. By-and-by they will not write. We have been together before, and I know them to be men.”

A timely accident, for which Cocoeni was to blame, either with intent or through carelessness, terminated this fit of *cocoethes scribendi* for the rest of that expedition, at least, and woke them up to sterner duties.

Cocoeni, whom they trusted with their most valuable effects, was one day carrying the small valise which contained their entire stock of writing-material. They were crossing a mountain torrent, which rushed tumultuously through a chasm and over a series of cataracts, when his foot slipped, and in an instant the precious packet was swept out of his grasp and whirled out of sight.

The caravan was instantly stopped and a wild search ordered, in which Cocoeni willingly took the lead.

But, alas! all that was found of the contents of the valise were a couple of closely written sheets. These Cocoeni brought back in a smudged and soapy condition after many hours’ absence. As for the broken valise and its pulpy contents, he said he had seen a greedy crocodile bolt these without compunction at one gulp, and straightway disappear into a dark pool as if he had taken enough.

Our heroes spent a doleful night, looking at their crammed note-books and those two hardly legible sheets of paper, all that remained of their painful and laboured efforts.

They had plenty of pencils, but not one blank scrap of paper to use them on. The wail of Ramma rang in their hearts, and for a time they were disconsolate.

Then Ned plucked up his courage and cheered his chums.

“We’ll just have to do a bit of memory practice after this, boys, and put down all we have seen when we get back to civilisation.”

“Let us keep these two sheets carefully as a specimen of what we are capable of. I fancy they will rather impress our great chief when he reads them.”

Comforted with this reflection, they packed their note-books and the manuscript carefully inside their medicine-chest, and devoted their future days to adventures, and their evenings to criticism on the faulty writings of other travellers. This cheered and elevated their minds greatly, until the time came when note-books and style were completely swallowed up by action as their valise had been by the saurian.

When Cecil Rhodes read those two rescued pages he laid back in his chair and wept. When asked by Dr Jim the cause of his emotion, he replied that it was out of pity for that poor crocodile. Even the most loathsome of reptiles deserved commiseration for such a dire fate.

We quote a few extracts from the precious manuscript which affected this most reticent of men so visibly. A little will be sufficient to prove how thoroughly in earnest our heroes were.

“July 28.—The palaeolithic region over which we are passing possesses fertile streaks of fluvial deposits that are most encouraging to future agriculturists. This superincumbent alluvium is most effusive on the depressed basins or water-sheds. Here also the tsetse fly is indigenous and multitudinous. Three of our horses have succumbed to the virulence of these pestiferous and dipterous insects.

“Memo.—The tsetse is similar in appearance and magnitude to the ordinary house epidemic.

“July 29.—After traversing for the past lunar month over more or less elevated plateaux, with intermissions of gorges and kloofs, we have commenced our descent into a deep depression, or valley. Before us extends an umbrageous and interminable wilderness. Precipitous cliffs bar our progress to the right and left, which have been gradually approaching each other until we are enclosed in a circumscribed upland chasm. We must either retrace our steps or enter this lower level. We have decided to proceed downwards. Hitherto we have been on friendly terms with the inhabitants. They have welcomed our presence and imparted to us all the information at their command. They have also accepted our presents with the most affable liberality.

“The country over which we have passed has been generally adequately populated, with distinct communities and agglomerations of huts of considerable magnitude. It is well watered by rivers and tributaries, and each village has its own fructiferous plantation, also fields of maize, manioc, and other granular produce. The Carnivora *fissipedia* is well represented in these upland regions, likewise the ungulated order. We have encountered several lions and leopards, and demolished a pair of the first and one of the latter species.”

(One of these first-named Carnivora *fissipedia* had nearly demolished Ned while he was making his notes for this elaborate extract, only that Cocoeni came to his rescue just in the nick of time. Ned, however, did not think this narrow escape worth making a note about. It was merely a personal item, he said, which could not possibly interest the great public that he was striving so hard and conscientiously to instruct.)

"We have been dining on buffalo-steak and elephant heart tonight, having bagged one of each species this afternoon in a reedy swamp through which we passed. The pecora was a tough customer to deal with, as we failed to kill him at the first volley, but eventually he was subdued. The tusks of the proboscidean weighed over a hundred pounds. We have inhumed this ivory until our return. Tomorrow we vertigate the forest."

Chapter Twenty.

In the Forest.

Our heroes were encamped within the "umbrageous wilderness," as Ned had named it.

A howling wilderness they discovered it to be, where constant vigilance had to be exercised, and thinkers-out of verbose phrases had no place.

Each moment of the day and night they had to be on the qui vive, for it swarmed with hostile enemies, both human, inhuman, and climatical. It was lovely in its tropic luxuriance and lushness. They cut their path through a labyrinth of juicy greens and vegetable parasites which untravelled Europeans see only in the hothouses of their botanic gardens. Great trunks festooned with tendrils rose and spread over their heads hundreds of feet. They were able only at rare intervals to see the lower limbs, for all above was so interlaced and covered, that an everlasting twilight of green reigned even on the brightest day.

Sometimes a slender shaft of sunlight penetrated to the canopy over them and illumined a patch of leaves, making them gleam like old stained glass, but that was all they saw of the sun. As for moon or stars, they were perpetually shut out from these secluded glens and avenues.

Round, as above them, the same mystical shadow prevailed. They could see an intricacy of snaky rope work and leaves intermingling, the creepers crossing and recrossing in all directions as they drooped or sprung up from the dank undergrowth, or threw themselves from tree to tree in bewildering arches. Through these tough tendrils they were forced to cut their path.

The compass was their only guide, and Ned carried it in his hand and kept his eyes upon it constantly while they were on the march.

Under their feet they squashed through oozy slime and rank vegetation, or tripped over spreading roots. They skirted deadly looking pools, black, and suggestive of unknown horrors where the fluid was visible. This was, they knew, only visible when it had been disturbed by the monsters who made it their noisome lair. The other portions were covered with flowering reeds and treacherous emerald bright grasses.

There were paths intersecting this malarious dankness, some worn by human feet, others trampled by the ravenous beasts with which the forest teemed.

They passed well-made, fresh-cut, and straight paths at times, but they did not use these tempting ways, for they knew the traps which they led to, as well as they knew that murderous eyes were watching them from the closely woven thickets and impenetrable canopy that covered them.

They crossed streams where the clear water ran noisily over sandy shallows or flowed smoothly beneath waving leaves. Sometimes the ground became elevated and rocky, then again it dipped into dark hollows that made them shudder at what lay below them. At times they had to surmount precipices and listen to cataracts thundering down unknown depths. At times they drew back with horror at the covered edges of inky chasms.

At night the blackness was palpable, except when it was rent up by the most vivid lightning-flashes and appalling thunder-peals. Then they heard all round them the splitting of limbs and crashing of giant trees which had been struck, while the tornado shrieked high up and the rain poured down solidly.

The atmosphere was as airless, moist, and sultry as that within a Turkish bath. Whether they walked or stood during the day they were always wet with perspiration and gasping for breath. At night cold exhalations rose from the slimy soil and chilled them to the marrow.

It was the dry season, or none of them could have survived this march. Yet it is never dry in those forests.

In the mornings the densest of fogs shrouded everything, and clung to them like a vast grey muffler. This entered their lungs and nearly choked them with its thickness and heavy effluvia. While it lay round nothing stirred. Nature seemed dead, animal and insect life asleep; a weird and ominous hush brooded over the scene like the sombre stillness of a grave. They were entombed and spell-bound with the universal and dim death-silence.

When this vapour dispersed, the labyrinth would suddenly start into life and swarm with motion and sounds. Birds would shriek at the welcome light, baboons chatter and swing themselves aloft with merry and noisy antics; butterflies would flutter and gleam with gorgeous colours as they sported through the open spaces.

Swarms of fierce mosquitoes and other venomous insects buzzed and flew about, stinging viciously. Ants dropped down their necks or rushed up their trousers in countless hordes and with maddening effect. These tormentors never left them alone day or night. Under the deadly bite of the tsetse fly their most seasoned horses fell one by one, and had to be left behind before they had gone very far. This, however, did not discourage them, and when they came to the rock climbing they felt they were better without these poor beasts.

All night long the forest resounded with the roaring, trumpeting, and other strange cries of wild beasts, while round

their fires they could see at times an outer circle of flaming phosphorescent eyes. During the day they could see sometimes what they took to be a stout tendril or limb detach itself from the tree and glide noiselessly out of their path. Sometimes also what they thought was a mud-covered log in their path would suddenly gape horribly at them, showing serrated rows of gleaming teeth inside the ugly long snout, while the seedy monster wallowed ponderously into the turbid bog.

These were only a few of the countless perils which beset them every foot of their leafy journey. The reptile, animal, and insect world encompassed them with as deadly intent as the noxious vapours. But what they had to look out for and dread more than these were the human savages who infested and disputed the upper branches with the man-like apes.

But our heroes were resolute, and held on undauntedly day after day. They kept to one course with the dogged perseverance of Englishmen, and their followers followed after them with blind confidence.

The wild beasts and savages they scared with their gunpowder and bullets. The malaria they fought with their medicine-chest. The insect pests they endured with philosophy.

They went along happy and fearlessly, for it was their nature to enjoy danger and exertion. Their youth, buoyant spirits, and cheerful confidence not only supported them, but inspired their followers with the same fortitude, while their pure constitutions, unimpaired by any excess, rendered them almost invulnerable to the insidious grip of the fever. In this their patrons had made no mistake. Where older men would have succumbed they passed on unscathed.

"I tell you what, boys, I call this jolly fine experience, and I consider us lucky to have it," cried Ned one night, as he carefully took a bead at one of a pair of glowing green eyes which were shining out of the darkness.

He fired, and immediately a wild stampede took place from all sides with thunderous roarings, while a bulky body leapt into the firelight and rolled over, clawing the ground in its death-throes.

He had made no false aim this time, but had brought down a well-developed leopard.

"A pity we cannot take those skins with us. The people outside won't believe in our stories when we have nothing to show on our return. But we cannot cart any more luggage. Never mind, we have something to boast about all the same, whether we are credited or not, when we get back."

"If we get back," murmured Clarence, gloomily.

Since his knock on the head by the Boers, Clarence had suffered now and again from depressed spirits. The organ of hope must have been damaged somehow on that occasion. At the present moment, however, he had a touch of malarial fever, which always makes one feel very morbid and despairing.

"Hallo, Clarence!" cried Ned. "I see you require some more quinine. Never mind, old fellow, we shall soon be out of this swamp; then you will be all right."

No one paid any attention to the dead leopard as yet. They had grown used to incidents of this sort, therefore felt little excitement. However, seeing that it was a magnificent specimen, and appeared jet black as it lay stretched out, Coccoeni rose and went over to skin it. While he was so engaged, the others kept a close watch over him with their guns, ready to shoot any covetous molester. As they watched the thickets round, they could see dark forms gliding about. These were wolves and hyenas waiting to devour the carcase when Coccoeni was done with it.

From all sides resounded the howlings, sharp cries, and vibrating roarings of hungry animals on the prowl. These never ceased all through the night.

Neither did the everlasting and varied croaking of the frogs, that kept up an increasing chorus, running up and down the scale of notes, from the deep bass of the bull to the reed-like treble of the tender froglet. Through this orchestra sounded the irritating and brisk humming of the indefatigable mosquitoes. As Ned remarked merrily, "No one could feel lonely while this concert went on."

They had no stint of fresh meat, for as they camped mostly where they found a running stream, the beasts generally had their choice of the menagerie as they came down to drink. Sometimes they would pot a fine young elephant or a hippopotamus, while they could always rely upon some variety of the antelope family for their larder.

Each morning and night Ned served out regularly to each man two grains of quinine. If any showed symptoms of fever, he repeated this mild dose every half-hour until they were better. Clarence had been under this treatment for the past two days.

"How much longer do you think we shall be in this earthly paradise?" asked Fred, as he brought his Metford up to his shoulder, and took a careful aim to the left of where Coccoeni was kneeling.

Ned waited until the bullet had sped on its deadly mission, then he answered—

"Not many days now, I reckon, Fred. We have been gradually ascending for the last day and a half, as you may know from the more solid state of the soil under our feet. That stream also, which has kept with us, shows that it comes from high lands by its speed. I expect we shall have some climbing to do very soon; then we shall begin to see the sun and have a breath of clear air."

"Where are you going to, baas?" asked Coccoeni, who had finished his skinning, and now returned to his place by the blazing fire. He spread the hide on the ground, and flung himself upon it as he spoke.

"Straight ahead, wherever that may take us to," answered Ned. "We will keep a bee-line as much as possible until we discover something worth reporting. This course is out of the ordinary track, as any one can tell from the absence of humans; so that we are sure to find out something new."

"Plenty humans by-and-by, you bet, baas; more than you may care to meet."

"Still we shall go on, Cocoeni, as far as we can. We shall be friendly with them, and spare them all we can; but if we have to fight, then we must do so."

"That all right, baas. Go ahead, and we will follow, never fear."

Ned knew this without one of his men assuring him. There wasn't one of them who would turn and leave him in the lurch. They were all picked fighters as well as hunters, whose glory and occupation had been battle from their boyhood, while their pastime was the chase. The oldest man amongst them was not yet twenty-eight, while the others ranged from eighteen upwards to that glorious period of manhood and strength. They were also all tall fellows, belonging to the Matabele and Basuto races, who were absolutely fearless and disdainful of death in any aspect. They were devoted friends of Rhodes, who had won their fealty by courage, and their devotion by kindness afterwards. None would have turned back if they could, but now retreat was impossible, even if any would have entertained such a thought. Each man carried his own share of the load. In this duty our heroes also took their equal part, for these men were men-at-arms, not henchmen.

They had cleared an open space, and made a huge fire in the centre, round which all now lay, except those appointed to keep watch and attend to the fire.

High above, the smoke roared and filtered through the canopy of leafage. For a dozen yards on either side the ruddy flames lit up the massy trunks, tendrils, and drooping leaves which hemmed them in, with the fringe of close undergrowth which gave solidity to the thickets.

They were camped near the bank of a torrent that rushed with impetuous force over rocks, foaming and swirling over and round these impediments, and covering the deep pools with curds and bubbles. This was the most cheerful sound of the many that filled their ears, and it lulled them to sleep. They had come upon it the day before, and as it was in their course, they had kept as close to it as they could.

By-and-by only the watchers were awake, among whom stood Fred, with his rifle ready for emergencies. He, with Ned, had enjoyed perfect health since the start; only Clarence gave them any uneasiness.

He was lying now on three folds of skins stretched face upwards, with his mouth open, and very wan and sallow. Fred occasionally looked at him with tender anxiety. He also attended to giving him his medicine regularly. Doubtless he would be all right when they got out of this fever-infested valley. He was still able to keep up with them, although he had not carried anything for the past two days.

While Fred was looking at his sleeping friend and listening to the forest outcry, all at once he was startled by the most furious bellowing and hoarse shrieking, accompanied by the crashing and tearing of some huge body bursting through the thicket.

Instantly his rifle was at his shoulder, and the barrel pointed in the direction of the advancing turmoil.

Nor had he many seconds to wait before he saw a buffalo, with a leopard on his neck, rushing at full speed along the open avenue which they had made in coming straight towards their camp.

He fired instantly, as did also the other watchers, and before they could get in second shots, the infuriated beasts had thundered past them into the other side of the forest. The buffalo had swerved aside at sight of the fire, and passed just within a couple of feet of where Cocoeni lay stretched on his new skin. As the pair rushed past, Fred had a passing glimpse of the red blood glistening ruddily on the sides of the bull as it gushed out of his wounds.

Fred calmly reloaded and stood once more at attention, for this was but one of many such incidents which might be expected before the morning fog rose and enveloped them.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Baboon Hunt.

Towards morning Clarence broke out into a lavish perspiration during Ned's watch. The moisture poured from him like rain for about half an hour, after which he sank into a more refreshing sleep.

Ned during this time kept him well rolled up in furs, after which he rubbed him dry and covered him lightly, giving him at the same time about a tablespoonful of brandy. When he woke in the morning he was clear-skinned, hungry, and better. After a hearty breakfast, they once more continued their journey.

They did not progress very fast, as they had to cut through the tangle, yet, to their joy, they found that they were ascending to loftier ground each step they took, also that the torrent kept beside them.

After about six hours of this steady upward marching, the undergrowth became thinner and the ground more solid. At places they had to climb over moss-covered rocks, which jutted from the earth. The tendrils, also, were not so thick, nor the tree-trunks so great in girth.

That night they pitched their camp at an elevation of over four hundred feet from where they had lain the night before. The forest was still dense, but there were greater spaces between the trunks.

"We are approaching the open!" cried Ned, exultantly. "Tomorrow, perhaps, we may see the sun."

A herd of koodoo dashed past them up the hill, followed by a pair of large leopards, and in their rear a pack of spotted hyenas also coursed along.

They fired at random into the koodoo, and brought down four. The second volley killed one of the leopards and wounded the other, who, however, made his escape, carrying with him one of the antelopes, while the evil-smelling jackals disappeared with savage yelps.

There was a succulent supper that night, which all devoured eagerly, as they were hungrier than they had been for some days past.

Next morning they rose all in a healthy and energetic condition. The usual thick fog was absent, and the green looked lighter which spread around them. All about them the winged insect and feathered world seemed more full of life and pleasure.

They were going up the sides of a decided hill now. By-and-by it got so stiff that they were forced to drag themselves up by gripping the creepers that spread over and barred the way.

The torrent was now a series of cascades as it bounded from ledge to ledge a swirling mass of foam. At times they lost sight of it altogether.

They were toiling over an upward spread of forest-clad terraces. When they reached one ridge, they found several yards of gentle slope, or even level ground, with a jutting out of boulders to be surmounted after these spaces were crossed. Still they were hemmed closely in with vegetation, and could only see a few feet ahead of them.

All at once they came to a kind of clearing, where the undergrowth was trampled down and the tendrils roughly broken asunder.

"Big man-monkey live about here," said Coccoeni, as he looked about him carefully.

In front of them were several gaping avenues amongst the undergrowth. Ned decided on keeping to one that went in the direction his compass pointed to.

They went upwards now cautiously, making as little noise as they could. There was no occasion to use their axes, as the baboon-path was wide enough for them to pass through in single file.

Coccoeni and two of the hunters went first, and some feet in advance of the others. All were on the alert, with their guns ready and their hearts beating with suppressed excitement. Not a word was spoken. They even held their breaths as much as possible, and took care not to make any rustling with their feet.

This was new game to our heroes, and they were trembling with eagerness. They crossed several of these open spaces as they scrambled up the heights.

Before entering these, Coccoeni scrutinised them cautiously and keenly, while those behind waited on the result. Until he entered they stood still and mute as statues. The only sound they could hear as they stood and listened was the loud-sounding and tumultuous rushing of the torrent. This being close on their left, although hidden, seemed to deaden all other sounds.

At the fringe of the fifth opening Coccoeni suddenly drew back, and held up his hand as a signal for them to advance carefully.

One by one they crept up until they were able to see what he was looking at.

A strange, weird, yet singularly human-like and domestic picture met their gaze.

At the root of a huge tree squatted the most diabolic-looking mother-ape nursing her baby at her hairy breast. She was a gigantic creature, with the most villainous-looking face that our heroes thought they had ever looked upon.

Yet there was an expression of grotesque tenderness and sentiment upon that dreadful visage as she looked down at her hideous youngster, that was half pathetic and half ludicrous. One hairy arm was holding the young ape up, while the other paw was gently stroking its face as any human mother might have done when similarly occupied.

But if she was frightful to look at, her mate, who sat at her side and also watched his offspring with paternal complacency, was the most awful and devilish monster that the imagination could conjure up as a nightmare.

There was nothing ridiculous about him, but a combination of all that was revolting, bestial, and terrifying.

His flat forehead and pent brows; his dreadful jaws, which were slightly open in a senile kind of leer that exhibited his fangs; his shapeless, bulging paunch, short legs, deep chest, and long arms covered with dingy-looking hair,—he looked the embodiment of brutality, loathsome ugliness, and ferocious strength.

The first glance made them shiver with horror, the second filled them with the desire to kill this half-human, wholly fiend-like monstrosity.

The tree under which this awful group sat grew on the edge of a precipice, while in front of them the torrent could be

seen and heard as it fell into the chasm, with a sound like thunder, from a lofty cliff. With that thundering in their ears, and the vibration of the covered rocks under their feet, they did not fear being heard by the brutes in front of them, Cocoeni made a silent sign, and the hunters crept through the leafage to make a half-circle round the still unconscious family party. While they were doing this, he drew back and whispered to Ned—

“Don’t shoot till I give you the sign. I know how to manage this fellow.”

“So do I,” replied Ned—“from what I have read.”

“All right. Now for him.”

Cocoeni stepped into the open, holding his gun ready, while our heroes followed him. They knew that they must kill with the first shot or it would be all over with them.

Neither of the baboons had heard them, but they had got the scent of the other hunters, and looked up sniffing the air suspiciously.

In a moment the male baboon saw his foes, and scrambled upright, fixing his wicked and ferocious eyes upon them. With a roar that eclipsed the thunder of the waterfall and echoed horribly in their ears, he opened his jaws, and grinned on them, showing all his teeth.

A tremor passed over them, and for a moment unnerved them—he was so horribly like an exaggerated Kruger as he stood there glaring at them.

He gallantly waddled in front of his wife and child, covering them with his ponderous body, while she sat still and waited. This action on his part the young men could not but admire.

With another fierce roar he stopped, and beat upon his stomach with both hands until it sounded like a big drum. He was getting ready for the fight, and bidding defiance to them.

Three more paces did he advance, then he once more stood still, and made the forest resound with his cries and drum-beating; then he threw his arms out, and crouched ready for the spring. He was about two yards’ distance from them by this time.

“Fire!” shouted Cocoeni.

Two rifles belched out at the same moment. Ned and Fred had fired off, while Cocoeni and Clarence stood ready.

The monster flung up its arms and fell on his face without a moan. He had been pierced through the heart and lungs.

The mother, when she saw what had befallen her mate, did not attempt to escape. She looked at the prostrate body stupidly for a moment; then, as if suddenly realising the disaster, she placed her baby on the ground, and rose, as the male had done, to her feet with a barking roar.

Ned and Fred meanwhile had fallen back a pace, and put another cartridge into their weapons. They were cool now that they had succeeded in their first shot.

She repeated the tactics of the male, only moved more actively, not giving them so much time to aim.

But their shots told all the same, even if she did not die so rapidly. With a shriek she fell forward, after she was shot, on to the body of her mate, and there she lay moaning and gasping piteously.

Our heroes were transfixed with horror at this death-struggle. It almost felt as if they had committed murder. With her life-blood streaming out, the mother made a frantic endeavour to cover and protect her little one, who had run whimpering over to her. She half turned, and got one hairy arm round it, hiding it on her bosom, all the while those human-like moans and gasps broke from her.

But the struggle was short. Even while Ned was aiming to finish her off, Cocoeni gripped his arm.

“No use wasting bullets, baas. She is dead.”

Yes; the arm suddenly relaxed its maternal hold, while the moans and groaning ceased. Only the baby remained. Ned would fain have spared the little one, but the hunters were round it by this time, and it was fighting tooth and nail to resist them. Before our heroes were able to reach it, one of the men had plunged his spear ruthlessly through its body, and pinned it to the ground. With a series of shrill and plaintive cries, it writhed for a moment, then closed its little eyes, and was suddenly still.

“I don’t care much for baboon-hunting,” said Ned, with a shudder, as he turned away, feeling sickish. “I hope we don’t meet any more.”

“So do I,” echoed Fred and Clarence, hoarsely.

“If we had missed that fellow, you would have seen nothing more in this world,” answered Cocoeni, deeply and sarcastically.

“Let us get on,” commanded Ned, shortly.

Then, taking up their loads, they resumed their upward course.

It was some hours before they could feel comfortable in their minds after that battue—that is, our heroes. The Kaffirs felt and showed no emotion whatever. Our heroes, however, walked silently and thoughtfully through the greater portion of that day, and when they camped that night, their prayers somehow did not give them the usual satisfaction. They felt as if they had assisted at a needless and cowardly massacre, and as if they merited punishment for committing an unworthy crime. They would have liked to have asked forgiveness for this action.

Yet these were merely beasts who must have disputed their passage, soulless monstrosities, for whom it seemed ridiculous to feel pity. The first and second they had killed in self-defence.

But the baby—ah, that was what lay so heavy on their consciences!

“I don’t mind the old man one bit,” murmured Ned, as he tossed about. “He was too much like President Kruger for me to let him live, when I saw my chance to wipe him off. He may have had some virtues—as Kruger may have. They both appear to be fond of their own, and willing to fight for them; but that wretched pup—I wish I could forget it.”

Events shortly banished this painful episode from the minds of these brave adventurers, and the jackals would soon remove the traces from the earth. Like the leaves of the forest, the lives of men and animals are trifles of no more consideration than the shadow that crosses a sundial and marks the hour.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Thunderstorm.

Ned sternly put his veto on any more monkey-hunting, big or small, as a cruel and useless expenditure of ammunition. They were harmless if left alone, as they were not carnivorous, and totally unfitted for food, unless for starving men, which this party was not by any means.

Therefore, while passing through this baboon land, the company, after this one experience, avoided these open avenues as much as possible. When, however, they were forced to use any of the paths, they made plenty of noise, which warned these creatures of their coming, and frightened them away. It was small honour to the hunter, who possessed a sure eye, steady nerve, and a good rifle to destroy one of these missing links of man, who so bravely and foolishly stood still and made targets of themselves before they made the attack.

There were leopards and other beasts of prey to be encountered, whom to bring down caused no after reflections. These were treacherous and murderous, and, as they lived by violence, so they deserved their doom.

On the next forenoon after this adventure, they emerged from the forest—at least, they reached an altitude where the trees were wider apart and not so densely interlaced. Then they had glimpses of the blue sky and golden patches of sunlight across their path. This, with the fresher air, braced them all up wonderfully.

They were still ascending, and were now fully four thousand feet above the sea, so that the tsetse flies were left behind them.

About midday they arrived at the base of some lofty cliffs, which reared above the tree-tops some fifty or sixty feet. The torrent was still on their left, and had come to be looked upon as an old friend. It flowed through a chasm or split in these cliffs, and fell into another abyss far below their feet. They could see it dropping like a dark blue band between the branches, while their faces were bathed with the cool vapour which rose up from the pool into which it leapt. A couple of rainbows arched this blue ribbon as the sun-rays glistened prismatically amongst the vapour.

These cliffs in front of them rose into the most fantastic shapes and pinnacles. They were of all shapes and sizes, some exactly like ruins of castles, some like pyramids and obelisks. To our heroes, as they looked up, they appeared like a range of deserted keeps and fortifications set there to guard the borders of a strange domain.

Trees jutted out of each crevice, while gigantic creepers swung like rope-ladders over the front of these strangely heaped-up boulders. The long and twisted lines reached from the top to where they stood, some of them as thick as a man’s thigh and others no thicker than a finger.

It was not at all difficult to climb the cliffs with those tough tendrils to hang on by, and our adventurers, without a pause, began the ascent. At length they stood on the crest of one of these castle-like broken walls, and found that they were entirely the work of freakish nature. They were rewarded, however, for their exertions by the magnificent prospect that spread all round them.

Under them they could see the forest which they had traversed, sloping downwards and reaching away until it became a blur of blue haze in the distance. The fierce African sun was pouring down its rays and heat on this vast mass of vegetation, from which rose a film of unwholesome gas, that softened the tops of the trees until they seemed like a great ocean of blended tones. A mighty silence seemed to brood over this vast sea of quivering colours—the pulsing silence of sleeping life.

Above them stretched that wide vault of atmosphere, the glad sight of which they had so long been denied. One and all spread out their arms as if to embrace the welcome light and pure air. Like the sun-worshippers, they experienced a kind of adoration for the glowing orb which was so softly sinking towards the west.

In front of them extended a flat prairie land dotted here and there with mounds and kopjes and devoid of trees, excepting near the banks of the stream, which they could trace as it flowed across the plateau from a far-distant range of mountains. These mountains were so faintly outlined against the sky that they might almost be mistaken for a low-lying bank of clouds. Only their peaks showed them to be land and not vapour.

Not a sign of human life could they perceive, either on the plain or on the banks of the river. No kraals, no huts showed up even, although Ned looked most carefully through his field-glasses.

"Have we discovered a new tract of country, I wonder," he said, "as yet uninhabited? I see not the slightest signs of cultivation, although it looks as good as Rhodesia or the Transvaal."

"It appears like it," answered Fred. "Only I wish we had our horses."

"Yes, that would be fine, for this seems to be a happy hunting-ground. Look yonder at the peaceful herds of giraffes and zebras. I bet no white man has been here, this generation at least, with his gun," cried Clarence, who had now quite recovered his spirits.

The Kaffirs leaned on their weapons, and looked round them with glittering eyes. Here, indeed, seemed a country worth trekking to.

"By George! I do verily believe we are the first discoverers. Let us christen it at once. What shall it be?" asked Ned, turning to his companions.

"Jameson Land, if anything," cried Fred. "He risked his life to rescue us from prison. He deserves this at least from us."

"So be it. Welcome to Jameson Land, boys; and let yonder range of hills be called the Cecil Mountains and this stream the Rhodes River."

They pitched their camp where they were for the night, and soon afterwards were busy discussing tea, roasted antelopes, and fresh-made cake, which the Kaffirs baked from the flour they carried.

A young moon showed in the sky that night like a silver sickle, and the stars came out gloriously. As our heroes lay and looked at these sparkling worlds, they thought they had never seen anything more beautiful than that overarching spangled vault of heaven. God had been very good to them to guide them safely so far upon their way. Not a man had been lost. They were as they had started, all except the horses, which was, of course, a universal regret. Yet they were grateful, and did not forget to express it before they went to sleep.

From the cries that resounded over the prairie as well as in the forest beneath them, all through the earlier portion of the night, they knew that there was plenty of sport before them.

During the night a most tremendous thunderstorm burst over their heads with a perfect tornado of wind. Fortunately, they were protected from the full force by those granite cliffs that surrounded them like Titanic walls. They had chosen for their camp a grassy mound, round which those strange-shaped rocks upreared.

The tempest came on, with hardly any warning, just after the young moon had set. They could hear it sweeping over the forest before it reached up to them with a most terrific shrieking. They had only time to drag their loads under the waterproof tent and secure that more firmly, when all the three elements—fire, wind, and rain—were upon them in full force.

What a spectacle this was to those who cared to look! Our heroes crept to a split in the rocks, and looked out upon the fierce bombardment with feelings of awe and admiration.

Over the forest hung the electricity-charged cloud, like a great war-balloon that had been dropped from the bulging heavens. From this ruddy and smoke-tinted mass issued a perpetual discharge of forked lightning. These vivid streaks darted from all sides into that ocean of rank leafage. It was a magnificent display of fireworks. It needed but a moderate imagination to transform this driving cloud into a great demoniac air-vessel armed on all sides with Maxim and Gatling-like batteries of the deadly flame.

Without intermission the lurid flashes darted downwards and disappeared amongst the foliage, each shaft doubtless working havoc with those giant trunks. From the point our heroes looked, however, they could only watch the forked streaks of brightness disappear amongst that yielding blackness.

High above the rolling clouds reflected this vivid discharge with a ghostly pallor, while the avalanche of driving rain in the distance seemed a swirling curtain of blue and silver gauze.

Loud and quick thunderclaps resounded, one peal after another, like the rolling of a hundred batteries of artillery. For fully half an hour the flames and the loud rattle of thunder went on without a break.

They were above this aerial fire-ship, and could overlook its dark upper side from which no flashes came. Over it spread a mighty shadow, moving as it sailed like a black opening in the sky.

It was driving rapidly towards them, and looked as if it soon must strike against the cliffs. As yet no wind or rain had reached them; yet they could see the tempest coming, although there was perfect stillness around them. They held on to the rocks, and watched the approach of this death-dealing cloud with fascinated eyes.

All at once it took an upward sweep, as if drawn suddenly from above. As it did so, the firing seemed to slacken and become irregular. Now it was passing over their heads and driving along with the speed of an express train. At it flew by, it dropped a fire-ball into a large tree that grew a short distance from where they stood. Like a reed, the gigantic trunk bent over the edge, and disappeared with a sound like a shuddering sob. When the next flash came, they saw a great blank where the tree had stood, with a rift in the rocks as if a ton of dynamite had exploded there.

Now the rain and the wind were on them with terrific fury. The thunder-cloud was miles away, pouring desultory and

wanton shots on to the plateau, as it raced towards the far-off mountains.

In an instant of time they were drenched, while the tornado shrieked through the rock-rifts like a thousand vengeful furies.

The Kaffirs pitched themselves face downwards, and clutched to the jutting stones, for nothing mortal could have stood upright before that blast in its first force. Our heroes crouched under the shelter of a buttress-like boulder and watched, still fascinated, that disappearing fire-cloud.

In a few minutes, from the little mound ran a hundred streams and tiny cascades into the hollows. These speedily became like filled moats, which swelled upwards until the mound became an island.

Then the wind and the rain left them as suddenly as they had come. The sky once more cleared and the stars burnt with increased lustre.

But their fire had been put out, and for that night, at least, could not be relighted.

Luckily, day was not far off, therefore they formed a square outside their packages, and stood at attention while they waited for the dawn.

Chapter Twenty Three.

On the Plateau.

Existence, for the next five days, was the most enjoyable that our heroes had ever experienced.

They were in a perfect hunter's paradise; in fact, so plentiful and varied were the specimens they saw, that the prairie appeared like a well-stocked preserve. The game was so trusting and fearless also, that they had about as little trouble to bring it down as sportsmen at home have over pheasant-shooting.

It was glorious, but it seemed too good to last long. When a man gets everything his own way for a time, he is apt to begin foreboding evil to come. This is an instinct which is planted in man to warn him against improvidence. Life is made up of changes, and neither success nor misfortune can last for ever.

Our heroes had been trusting entirely to chance so far. What they killed they had partaken as much as they wanted for the day, leaving the remainder to be devoured by the beasts who came after them, and the morrow to provide for itself.

But now Ned began to think it wise to prepare a stock of food to carry with them, in case the present supply failed.

With this object in view, he made easy marches, and devoted a portion of each day to more deliberate hunting, turning into "biltong" what they did not at present require. These were pleasant occupations to the whole company, and they went along with cheerful hearts.

As far as they had proceeded the land appeared to be ownerless, or in the undisputed possession of the grass-feeding and flesh-devouring fauna. There were no pathways, no signs that any other human feet had ever trod over these plains prior to their own advent. This was encouraging, but it also made them wonder.

To reach it they had come through a pestilential belt, which might have hitherto deterred humanity on that side. But what prevented them from reaching it from other directions?

This made Ned and his companions thoughtful when they discussed and speculated upon the yet unknown problem. Was it surrounded by impassable forests, or worse?

This they were resolved to discover, but the surmise of what might be made them take every necessary precaution, so as to be prepared for whatever chanced.

Meantime they revelled in the gifts which were within their reach. They were possessed of everything that was needful to make adventurous men happy—excepting, perhaps, notepaper, and that luxury they had learnt by this time to get along very contentedly without. The weather was simply perfect. Hot sunshine during the day, with pretty nearly always a fair breeze. Cool dry nights, when they could enjoy their camp fires and their fur coverings.

They clung to the banks of the stream that still coursed along unfailingly.

It was of lesser volume now, however, as they had crossed several smaller tributaries that fed it, so that it was about half the width it had been in the forest. But it was still of passable size and depth, considering they were in the midst of the dry season. It flowed smoothly now, yet with considerable current, and with few windings.

At parts the banks widened out and became nearly level. In these parts it lost its depth, and was a series of swampy and shallow marshes with a narrow winding brook in the centre. These ponds, being thickly covered with rushes and jungle, were densely filled with feathered game: koorhaan, francolins, quail, and snipe, also flamingoes, storks, and ibis birds. Once or twice they started some Koro bustards, and dined sumptuously on the delicate dainty.

They could always tell when they were approaching one of these marshy stretches from the dwindled state of the stream; however, after these were passed the beds became fuller again, as it was constantly being fed by tributaries, and appeared to be one of the principal water-sheds. Round the base of kopjes it wound, rippling clear and

unceasingly over its rocky and clay beds; growing smaller as they advanced, yet with pools deep enough to furnish their daily bath, and fringed with brushwood enough to feed their fires.

Every hour they got within range of large herds of African game of some description or other. Zebra, quagga, and giraffes crossed their path frequently; antelopes of every variety were met and shot constantly. Doves of eland, koodoo, hartebeest, reed-buck, and other kinds, evidently thrived here, in spite of their natural enemies, that were also plentiful.

They had several encounters with lions during the day, and never a night passed without their presence being announced by their loud roaring. As the moon increased, they were able to see these majestic beasts prowling outside their camp, with their numerous hangers-on, the wolves, hyenas, and jackals, all helping to render night hideous. Several times, also, they roused a cheetah, and seldom failed to bring the tiger of Africa to book when seen.

As yet, however, they had not met either buffaloes or elephants on this plain.

Ned kept strictly to his programme, and led his company straight across the plateau, only turning a little out of the straight course when stalking down some special prey. He always returned, however, to his bee-line as soon as the sport was run to earth.

The distant mountains were his landmark. Each day they were getting nearer and more sharply outlined against the limpid sky. The stream trended directly towards them.

They had taken matters easy during these five days, seldom covering more than ten or twelve miles each day of straight travelling. Some days they had not covered half that distance. On Sundays they always rested; and as a Sunday had been spent on the plateau, they reckoned that they had put in about thirty-eight to forty miles since leaving the forest.

The mountains still lay, as nearly as they were able to calculate, about thirty miles away. These had been rising gradually on their view, until now they loomed a considerable height over the horizon.

As far as our heroes could judge of the ranges, they appeared sterile, rocky, and uninviting; rugged in outline, with upstarting and fantastic peaks, that broke against the sky like great tors.

When the sun shone upon them, the adventurers could see patches of tawny light, with serrated edges and ragged shadows of violet. There were also long zigzag lines of deeper purple, that looked like chasms and steep precipices. Nothing like vegetation appeared to line those bleak and rugged ridges.

"If we are in the land of plenty now, yonder appears to be the land of desolation," observed Clarence.

"Yes; I fancy we shall see something different over there from what we have hitherto experienced," answered Ned, cheerfully. "Fortunately, our friend 'Rhodes River' still is with us."

"It is also growing, like the game, beautifully less as we advance," remarked Fred.

It was true. The stream was only a rivulet now, hardly six feet wide, and not above the ankle in depth. The game they were leaving behind, and a wave of hot wind seemed to spread from those rocky mountains.

They made longer marches now, covering on the first day twenty miles, and bringing up at sundown to where they could see the details of the mountains very distinctly.

During that day they had seen, in the extreme distance, a herd of quaggas bounding away to their rear, and later on had been able to bring down four white-tailed gnus. These were enough for their supper, and they had plenty of dried meat.

They camped by the side of the brook, now less than a yard wide. They had crossed no feeders for the past two days.

The soil round them was more stony and bare than it had been, yet close to the stream the banks were fertile. Before them the ground spread like a desert.

The mountain range in front was forbidding in the extreme. The nearer lap rose abruptly from the plain like a rocky coast. Huge wall-like precipices, that looked impassable, except where great rents yawned darkly at places.

Ned examined these chasms long and silently. The others looked at him expectantly.

"Well, Ned, old fellow, what do you think of those gateways?" asked Clarence.

"Not much—except as gateways," answered Ned, quietly.

"Then you mean to go on?"

"I should like to see where they lead to—yes, we must see where they lead to," he added, in a more determined voice. "It would never do to go back and say we were checked by a few rocks. As long as the road lies open and our supplies last, I'll go on, if you will back me up."

"Right you are. We won't leave you to go forward by yourself," replied both Fred and Clarence, while Cocoeni and the Kaffirs nodded grimly their willingness to go also wherever they were led.

For the first time since leaving Rhodesia the sense of his responsibility pressed heavily upon Ned. As he lay that night and looked over towards the shadowy outlines of those barren rocks, he felt his resolution waver somewhat. He had

many lives under his charge, men who were prepared to follow him wherever he chose to go. Where was he about to lead them now?

Death by thirst and want seemed to lurk within those desolate crags, which revealed no speck of gnus upon their tawny and red breasts, and only the arid shelter of shadow within their stony flanks.

He curiously began to think what must have been the feelings of Moses when he looked at the naked peaks of Attika, after he had seen the pursuing hosts of Pharaoh overwhelmed. These rocks in front of him could not be more inhospitable than were the red mountains of Attika. Yet they had been the entrances to the promised land.

The rank forest had not appalled him as those stern, dry cliffs now did. Yet the forest held as many dangers—indeed, it hid more varied forms of horrors than these chasms could: death in the shape of fever, and submerging in loathsome and treacherous morasses; from venomous snake-bites, and crocodiles, lions, tigers, and the poisoned arrows of lurking savages. There was nearly every kind of peril to be encountered in the forest except one, and here it waited for them—at least, so it seemed to Ned and his companions—the peril of thirst, the most dreaded of dooms, next to fire, which humanity shrinks back from encountering. Would he go on with those dauntless fellows, and dare that terrible risk, or turn back before it was too late?

The half-moon silvered the ground with cool lustre. A little way off he saw several soft-footed, slouching forms prowling about, with swinging tails and luminous, emerald-green eyes, that betrayed them. While he watched their restless motions, and the rolling heave of their lean hips, he became conscious of the musical ripple of that ever-flowing, if diminished, brooklet.

“It comes from those sterile mountains,” he murmured. “And while it still flows, we are in no danger of perishing from thirst.”

Braced up with this comforting solace, his momentary timidity and irresolution passed away, and he felt once more cheerful. Moses and Aaron had faith. So had the other explorers, both in Africa and on the frightful waterless deserts of Australia, and many of these daring, purposeful heroes had endured all and returned to tell the tale. With manly pride he crushed out all recollections of those who had never returned, and dwelt only on the lives of those who had come back.

“Nothing venture, nothing win. If I bring down that nearest lion with the first shot, I’ll take that as a sign that we will be successful.”

The beast in question was squatting at that moment on its haunches, like a great dog, with its face full towards him, and its phosphorescent eyes shining like lamps.

It was less than thirty yards away, and seemed to be glaring full at him. Doubtless it was waiting and hoping that the dreaded camp fire would presently burn out, so that it might get one of those tempting figures which were stretched round it. About a dozen of its companions were sitting or moving about, inspired by the same idea that now engrossed its leonine fancy.

It was a splendid target, for it sat as motionless as if it had been one of the boulders that were scattered round. Ned smiled broadly as he brought his twelve-bore double Metford rifle to his shoulder, and took a careful aim at the dark space between those glowing lamps. It seemed trying for a sign with a pretty certain conclusion. Yet if he chanced to miss, then, indeed, he might well take this as a bad omen.

With a report that startled the sleepers, the rifle exploded, and made them all leap to their feet. But before the sound came, Ned had the satisfaction of beholding the lion bound into the air and roll over on its side, with those green lamps extinguished for ever.

“What’s up now, Ned?” cried Clarence and Fred, rubbing their eyes.

“Only a bit of an experiment I was trying,” answered Ned, laughing, as he watched the other prowlers scurrying off with their tails between their legs like frightened curs. “That old fellow was sitting a little bit too near my rifle for his health.”

“Was that your experiment?” asked the boys, as they looked sulkily at the dead lion. “You needn’t have woke the whole camp for that easy practice.”

“I wanted to see if I could possibly miss him, for I had made it the condition whether we should go on or turn back.”

“As if any one could miss such a mark! Your ordeal of signs is like what the testing of witches used to be—pretty safe to turn out as you wished it.”

“I might have missed, you know; aiming in the moonlight has always some degree of uncertainty about it,” said Ned, modestly.

“Some few of the reputed witches must also have escaped drowning, but precious few did so, I have read,” answered Clarence, sarcastically. “Then, I suppose, since you must have blown the brains out of that carcass, the sign is, ‘Go on and—risk it?’”

“Yes; that is the result,” replied Ned. “Go on and—succeed.”

“That is the consummation devoutly to be wished. Now, don’t waste any more bullets on signs in the shape of lions—until our watch below is over, at any rate. Be sure, Sir Oracle. We are off again to the arms of Morpheus.”

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Bashikonay.

It was not by any means a dull camp since the diaries and note-books were destroyed.

Before this fatal accident matters had been slightly monotonous for Cocoeni and the other young sporting Basuto and Matabele braves. Since that irreparable loss, however—to use Cocoeni's slangy English—"things were humming, instead of being humdrum."

They were merry boys, all of them, and could not have been more wisely assorted for such an uncertain enterprise. Regardless of danger and privation, and well-nigh impervious to fatigue, they took their troubles laughing.

They made sport of their work, and, unless silence was necessary, turned their daily march into a Christy Minstrel serenade. Repartee, song, and jest were the orders of the hours, and never had Ned seen a moody brow about him since Cocoeni brought the sorrowful tidings back from the rapids about the saurian and the valise.

Splendid-looking fellows the natives were, also; the flower and chivalry of their tribes. Deep brown eyes that could melt with emotion, flash with courage, and sparkle with fun; lips full, and ever on the ripple with appreciation of a joke; teeth even and white as the purest ivory could be; limbs muscular, shapely, and supple, with epidermis smooth, sleek, and sheeny as satin. Whether they were lying, standing, wrestling, or running, they were bronze models of grace and symmetry to draw the eye artistic upon them with admiration and delight.

Ned put them through their facings morning and evening for half an hour each time, before they commenced and after they had ended their day's march. They took to this military exercise most congenially, and as they were quick to learn, very soon became splendidly drilled soldiers. He and his chums had cause to be proud of these glorious young warriors, as with lightning speed they obeyed orders, forming squares, scattering out into skirmishing order, marching steady as Romans, and pitching themselves flat on the ground to the word of command. With what they had learnt of British war tactics, added to their own native training, Ned had charge of as fine a body of men as a captain or centurion could have desired.

Our heroes had not been so long from school to forget or forego the delights of outdoor games and athletic exercises, and these they taught their followers, much to their delight.

Cecil Rhodes, with that profound knowledge of men which has made him such a success, had not omitted cricket-bats, wickets, and balls, with the more necessary items of their equipment. These furnished them with constant amusement at such times as they might otherwise have felt wearied when game was not in their vicinity.

Football was an unfailing source of amusement with these stalwart dusky athletes. Ned was referee on these occasions, and Clarence and Fred the touch-judges. Rugby was their favourite game, and as it was played on those level veldts, it was a pretty and exhilarating game.

Cricket also they enjoyed hugely. They usually fixed Saturdays for their big matches, but some practised all the week. Cocoeni became a crack bowler, and much of the evenings were spent in discussing the qualities of the different players.

They had also racing contests and jumping matches. The steeplechases would have been eye-openers to some British experts, for these fellows could leap like kangaroos and run like racehorses.

They had wild tugs of war, and putting and throwing the weights; also wrestling, lifting, and club exercise. In all these feats the Matabeles contested with the Basutos, yet never lost their temper once.

It was the general good temper and fine control displayed by those hardy young warriors, as well as their expertness, quickness, obedience, and strength, that made them such valuable allies. Ned felt that his hundred and twenty-five trained heroes were equal to a thousand or more irresponsible savages, if they were forced to fight for their lives. With these at his back, he was hardly afraid of any odds now that they knew and could depend upon each other.

Our heroes were well-trained and religious young men, and while paying such strict attention to their physical exercises, you may depend upon it, did not neglect their spiritual devotions. On Sundays they conducted Church service twice regularly, each of them taking turns to deliver a discourse suitable to their audience and their own abilities. They explained the Scripture as they read it, and did their best to demonstrate how good and beautiful, as well as knightly, were the qualities of mercy, purity, truth, and faith.

They showed their heroic and simple listeners that fearlessness, endurance, courage, and strength were only the common attributes shared alike by beast and man; that where the man proved his heroism and superiority over the beast was in his generosity and chivalry towards his weaker or viler enemy, and also in his humility, trust, and obedience to the higher and Divine laws of God. When they told of that great and perfect Example and Sacrifice to humanity, those emotional Africans sobbed their sympathy for His sufferings for them. He was the true and perfect Knight who faced and endured ignominy and death that they might live eternally.

They pointed out the living example of King Khama, who had proved that a Christian could also be a brave and great warrior. They told about that other hero, Gordon of Khartoum, who did not lose his faith or courage even although so basely betrayed by those from whom he expected help. The Matabeles and Basutos quickly comprehended and appreciated these specimens of fidelity and heroism. They remembered, also, during the week what they had listened to on Sunday.

"You will be brave in the hour of danger, for that is your nature, I know," said Ned on one of these occasions. "Be

brave enough, also, to stay your hand in the hot moment of triumph, for that is the moment of greatest peril to the hero. You can endure privations, I have seen; you must also learn to resist temptations. The perfect warrior is temperate in all things, true to his brothers, and true also to his pledge even when given to a foe. His shield is meant to protect his own body, and his body is given to him to aid and protect the weak, raise the fallen, comfort the afflicted, and keep it holy and clean."

These were boyish orations, but they went straight to the hearts of those child-like hearers. The ideals were those of uncontaminated youth appealing to unsophisticated and malleable Nature. Our heroes had no scoffers amongst their congregation, but only young men devoted to them, who were as easy to lead upwards or downwards as children. Ned and his two chums led them upwards as far as they could; and made them to see how much better virtue was than vice, how much happier faith made one than did doubt. Each had their departments to debate upon. Ned showed the greatness of the Creator by botanical illustrations. Fred brought in his chemistry, and filled them with wonder at the marvels he revealed. Clarence explained the stars, and entertained them with the fairy-like tales of astronomy. Thus their days and nights were fully occupied.

They began and ended each day with prayer. As they walked along they felt that they were environed with unseen protection. This inspired them constantly with renewed and lofty courage. So long as man can rely on prayer, he need fear no enemy, for his buckler is impregnable.

On the next morning after Ned had killed the lion, they started at daybreak towards the mountain.

They had not gone half the distance, however, when the sun, which had risen brightly, suddenly became overcast with what appeared to be a dense, dark cloud, which completely blotted out the light, and threw a dismal shadow over the landscape.

Our heroes looked at the dark cloud which was so swiftly rising out of the east and overspreading the blue sky. It was like nothing they had ever seen before, of a violet blackness, with copper-coloured upper edges that glistened metallically. A strange rustling sound came from it, growing louder as it advanced.

Myriads of birds circled above this cloud, diving in and darting out from it perpetually. As it came on with incredible rapidity, they could see it trailing along and covering the ground like a black pall.

The Kaffirs flung down their loads, and stood watching it with glittering eyes, while Coccoeni stretched out his arm and explained the startling phenomenon with one word, "Locusts!"

One of the plagues of Moses was coming. Even while Coccoeni still pointed, the swarming insects with their violet wings were upon them in countless hosts.

They filled miles of space with such a palpable mass that only a dim twilight prevailed. They covered the earth like a fall of snow six inches deep with no intervening space. All the air was reverberating with their loud chirping, the rustling of their crisp wings, and the shrieking cries of the birds who devoured them wholesale, yet without apparently diminishing their bulk.

Our heroes were appalled at this numberless host, and dazed with the darkness and noise. They staggered about trying vainly to shake the pests off, that dropped so thickly and incessantly upon them. They slid and squashed thousands under their feet; while they felt sick as they watched their followers greedily imitating the ravenous birds, and devouring handfuls of them, as fast as they could chew and swallow.

For an hour this went on, as the rustling, whistling, shrieking, and living cloud of darkness swept over them. Then gradually the air cleared, and the fierce sun poured down upon that glistening and writhing plain.

Not a blade of grass or leaf of herbage was left. Around them spread a barren desert; even the river-bed was choked up with a moving compact mass of blackness.

They resumed their march, watching the cloud as it swept westward, and slipping about as if treading amongst slushy ice, over the ankles. It was horrible. It was sickeningly disgusting.

The Kaffirs, however, showed no disgust. After gorging themselves, they filled their bags with these insects, and trudged along singing merrily.

"Are they good to eat, Coccoeni?" asked Ned.

"You bet they are, baas, bully fine. You eat one, and then you will find out."

"No, thanks; I'll take your word for it, old man. They ought to be good for something, since they have used up the country."

"Oh, next rains will make that all right."

"Meantime, I suppose there will be starvation amongst the game?"

"No; they will eat these as we do; after that they will move off to other parts."

In another couple of hours the company arrived at the cliffs. The ground was still covered with locusts, which had been unable to rise, and the stream-bed was completely filled, so that no water could be seen.

In front of them yawned a chasm of about a hundred yards wide. Wall-like precipices rose on either side and stretched upward for five thousand feet with hardly a break. A few fissures and cracks were discernible here and

there, but no ledge which could afford a foot or handgrip for even the most expert climber.

The ground was hard and stony, yet even here, as far as they could look into the cavity, it was overspread with locusts.

The stream penetrated this barren gully, and also continued as far as they could see. Eastward and west these same smooth precipices extended, like a coastline until merged in distance. Serrated on the ridges, at long intervals they presented similar openings to the one they now stood before. Possibly these were water-sheds in the rainy seasons, but at present there were no signs of streams flowing. After a careful survey east and westward, Ned decided that the Rhodes river opening was the most promising route to follow.

Without any more hesitation, he strode into the shadow of the cliffs and out of the sun glare, crushing his hundreds of locusts each step he took. The rest followed him obediently, still singing as they went along.

A crowd of aasvogels had come down from their lofty watching-posts, and were busy glutting themselves with the locusts. These vultures merely lifted their ugly bald heads and bare necks and looked at the invaders as they passed, and then continued their feasting, hardly budging out of the way.

After penetrating for about a mile of this shadow-land they crossed the belt of locusts, and found that the ground was ascending.

It was paved with water-worn smooth rocks between patches of yellow sand, and rose in a series of steppes. In the centre of this channel, the brook still ran purling and clear over its stony bed, with here and there small fringes of vegetation at its edges. All else, however, round and above them was sterile in the extreme. A deep silence brooded over this rocky valley, which, although at present in shadow, was intensely hot and airless. The sun glared on the upper half of one side, but the rocks in the bed still retained the heat where it had lately shone. As they walked, our heroes felt as if enclosed in a bakehouse.

They were winding round a corner, when suddenly Coccoeni and the other Kaffirs uttered cries of affright and rushed into the middle of the running stream, where they stood in a line, trembling. Ned and his chums at once promptly followed their example; then they asked—

“What is it, Coccoeni, that frightens you?”

“Look, baas, the bashikonay is coming!”

Chapter Twenty Five.

In the Defile.

“The bashikonay?” echoed Ned in astonishment. “What in the name of this wonderful country is that?”

“Ants,” replied Coccoeni, hoarsely, while he shivered with unmistakable fear. “The bashikonay ants eat up every living thing in their way, and yonder they come in force; they have smelt out the locusts.”

Our heroes looked when Coccoeni pointed with his trembling finger, and saw marching down the valley a vast army of ants, each insect about half an inch long.

They were in close order, and had divided themselves into two lines, one on each side of the stream. So dense were they that they completely filled the valley, until no ground could be seen under them. They also extended in a solid phalanx until the winding hid their tail. They were coming along in perfect soldier-like order, and running rapidly, with their officers and scouts directing their movements.

“Are they so very vicious, then?” asked Ned, as he watched their fine uniform motions with admiration.

“I tell you what, baas, if they see us they will eat us up in no time, and leave our bones clean picked. No man nor beast can meet them and live. They are terrible, and cannot be fought with.”

“Then are we quite safe here?”

“I think so—I hope so. They do not like to cross water; besides, the locusts are what they are after now, therefore, so that we don’t stand in their path, they may pass on. If the front rank passes on, the rest will follow.”

It was an anxious moment, for our heroes had no desire to test the eating qualities of those small monsters. It is not nice to think of being reduced to a skeleton so rapidly; besides, the agony of those myriad nippers at work in and outside every organ, disintegrating humanity, was frightful to contemplate.

Ned thought about the tortures of the iron boot with the boiling oil poured in, the rack, and red-hot pincers, etc.; but even the imagination of these failed to come up to the vague horror of being demolished in this infinitesimal fashion.

Agony seemed to drag by before the front ranks were on a line with where he stood. He watched the ruthless little monsters of fate, fascinated, and thought with horror on the myriads of ogreish, sharp eyes that might be watching these helpless victims in the tiny stream.

Onwards, however, they rushed past the human food, without turning to the right or left; down they wound their course towards the open plain.

For three and a half hours they filed along, until the sun had almost set.

Our heroes and their followers stood meanwhile with their feet in the water, and their eyes fixed anxiously on that moving mass that had hitherto left them alone.

Ned saw a large black snake drop from a crevice in the rock amongst them. They at once closed upon it, and passed over it. A ripple-like movement took place amongst the compact multitude where the snake had dropped. This motion only lasted for a few seconds, then it ceased, and the army scurried on with methodical and ruthless order.

At last they saw the end of this frightful army. Ned had attempted a futile joke about the Jubilee Procession, but no one had laughed. These little beasts were not suitable subjects to jest about—at least, not while they were on the war-path.

They had come in one straight valley-filling line in the van, and they terminated at the rear in the same rigid form, with no stragglers dragging up behind. As the last rank filed slowly past, all uttered a glad cry of relief.

Cocoeni pointed silently to the trail which this army had left, and our heroes no longer dared to doubt his assertion.

Where the black snake had been was a gleaming necklace of white vertebrae, and a flat grinning skull, and shining fangs. Scattered over the ground were specks of varied sizes and shades. These were the excavated and polished shells of insects and reptiles that had not been so prudent and lucky as were Ned and his followers. The devastating bashikonay had passed along that way, and, like the Grand Army of France, had cleaned out thoroughly their line of march.

It was some time after the last of these resistless conquerors had disappeared before any of Ned's band dared to venture out of their sanctuary. These might only be the advance guard; the main body might be coming on behind.

Therefore, uncomfortable as it was to have to stand passive for hours in the centre of a stream of running water, this was infinitely to be preferred to being caught between two such formidable hosts.

At length, even Cocoeni appeared satisfied that there were no more of the bashikonay hosts coming down this particular glen on that occasion. He therefore suggested that they might once more venture on terra firma, and place some decent space between themselves and the common enemy.

This prudent advice they hastily acted upon. Each man grasped his load firmly, and set off as fast as he could travel up the gorge, without standing upon the order of his going.

Traces of these awful ants were seen at every turn of the way. Beautifully polished and bran-new skeletons, large and small, were scattered about in every contorted attitude of the most excruciating agony.

Serpents with the tail-ends of their vertebrae in their jaws firmly clenched; centipedes, scorpions, and other creeping and venomous things exquisitely manipulated and polished of every fragment of corruptible matter lay about, perfectly cleaned, yet undisturbed, and not a joint out of place. Splendid museum specimens these were, going to waste.

Ned, even in his haste, could not help stooping and picking up a few of these as he ran along. He was astonished at the deadly dexterity and skill of those voracious workers. Not the most minute fragment of flesh, marrow, or sinew remained on any of those highly burnished bones. It was amazing and blood curdling. They had done all this without disturbing the order of their march. Each insect had snatched his bit in the passing, masticating it as he rushed onwards, while those following after had finished the gruesome task. It was numbers, with a fixed unity of purpose, which made the work compatible with speed. This was, as Ned said, the biggest co-operative concern that he had ever seen or read about.

"I hope these insect fiends are cannibalistic also in their habits, and that the whole tribe have gone on this locust expedition. It is something decidedly unpleasant to think that we may have to encounter them on our return."

Nothing that they had experienced in the forest had been at all equal to the horror of those half-inch adversaries. As they passed those numerous and ghastly tokens of this most terrible foe, Ned and his chums mentally vowed that it would be better to push ahead, rather than retreat down that way too quickly again.

No animal that lived seemed too formidable to be able to resist them.

Before night came upon them and forced them to stop, they passed a group of skeletons terribly suggestive. They were those of a lion, a lioness, and two cubs. They had evidently been overtaken while sleeping in a little cavity, and devoured before they could move far away from each other. They lay in a circle, with the gravel torn up round them, in their impotent and maddening agony. The skeleton of the lion was on his back, completely curled up, with his thigh bone in his mouth. The lioness was sprawling with legs far apart, and the cubs in different positions, each indicative of torture.

That night they had to do without any fire, as there was no fuel to be found. Scarcely one of them slept, so unnerved had these sights made them. However, the darkness passed without any disturbance. Indeed, the silence of that long night was weird, for it seemed the silence of a universal death. Nothing broke it. No sigh of wind, no chirp of insect, not even the rustle of a night adder—only a deep and awful stillness that kept them awake with horrified expectancy.

Morning at last arrived, and they went on following the stream and the whitened trail of those demon ants.

The gorge was gradually becoming narrower, yet without any diminishing of those stupendous sides. It was not more than half the width it had been, and as they looked up, the sky appeared like a ribbon of blue very far above their

heads. They were closed in now with rocks on all sides, as the chasm was getting more abrupt in its windings.

All at once they came to the head of the stream, while beyond them appeared only a dry and stony bed. At this sight the hearts of all sank and felt like lumps of lead.

The stream rose and bubbled out of a little fountain, while round it spread a patch of bright green grass. It was a delicious little patch of moisture and verdure in the midst of this surrounding vastness of shadow and sterility. As they flung down their burdens and rested beside them, they felt as if bidding farewell to their only friend.

It had been a good and trusty friend to them for many days, becoming more dearly prized the frailer it grew. It had saved their lives even at its last stretch, and now it was all they had to depend upon in the most uncertain future.

Some brushwood was found on the banks, and with this they made a fire and cooked breakfast. Then they sat down to consider matters.

After a long silence, Ned spoke. "Boys, we must see the top of this defile, and carry what water we require with us for the rest of the way. I reckon that we are more than halfway through it, and we have water-bags enough to last us a fortnight with care, and provisions for double that time."

"Yes," answered Fred and Clarence, steadily.

"I don't savy going back yet, with those precious bashikonay behind us," added Fred.

"Then let us unpack our waterproof bags and fill them here. We can keep on for a few days, and if nothing promising turns up, we can easily come back."

No one having any objection to offer, this order was obeyed. The water-bags were unpacked, filled, and the stoppers firmly screwed down. Then, after a refreshing wash and a big drink, they said good-bye to the crystal fount, and began their arid journey.

As the pass became narrower, it also became more steep and winding. Sometimes the cliffs overhung so much that they lost sight altogether of the sky, and seemed to be walking through a vast fiery tunnel.

It was hot and thirst-producing—this climbing over those parched rocks. The light never left them altogether by day, even within those closed-in portions. Sometimes they almost wished it had, to shut from their unwilling eyes some shuddering sights they at times beheld.

They disturbed ugly-looking and venomous snakes, scorpions, and yellow-spotted great spiders, with other strange specimens of the reptile and insect world.

It was, as Ned had remarked, a wonderful land, this Africa, with its strange curiosities of animal and insect life. They had seen already much more than they had anticipated seeing, in the forest and on the veldt.

Yet this long and weary passage through the mountains seemed to give them every hour some new experience of the weird and horrible. As they struggled on, their hearts beat with expectancy of what was next to be revealed.

The gorge was longer than they had expected; three days and nights had dragged along since they left the spring, and still they did not seem nearly at a termination. They were going in an undulating, yet on the whole pretty straight, course north-east, and they were ascending gradually.

Already they had risen to an altitude of over six thousand feet above the plain, yet the cliffs, instead of diminishing in height, seemed to tower more loftily above their heads.

It was an arduous climb, and felt prison-like and spirit-crushing in its narrow limits, yet, since it led them so straight, they could not but think it must soon end. They reckoned that these most lofty cliffs must be the centre peaks of the high inner mountains which they had seen from the distance.

When the sun was above their heads at noon for a short time, it poured its rays down pitilessly upon them, and heated the chasm almost to suffocation point. Then loathsome insects and reptiles crept from the crevices and frolicked in the furnace-like glow.

But at night, when the dew fell, it was piercingly cold and damp, even under their skin wraps and tent. Only once had they been able to find wood enough to raise a fire since leaving the fountain. Then the effect on the bulging and smooth cliffs had been like some of the Inferno conceptions of Gustave Doré.

"Two more days, lads," said Ned to his dutiful and unquestioning followers. "If we see no way out of this lane by that time, I shall turn back."

They were, however, lured on by the windings and the perceptible drawing-in of the gorge. At the rate it was narrowing it must terminate either in a cul-de-sac or an opening soon.

At last their hopes were realised, and they had palpable evidence that they must have reached the other slope of the range.

The ridges were getting lower, or rather they were rising to their level.

Daylight became stronger, while the chasm became once more a valley, and fresher air poured in upon them.

About midday they were hemmed in by only about fifty feet high of walls that dipped until they became level with the

ground.

In front of them spread an almost flat ledge, and on it what looked to be the ruins of a citadel.

Chapter Twenty Six.

In the Deserted Citadel.

The crumbling walls and earthquake-rent towers which stood between them and the deeply blue sky attracted all eyes upwards.

Then an exclamation from Clarence, who had stumbled over something and fallen on his face, drew their looks once more down to the ground, and all stood still for some moments, transfixed with consternation. Between them and the buildings lay heaped a perfect Golgotha of human bones. It was like the valley in the vision of Ezekiel.

The ground took a slight dip at this juncture, then rose abruptly up for about seventy or eighty feet like an acutely slanting roof. Upon the crest of this slope were built the outer walls and watch-towers of these ancient ruins.

In this moat, or depression, were heaped and scattered mounds of grinning skulls, gaping ribs, detached arm and leg bones, shoulder-blades, and the smaller phalanges, which proved at the first glance that these dry frames were human remains. They were lying singly at places, in other parts heaped confusedly together in piles, just as they must have fallen. From the space they occupied there must have been thousands left here to rot, or to be devoured by birds, beasts, and insects.

It was an ominous and an awful sight, which might well have made the bravest shrink back from those grim and crumbling walls. A large and solitary vulture sat on one of the upper keeps, and seemed to be the only watcher left in this deserted fort. He perched motionless and sharply silhouetted against the rarefied space, like an embodiment of spent disaster.

Ned was the first to recover his presence of mind. Stooping down, he picked up a skull and looked at it critically. It was dry and powdery, with the combined effects of sun-bleaching and time. Holding it up in his hands, he said—

“The fellow who owned this, once upon a time, has forgotten his pains and troubles for many years—perhaps centuries. He must have been a big fellow when he carried it, with a solid brain-pan, although it has now grown thin and brittle as the finest porcelain.”

“A big fight has taken place here,” remarked Cocoeni, holding out the rusty head of a broken spear which he had picked up, and looking at its shape curiously.

The splintered shaft was like tinder, and crumbled between his finger and thumb like powder; the design of the iron was ancient and strange.

“That vulture appears to be the only resident at present inside the fort,” said Fred. “Suppose we have a shot at him, and try the effect, eh?”

“No,” replied Ned. “Keep your ammunition for worthier foes; we may need all our cartridges by-and-by. Meantime let us try to achieve what these fellows have evidently failed to do—get over the walls as quietly as possible, and discover what is behind. Keep your weapons ready for instant use, and your eyes and ears open, boys. Now, forward, in your best scaling order.”

They ran swiftly through the crunching bones, and up the steep sides of the cliffs. A rugged kind of hewn stairway led them up to a massive square-shaped portal, which was gateless and more than half demolished. The huge stones of the posts were bulging out, and the top bending over. As they dashed inside, the vulture rose with a hoarse scream and sailed lazily away.

Inside they discovered a large courtyard, heaped with fallen masonry. Great blocks of ten and twenty feet long lay in every direction, with gaps in the walls above them, from which they had been dislodged.

“By George, but they built for time here, when they were at it!” cried Clarence, looking round him with admiration.

“Yes,” replied Ned. “The builders of this place knew something about the pyramids.”

It was all of the massive, square, and Egyptian style of architecture: walls with heavy abutments at the bases; oblong narrow slits for windows and embrasures; wide spaces which had originally been covered with paintings, now only showing in undecipherable patches; massive upright slabs for pillars, with enormous flat lintels.

At intervals on the tops of the outer walls which enclosed this court were placed watch-towers, of forty and sixty feet in height. The thickness of the portal through which they had passed was twenty feet at the base and about ten at the top, as nearly as they were able to calculate from below.

An open gateway within the most massive of the buildings attracted their attention, but before venturing to explore its dark cavity, Ned formed his company into a close square; then, bidding them wait and watch, he ran over to the wall on the other side, and, climbing it by some steps, he stood on the esplanade with about five feet of wall in front of him.

Then as he looked over he uttered a cry that quickly brought Fred, Clarence, and Cocoeni to his side.

They were overlooking a vast desert that spread far as the eye could take in, as bare and tawny as the great Sahara.

This wall had been built upon a giddy precipice, without a break or a ledge. As they stretched over they could have dropped a stone without striking anything until it reached the bottom, four thousand feet at least from where they stood.

The air was bracing, and would have been cool, only for the intense waves of heat that were wafted up from the burning sands.

"Here terminates our journey, I expect, Ned?" said Fred, in mildly interrogative tones.

Ned had pulled out his field-glass, and was scanning the far-distant horizon through it, therefore he did not answer at once. It was a splendid instrument, and of exceptionally far-reaching power of lens.

"Tell me, Fred and Clarence, what you see over there?" he asked, handing the glass to his companions. "Look carefully before you speak, and let Coccoeni have a peep as well first, before you open your mouths."

When Fred had looked through it for some moments he handed the glass to Clarence, who in his turn gave it to Coccoeni in silence. Then the three friends glanced at each other dubiously.

"Well, Coccoeni, you say first what you saw."

"What white man calls mirage, and black man calls devil-land," replied Coccoeni, grimly.

"Well, but describe this mirage."

"I saw trees and water and big houses same as this here, all shimmering in the air."

"Yes; but they were only in one part of the horizon—to east and west there was nothing but sand."

"That is so, baas."

"And what did you see, Clarence?"

"Oh, something the same as Coccoeni. There appeared to be a large lake in one part, with trees and houses on its margin."

"And you, Fred?"

"Oh, I saw the lake, or sea, with the other deceptions," replied Fred. "But I have seen the same sort of thing in Australia."

"I bet you didn't, Fred, see exactly the same sort of thing out there!" cried Ned, excitedly. "Now, you know, the nature of mirages is that they will show up on all sides when they show at all. Look again, and see if that lake has altered its position, or if it is repeated anywhere else than in the one direction."

After another careful survey, the boys owned, somewhat regretfully, that their leader was right. The mirage—if it was a mirage—was stationary, and localised to one part only.

"It is no deceptive phenomenon," said Ned, decidedly, as he replaced his glass in its case. "That is a real lake, and those are substantial buildings, and bona fide trees, or I am a Boer, which is about the last kind of beast I'd like to be."

"Then, I suppose, that means you intend to risk the desert?" answered Clarence.

"Yes; if we can get down to it. I reckon we can cross that strip of sand in two or three days at most, and we have water enough to carry us over it."

"But, supposing it is a real lake, that doesn't say it is a fresh-water one," replied Fred.

"The buildings and trees are vouchers for that. Now let us examine this present hill. Before we do so, however, we'll climb one of those towers, and find out what is to be seen from there."

Ned crossed the court, where his followers were still standing in square, and entered the doorway of the centre tower on the other wall.

The stairs were still standing, and firm underfoot; therefore they were soon on the upper platform or roof.

Here they could see down the pass which they had come, also two other approaches or chasms in the mountain. They had likewise glimpses of high bare centre peaks that reached above the lower ridges. It was a sterile prospect. Not a tree broke the hard outlines of the ruddy rocks. They lay baking and bald under the bright, hot rays of the tropical sun.

A large flat-roofed building filled out the centre of this fortification. It was smaller at the top than the bottom, for the sides sloped outwards as they descended; yet a broad parapet surmounted the top for several feet, projecting from its sides. The roof was completely covered over, while the walls were pierced with windows and loop-holes. On the farther side of this building they were able to see other walls and towers stretching along to a considerable distance.

"This has been a stronghold to keep invaders from the inhabitants of yonder lake-watered land; and as far as I can

see, the necessity for keeping it garrisoned has passed away. That heap of bones we saw must be the remains of some demolished race of invaders. I think we may venture with all safety inside this building. There does not seem to be even a jackal about."

Saying these words, Ned led the way down, and, marshalling his force in double line, he advanced with revolvers in his hands towards the portal.

The walls were of immense thickness, and made quite a long passage, through which they passed silently.

Before them opened an apartment, so spacious that the entire company, with their luggage, only occupied an isolated portion of it. It had accommodation space for at least five thousand people.

Above their heads the roof rose, misty and indistinct in the feeble light that pervaded this vast hall. The atmosphere felt cold after the heat outside, so that it chilled them and made them shiver. Lighted only by those narrow windows and slits, which were placed high up the thick walls, a mystic shadow, like the forest gloom, added to the vastness. They seemed within a mammoth cavern.

The floor was slabbed with stones, and destitute of furniture, while a thick layer of dust and fine sand deadened the sounds of their footsteps. For a time no one dare utter a word, so profoundly had that gloomy vastness and deathly silence impressed them.

At last Ned spoke, and at the hollow sound of his voice they all started; it seemed as if the words had been instantly carried away, to be repeated faintly in the roof.

"I wonder what they used this place for? Look at those figures on the walls."

The walls, which they could now see more plainly than at first, were covered with strange designs of figures and animals—men, with the heads of birds and beasts; warriors in chariots, on horseback, and on foot; captives being driven along. All the pastimes and pursuits of the builders were here portrayed in colours, in which black, red, yellow, and blue predominated. These were faded with age, yet, with but few exceptions, in perfect condition as far as the outlines were concerned.

There were no openings along the entire sides, nor, with the exception of the passage by which they had entered, were there any other portals. But at the far end they could see daylight shining through a number of dislodged slabs, which partly blocked up what appeared to be a much longer passage than that behind them.

As they grew accustomed to the faint light they were able to make out two smaller doorways on each side of the centre passage. Ned strode boldly, followed by his comrades, to the aperture nearest him.

Inside they found a small chamber; at least, it looked so after the hall. Yet it was twenty feet wide by nearly thirty long.

It was lighted from the outer side, and at the end was a small doorway, on entering which they found themselves at the foot of a staircase, which led upwards, as they naturally supposed, to other chambers and to the roof. For the present they deferred the further investigation of this stair, and tried the other door of the hall.

A similar apartment waited them here, with a ceiling of the same height, namely, about eighteen feet.

But at the end they found themselves confronted by a flight of steps leading downwards. It was wide enough for four men to walk abreast, and in good condition. Also, although darker than the hall, yet it was fairly well lighted by slits in the wall.

"Ah, this is the road I want to take!" said Ned. "Come along with your traps, boys."

They were very soon below the surface of the ground, and traversing broadly cut steps that led them at a downward angle straight towards the face of the precipice overlooking the desert.

They knew when they had reached within six feet from the rock front, from the turn they took, also by the increased light. This, with sufficient fresh air to keep the tunnel sweet, had been made by perforating loop-holes in the solid rocks.

Ninety-eight steps they counted, as they went downward, of a foot and a half each in depth. Then suddenly the stairs terminated, while the passage widened out until it formed another great hall underground, of about two-thirds the size of the apartment over their heads.

They stood and looked about them with increased astonishment.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

In the Palace of the Dead.

The labour of hewing this immense underground chamber from the solid rock must have been prodigious, unless originally the excavators had found natural caverns here.

But this was not what astonished our heroes, so much as the artistic ingenuity and care which had been expended here.

In the hall above, the severely plain walls had been frescoed by the painter's art. Here the sculptor had displayed his mystic and religious skill with bold as well as intricate designs.

From floor to ceiling, all along, the walls were carved. There were also outstanding rose-tinted and white granite massive pillars of colossean and upright figures, with elaborate ornamental capitals on their heads, representing head-dresses of flowers, fruit, and grain, or coiled snakes. At the feet of these huge figures were other symbols to serve as bases. As these pillars were carved in almost full relief, they formed deep niches between each, which were shelved up from floor to ceiling with thick ledges, also cut from the rock.

The edges of these shelves were most intricate in their symbolic sculptures. The ceiling, likewise, was closely covered with designs of a sacred character in bold relief, while even the floor was a mass of smooth and polished carving.

The effect of all this subtle and bold work was extraordinarily rich in the subdued light that filtered in from the one side, making deep and rich shadows.

Never had our heroes looked upon anything so profusely beautiful and mysterious.

Yet it was not the carving only that made them gasp with admiring wonder. All over the sculptures gleamed sparkles of gold, chased and burnished. These glittered in all parts, sometimes in broad veins and clusters, in other places in star-like specks or thready lines. Going over to one of these clusters, Ned discovered that they had not been inlaid, as he at first supposed, but were natural veins of virgin ore, utilised as they occurred, by the cunning artificers.

They were in the centre of what was probably the richest gold quartz mine in the world. The excavators, satisfied with the wealth which had been already extracted, had carved this monument on the still-teeming mine, thinking to consecrate it probably in this fashion from covetous hands.

There were hundreds of shelves, and the greater number of them were occupied by sarcophagi, also carved elaborately.

Whatever the upper chamber had been used for, the meaning of this place was at once apparent to our heroes. They had not only discovered a gold-mine, but also a hall of the dead.

In front of them, in the upper end of the apartment, were placed, or rather cut out, like the column, two great statues in a sitting posture, and between them a broad table of polished quartz. One of these had the body of a woman, with the head covered. In her right hand was held a pair of scales. The other was shaped like a man, with the head of a bird, which was turned in her direction.

"This beats all I ever saw," said Ned, in an awestruck whisper. "We must come here again. Meantime, we must try to find our way down further."

None of them suggested food, although it had been hours since last they dined. They were too greatly excited over this strange discovery.

Round the chamber they paced, seeking for an outlet without success. The only opening they could see was the one down which they had come.

At length Clarence saw, at one side of the table, and close to the feet of the woman statue, a large bronze ring that had been covered over with dust.

"Hallo, boys, here seems something made to lift! Bear a hand, and see if we can hoist this particular slab."

Several of the Kaffirs leapt forward and pulled at the ring individually without success.

Finding that not even the strongest among them could make the slightest impression, Ned ordered the rope used for the "tug-of-war" to be produced and inserted into the ring. This was done, and twenty-four of the men took each end of it—twelve to a side—and ranged themselves down the hall.

"Now, steady, lads, and all together—pull."

This was effective at the second pull. Those watching had the satisfaction of seeing a large slab slowly lift up from the floor until it rose on end, and fell backward with a loud crash.

But their satisfaction was short-lived, for hardly had the echo of the crash ceased, than, with loud yells, the entire company were flying pell-mell towards the stairs in a panic. From the cavity emerged, with loud hisses and gaping jaws, a number of the largest pythons ever seen out of a drunkard's delirium.

Gorgeous-tinted and shining, they reared out one after the other, trailing their long bodies over the carved floor, until there were at least fifty of them, twenty to fifty feet in length, and with girth enough to have swallowed a buffalo easily.

That they were hungry, and thought feeding-time had arrived, was evident from their motions. They were losing no time, after their preliminary stretch, in making for the staircase where Ned and his followers were crushing together.

Cocoeni and several of the Kaffirs recovered their presence of mind first. Instantly facing round, they discharged their weapons at those nearest, while the others followed suit, their courage returning at the sound of the shots.

Blatter went rifles and revolvers into that advancing mass, turning them into a wriggling confusion, and filling the hall with smoke and startling echoes.

It was a horrible and blood-curdling sight to see those monstrous serpents interlacing on the floor, and dyeing it with their loathsome gore, after some of the smoke cleared. The effluvia, also, which exhaled from them was most noxious and sickening. Many were slain, although their bodies still writhed and twisted about with horrible contortions. But more were issuing from that rashly opened aperture.

"That slab must be closed somehow, or we shall never be done with this beastly work," shouted Ned. "All the pythons in Africa seem to have been preserved in that vault. Who is game to help me to shut down that trap?"

He made a desperate spring forward as he uttered the words, and ran, followed by the rest, right amongst the horrible mass.

Revolvers, spears, and axes did the rest of the battle.

They were not difficult to disable, although loathsome to feel and smell. And now that the men had got over their first surprised panic, they tackled the enemy with quick eyes and deft strokes.

Ned, Cocoeni, and two other Matabeles reached the stone, and managed to raise it and drop it once more into its place with a bang, cutting through the middle a couple of out-coming snakes. While they did so, the rest hewed, stabbed, and shot for all they were worth. In five more minutes the last of the sibilant hisses were silenced, and only the sound of lashing bodies could be heard.

Then, while they reloaded their weapons, they paused, waiting for the smoke to evaporate, while they cleared, with their rifle-butts and spears, the wriggling abominations from their vicinity.

Before this could be done, however, many a shiver passed over them as they felt a slimy tail convulsively grip round their legs. A slash with their knives relieved them of these unpleasant embraces, but the sensation was decidedly nauseous and creepy.

Slowly the gunpowder smoke grew thinner, as it escaped through the air-hole slits and up the staircase. It still, however, hung too closely around them to see the opposite walls.

All at once, as they listened for fresh hisses, a sound like coughing, outside their circle, struck upon their ears.

Snakes do not cough, although they can make a noise. Some human beings, with lungs less used to saltpetre fumes than theirs were, must be in the hall at the far end, as yet unseen. Strangers here meant probable enemies. Instantly and instinctively they drew together and formed a square, with their rifles up to their shoulders.

As they bent forward, peering into the sulphur-charged mist, those facing east and west beheld a mass of indistinct forms clustered before them. Those facing north and south saw hazy figures gliding from pillar to pillar.

Three more minutes, and the vapour had cleared sufficiently for them to grasp that they were surrounded completely, by a foe clothed in some kind of scaly armour. They waited in grim silence for the fumes to clear thoroughly, so that they might know what force they had to encounter.

At last they could see the four corners of the walls, also the open passages by which the crowd had entered so noiselessly.

Two of the pillars at each end had been rolled aside, leaving gaping cavities where they had stood.

Facing them, and leaning on their spears, stood a double row of upright figures, with metal helmets on their heads and chain armour on their bodies, arms, and legs. Round the waist of each was a short kilt of leopard-skin, which reached to the knees.

They were well-formed warriors, nearly all of them as tall as the Kaffirs. Their skins were of a warm copper tint, with dark eyes and long flowing tresses.

Not a beard was amongst them, while their features were fine and pronounced, with straight noses, full lips, and oval faces. They were determined-looking and fierce, yet unmistakably youthful and handsome.

Ned glanced from their faces to their breast-plates, and then he shouted—

"Boys, after the snakes we have a regiment of amazons to face. Oh, come, this is hard lines! We cannot fire on women, even though they are amazons. We must manage them in some softer way, or else capitulate with our best grace."

His words broke the spell of silence that had been upon them. Clarence and Fred burst out laughing, while the Matabeles and Basutos grinned broadly and displayed their ivories.

They did not drop their weapons, however, for the amazons had advanced a step closer with their spears ready for charging, and they did not look at all amiable.

Still Ned thought he discerned upon their faces more of wonderment, blended with some admiration, than anger, as they scanned the splendid semi-nude figures of his men. He gave the order to ground arms and stand easy.

For himself, he handed his rifle to the one standing next to him, and, pushing his revolver back into his belt, he stepped from the ranks, and held out his open hands to show that he was unarmed. For a moment he paused there, the women watching his smiling face suspiciously; then, at a word, they lowered their spears.

He took another step away from his men. As he did this, a young and extremely handsome woman advanced towards him, also with open hands.

She was more richly armoured than the others, from which he concluded that she must be an officer.

She did not answer his smile, although she had laid aside her weapon, but came forward, with flashing eyes and curling lip, until she stood opposite him; then she scanned him over so critically until he flushed to the temples.

The other amazons stood watching, evidently with keen interest.

For what? Ned was thinking. Was she about to embrace him? It looked as if she were, for she began to crouch like a cat getting ready for a spring, her elbows close to her side, and her palm held upwards.

Then, just in time, her intention flashed upon him. She had taken his attitude as a challenge to a single duel of wrestling, and had accepted the invitation.

He had only time to utter an exclamation and step backwards, when she made the leap and closed in.

She was an adept at the game, as Ned could feel by the way she tried to slip her arms under his, but so was he. Quick as lightning he got one arm under, while she managed to do the same with him, and then the trial of strength and agility began.

They were equal as far as grip was concerned, but the chivalry of our hero placed him at a disadvantage. He could not forget her sex, and dreaded crushing her if he put out his full strength.

All the same, he wished she had been a man, for she was a most worthy adversary; also, if he spared her, she had no such feelings for him. He felt she was in deadly earnest, and was striving her utmost to break his back or neck. As he said afterwards, Pylea was a vicious cat at wrestling.

He might have thrown her, or tripped her up, had he liked, for he was as hard as iron, and had the advantage of weight, although she was no mean weight herself.

But he preferred the waiting and eluding game, so together they strode backwards and forwards for full five minutes without either of them losing their feet or grip.

Then gradually, as her hot and panting breath struck down his neck, he worked his hand down the links, until he had her round the small of the waist.

Next instant, by a quick jerk, she was off the ground and in his power. Had she been only a man, he would have thrown her without compunction over his back, but as it was, he placed her gently on the ground, and pinned down her arms.

It is sad to relate, yet as he did this with all the gentleness possible, under the circumstances, she showed her sex by making her white teeth meet in the fleshy part of his arm. She had wrestled fairly up to this moment of defeat, and Ned was too much of a man to resent that last touch of vanquished ire. He looked at her reproachfully as he rose to his feet. As he did this, the tears rushed into her eyes, while she covered her face with her hands, as if ashamed as well as beaten.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The Amazons.

"Wrestling must be a favourite pastime with these warlike ladies," murmured Ned, as he wiped his streaming face on his handkerchief. "Pouf! that was a hot bout, and no mistake."

For a moment after he had released the amazon, silence reigned over the spectators, then a loud cry of admiration rose from the ranks to which the conquered one belonged. This proved at least that they might be fierce, but they were at least generous foes; also that they had witnessed what evidently was a novelty to them.

"What sort of men are raised in their nation, I wonder?" muttered Ned, looking anything but pleased at this demonstration. "The women are all right, and a little more so, like our gymnastic girls; but they are evidently not used to muscular men, or perhaps these are so big that they are astonished to see the like of me doing this slight trick."

While he still mopped his face and his followers stood waiting on the next development, sixty of the women ran out of the ranks from different sides, unarmed, and with animated gestures and a torrent of scornful words, challenged the square to a similar contest.

The language sounded strange yet musical in their ears, but the bright flashing eyes, curling red lips, and defiant actions made their meaning clear.

With a burst of guttural laughter, Cicoeni and fifty more of his companions stripped themselves of all but their waistbands, and stood forth to gratify the wrestling-loving viragoes.

"Deal softly with them, lads, yet beat them," cried Ned, seeing what was about to take place.

He had an instinctive feeling that it was necessary for their future safety that these amazons should be taught a

lesson, yet he did not wish any of them hurt, and these Kaffirs were mighty fellows.

“Never fear, baas,” answered Cocoeni, laughing softly. “We shall not lose our tempers, but we will show these girls that they have the arms of men round them.”

The challengers looked at the satin skins and muscular forms of those sable heroes with renewed cries of admiration, which mightily pleased their masculine vanity. There was no timidity or fear, however, in the regard of the amazons. They were evidently only delighted at meeting with such antagonists.

As the Matabeles and Basutos also examined the opponents opposite to them, their eyes began to sparkle with feelings more ardent than rivalry. Here stood women worth fighting with or for.

They had no longer any dread of treachery, for the others had laid down their weapons and shields, and were busy discarding all superfluous encumbrances, such as helmets, shoulder-coverings, and ornaments. They were also rolling and tying up their loose tresses. It was evident that they intended having a turn also after the present bout was over.

As far as numbers were concerned the amazons counted about two to one of Ned’s force, therefore he saw that he would be likely to have another engagement presently. Thinking on the possibility of this, he stripped himself of his jacket, hat, and bandolier, tightened his waist-belt, and began to roll up his shirt-sleeves. His example was followed by Fred and Clarence.

As he was thus engaged near the girl he had conquered, who still crouched at his feet with bent and covered face, one of the amazons came over to him with a spear in her hand. This weapon she held out to him, pointing at the same time to the prostrate figure, with a significant gesture, which said plainly—

“She is yours by right of conquest; kill her.”

Ned recoiled horrified at this savage suggestion. Refusing the spear, with a motion of disgust, he stooped and gently lifted the fallen one to her feet, patting her at the same time kindly on the shoulder. She appeared dazed for a moment at this unexpected clemency, then suddenly she seized his hand and kissed it passionately.

Ned laughed awkwardly and blushed scarlet; then, to cover his confusion, he turned to watch the combatants.

For the next two hours that richly carved hall of the dead was the field of as tough yet bloodless a contest as ever had been waged anywhere. All had observed the incident, and understood the meaning of that spear offer. These amazons were as brave and generous as chivalrous soldiers could be, but mercy to the vanquished was clearly not one of their virtues. They neither would spare nor expect to be spared.

This being the condition of defeat, every one exerted themselves to the utmost, and finished the conflict as quickly as possible.

The amazons were strong, lithe, and full of tricks, but the men acted warily, and gave them no advantage. The result was that sex conditions told, and the women, without exception, were put hors de combat.

By the time it was over, however, Ned and his followers felt that they had done hard enough work for that day at least. They were hot, hungry, furiously thirsty, and completely fagged out.

So were the women, but not so much as they were, since they had taken double turns. They flung themselves down on the cool stones, steaming and panting, while a number of the amazons who had rested left the chamber.

The mangled snakes still jerked about their severed links at the other end, for the conflict had been carried on at the lower end of the chamber.

While they sprawled about in all sorts of free and unstudied attitudes, the amazons, who had recovered their breath, watched the brawny proportions of their rivals with undisguised admiration and respect. Many of them had received heavy bruises and falls, but this they did not seem to care much for. They were considerably dishevelled also, but womanlike, they at once started tidying and redecorating themselves, while they watched with friendly eyes their rough conquerors.

Presently those who had left the chamber returned, accompanied by about a dozen of degraded-looking, ugly black dwarfs, who carried heavy jars and dishes laden with food. At the smell of the roasted meat and boiled pulse, our heroes and their followers at once sat up and prepared themselves for the welcome feast.

The girls now clustered round them, a couple to each man, and waited upon them assiduously, with the most hospitable smiles and gestures. The conquered were particular in selecting those who had mastered them to serve. They knelt on each side, and while one proffered water in large cups of curiously shaped and carved metal, the other picked out the choicest pieces from the platters, and fed them from their fingers like young birds.

They were all friendly now, chattering away in that unknown liquid language with wonderful volubility, and showing their white teeth in the most bewitching smiles. They seemed to be delighted with their new masters, for they showed that they recognised them now as such. Ned and his followers also were more than satisfied with their present position.

Yet these amazons displayed by many signs that they had a purpose in view, and no desire to linger or leave their new friends in this sculptured hall. With a few words of stern and terse command, the leader, who was Ned’s first antagonist, pointed shudderingly to the mutilated snakes. At these orders the repulsive-looking dwarfs went over, and lifting up the quivering masses, removed them by the upper end, and afterwards brought sand and covered up

the blood.

As soon also as our heroes had satisfied their hunger and thirst, they all rose, and dividing the packages amongst them, led the way towards the two apertures in the lower end. Ned and his men had no objection to these new attendants carrying the loads, since they were forced to trust them now. But they stuck tenaciously to their weapons and ammunition.

They entered a narrow passage outside the column, and after pacing along it towards the cliff face, they began once more to descend.

Fifty steps in one direction along the punctured inner side of the cliffs, brought them to a flight of steps at the opposite angle. When that other fifty was reached, another flight at the first angle met them, and so on, until they had descended three thousand of these steps.

It was a fatiguing journey after their heavy exertions, for the amazons hurried them along without a pause. They were either in great haste, or else did not wish any more investigations to be made of this underground region.

The light was growing fainter also, as it was nearing sunset, yet our heroes were able to see, at each turn of the stairs, passages leading into other chambers. From several of these, as they got near the bottom, they heard a clanking sound, as if miners were at work.

"I say, boys," said Ned, "do you hear? They are still working this gold-mine. What about the mirage now?"

Since meeting these female warriors our heroes had no longer any thought of turning back. There seemed no danger of perishing from want or thirst. As for other dangers, they were quite ready to encounter these.

"This is an adventure and no mistake. I guess we are bound to see some strange things before long," answered Fred, excitedly.

It was nearly dark before they crossed the last step and found themselves once more on level ground.

Before them spread a wide and long apartment with a huge fire burning in the centre. A strong menagerie-like perfume greeted their nostrils along with the more pleasant odours of cooking. As they entered, a wild chorus of savage yells echoed through the vault.

A number of slender and undersized figures moved about. Some were clad in white robes, others with only waist-bands round their waists.

From a square, wide, and high portal halfway down, and on the same side by which they had descended, the last orange glow from the setting sun fell in a long slanting line upon the sand floor. They had, at length, come down to the desert.

Ned and his followers looked round them curiously, while the friendly amazons placed their packages all together.

There were bold and somewhat rude carvings on some portions of the wall, but otherwise it was left rough hewn. It was, however, quite as roomy, although not so lofty, as the upper hall which they had first seen. There were rugs and skins flung down at different parts on the sands, with armour, weapons, and other articles of use. This was evidently the present barracks of these amazons.

The lower parts of the inner walls were lined with recesses strongly barred. In these were caged a number of leopards. These leopards were separated from each other by intervening partitions. Apparently it was their feeding-time, as these half-nude figures were moving about from cage to cage with huge junks of flesh, which they pushed into the cages.

The amazons went round the cages, inserting their hands between the bars and stroking the animals. As they did so, the wild roaring which had greeted their appearance sank into gratified and loud purrs.

Pointing to the spread skins, the women signed for the adventurers to rest. Gladly our tired heroes availed themselves of the permission. Here, stretched out at their ease, they could observe their surroundings. They saw the amazon leader, with a few of the others, go over to the white-robed figures, and then began an earnest conversation. A little explanation was evidently given to account for the presence of the strangers; but, as far as Ned could make out, the warriors were mistresses, and confined themselves mostly to giving orders, which the others listened to meekly, and bowed their heads obediently.

In a little while the half-naked figures approached the fire and lighted some torches at it, which they stuck into clamps round the wall. This threw more light on the scene.

The sun had now gone down, and darkness was beginning to hide the desert, which Ned could see through the open portal from where he lay. The semi-nude figures now approached, and, kneeling down, began to take off the boots of him and his comrades; after this they washed their feet and covered them again.

It was all most delightful and pleasant, and Ned was glad that the amazons did not attempt this task. They apparently were engaged making their own toilets during this time.

While allowing the slaves to manipulate, he looked at the white-robed forms. They were engaged in various departments of duty. Some were baking bread-cakes, others cooking various dishes, and several were hard at work plaiting and dressing the tresses of the amazons. They were meek visaged, and had their heads shaved, yet, somehow, although so small and spiritless, they seemed to belong to the male sex.

Another feed was under way of a more substantial description than the last. As the savoury fumes stole into their nostrils, they once more began to find themselves prepared for it.

Presently it was ready, and this time the ladies shared it with them. While they were eating and drinking, four of the white-robed figures sat near and played on harps.

It was a plain supper of roasted and stewed game garnished with garlic, boiled rice, with maize and lentil cakes. For vegetables they had leeks and yams, while bananas, figs, and grapes served for dessert.

A delicious, light-tasted, but rather heady wine was given to them along with the water, which was pure and sweet. This they took sparingly of, yet it quickly sent them all off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

A Chariot Drive.

Ned woke soon after sunrise the next morning, and before his companions. Fred, Clarence, Cicoeni, and the other Kaffirs were doing their best to eclipse the howling of the caged leopards with their snoring.

The slaves were there, also the bakers, cooks, hairdressers, and general all-round men. But the amazons were absent.

The general practitioners of the comb and harp were filling in their spare time by whipping the slaves with cruel-looking thongs, as they went about their drudgery.

The faces of those clean-shaven, undersized, and lean, white-robed men still looked as expressionless and meek as long-imprisoned convicts usually do. They had likewise the same unwholesome waxiness of complexion; buff-coloured wax their thin cheeks and narrow foreheads were, with purple close-set lips, and long, deep-placed, lustreless blue-black eyes.

But, although they did not smile nor sneer, nor ever lose their sad gentleness of expression, they cut pitilessly into those naked black shoulders with their hard flagellators, and often out of ruthless wantonness. The slaves were a square, dwarfish, and repulsive set of bestial wretches, yet Ned began to view these placid and soulless tormentors with greater repugnance and loathing; they were like venomous, icy, and cowardly yellow snakes. Their features, however, were sharp and fine, and of a sameness in profile if cast from one mould. He had seen those calm, bird-like, relentless profiles in prints of the Egyptian sculptures and paintings, with long, straight noses, protruding and short upper lips, and receding small chins,—the true signs of a used-up decadent race.

Sick with watching these methodical and pitiless strokes, he walked through the portal and out a few yards into the yielding sand, then he looked back and up the precipice.

He could see the broken walls at the top, over which he had peered yesterday. The rising sun was shining upon them, and they gleamed whitely against the soft azure. The precipice also glistened with its variegated blush and yellow rose-leaf tints, with the darker veins of grey and ochre. It was smooth and ridgeless, while the loop-holes were too narrow to be seen from where he stood.

The flat lintel and obelisk-like sides of the doorway had been cut a few feet into the rock, so that the precipice protruded. The intaglio slabs were covered with hieroglyphics and figures.

His eyes wandered to the sides, and here he met a surprise,—a long line of gaily painted and anciently shaped chariots stood ranged, like bathing-machines, against the base of the cliff. He had never seen a chariot outside of pictures before, therefore these interested him vastly, with their carving, gilding, and bright colours.

After looking minutely over one of them, he turned round to scan the desert. Away in the distance rolled a low cloud of dust, through which the sun shone upon glittering metal. It was approaching rapidly, and as he watched resolved itself into the two hundred mail-clad amazons, who were coming in at a swift run and in a straight line.

Very soon they were within a hundred yards of him, with flushed faces and heaving breasts. There they stopped suddenly, and, forming rapidly into eight deep, marched steadily towards where he stood.

He learned afterwards that they had been out for the past four hours, doing their customary morning exercise of running, which was twenty miles before breakfast. This was to keep them in good condition, and one of their obligations as warriors. With friendly smiles they marched past him and entered through the doorway without other recognition. Following them slowly, he saw them pass through and into a door which he had not observed the previous night.

He found his followers awake when he got in, and busy washing their faces in basins, which the slaves were holding for them. As this was exactly what he would have asked for, could he have made his desires known, he straightway proceeded to follow their example.

"I expect they have tanks, or some way of catching and keeping the rains from above," said Ned, seeing that they were so lavish with the precious fluid.

A distant sound of splashing, accompanied by female voices, from behind that curtained door answered his surmises.

Very soon afterwards the amazons appeared once more, accoutred, and with fresh-coloured faces and damp flowing

tresses. Breakfast was ready, and without ceremony they fell to, and hastily did full justice to it.

The next operation which our heroes watched, but could not help with, was the liberating and harnessing of the fierce leopards to the chariots. Each amazon led out her own trained animals, like dogs in leash, and strapped two to each chariot.

The fair leader now split her regiment, leaving half behind to mount guard over this mine, while the other hundred and twenty distributed the packages of our heroes amongst the chariots. They were ready to start. Ned, the leader, chose to share her chariot, and the others picked out their conquerors and beckoned them to enter.

With a swift, cat-like bound the leopards went off, while from the broad wheels the sand flew up, and left behind a trail of yellow clouds that quickly blotted out those left behind.

The passengers, not being used to chariot-riding, kneeled on the packages, and hung on to the side-rails frantically.

But the drivers stood, like rocks, on their feet, with the reins round their waists, held there by a ring, and their arms and hands free to use their whips or weapons. Over each shoulder was slung a strap filled with long shafts and a black palm bow.

They never slackened speed, for the leopards seemed tireless. They ran softly yet swiftly, hour after hour, while the sun rolled overhead with scorching force. The burning glare from the hot sand was blinding, and the helmets and chains must have been almost unbearable, yet the hardy drivers did not appear to feel them. They leaned forward with flashing eyes and streaming tresses, and still urged their willing animals on.

Once during that day they roused a pack of fine lions, who bounded after them. Ned saw one of these fierce beasts nearing the chariot, and shouted to his driver to warn her of the danger. His rifle was between his knees, loaded, but it was of no more use to him than a stick. He dare not relax his grip of the side at the rate they were going, or he would have fallen out.

The dauntless girl looked back, at his cry, with a merry laugh. Then, gripping her whip with her teeth, she slipped off her bow, and tightening the string, took out one of her shafts, and fitted it.

Swiftly turning half round, she bent the bow until the arrow-head was touching it, then the string smote the bow with a twang like a loud harp-note.

Ned watched the shaft, as it sped with a whistle through the air. Straight it flew towards the lion, and buried itself in his flaming eye. It was a splendid and deadly, though it looked a careless aim. With one leap upwards the lion rolled over and over, half burying himself in the loose sand in his death-throes.

When Ned looked from the lion to his slayer he saw her standing, with her bow once more in its place and the whip in her hand, standing and looking forward, while she drove for all she was worth.

The other lions were treated in the same fashion by the rest of the drivers. Evidently they had nothing to learn in the ancient craft of archery.

That afternoon, however, as they rested for an hour, Ned found an opportunity of showing what his rifle could do. Yet, after her archery feat, he did not feel too conceited over his most modern of death-dealing implements.

The desert appeared infested with lions of the fiercest order. Hardly were they seated when one appeared at a little distance. It was within shooting distance, but too far off for her shaft, so, while she was leisurely tightening her bow-string, he took a steady aim and fired. At the report she started up with unfeigned alarm, but, quickly recovering herself, she sat down again with stoical composure.

It was a long shot, but he did not need to repeat it. The lion was done for.

When she saw this, she displayed the most lively and childish interest about his rifle. Pointing to a great vulture in the sky, she signed him to shoot it.

While he was taking aim, she put her fingers into her ears; then, when she saw the bird drop headlong, she cried with wonder. He had raised her admiration in a new direction.

All through that night and the best part of the next day they raced. They only took three or four half-hours' rest during this time, while they ate a few dates and drank a mouthful of water.

As for the leopards, they got nothing except a few small cakes during those short breathing spaces. Our heroes were forced to own that for swiftness and endurance the trained leopard beats both horse and dromedary for desert travel.

At midday the distant city and lake appeared on the horizon, and by four o'clock they had passed between the first of the palm trees, and left the desert behind.

Ned, Fred, and Clarence had by this time become somewhat used to their uncommon and ancient surroundings. The biblical and archaeological chariots, armour, costumes, and features had startled them when first seen. Now they were only driving toward, what they expected to find, a specimen page of prehistoric illustrations, preserved in the heart of that Africa from which those decayed nations had sprung.

Luxury and corruption caused the fall of Rome, Carthage, Greece, Assyria, Egypt, and the countless races that preceded these chronicled nations. When Melchizedek walked the earth, and Lot pleaded with the angels, mankind was old and worn out with self-indulgences. When Noah vainly preached to the sons of men, they had become

dilettante, idle, cynical, and luxurious; refined in art, cruelty, and callous vice; enervated to the last degree, and barren of all impulse. This has always been and always must be the results of ultra-civilisation. The second step from utter barbarism which deals with conquest and cruelty, is but the beginning of the end of all nations, ancient and modern. The implacable order of nature is to grow and decline. Matter must change, although its constituents are immortal.

The road from the desert to the city was broad and straight. Fifty chariots could drive abreast through the centre, leaving the side paths for the pedestrians.

A double line of huge palm trees fringed this wide highway, and cast violet shadows on the side-walks. Between the trunks they could see rich and carefully irrigated fields of grain and vegetables—maize, rice, manioc, wheat, pulse, yams, and pine-apples, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic, with shady groves of sugar cane and bananas at the corners, and hedges all around of vines.

The glistening of water in the regularly cut canals and lotus-covered ponds, with the fringes of papyrus reeds and varied-tinted blossoms and flowers, made a delicious picture of rural prosperity and radiance. Regular symmetry and mathematical order were the predominant features of these fertile plains, with their straight canals and square ponds. Not a foot of soil was wasted nor left to run wild. It was all under cultivation, like a carefully tended garden.

Dark-skinned and semi-nude slaves of both sexes crowded these fields and plantations, while the same class of white-clad, yellow-skinned, and diminutive overseers walked about and plied the whip remorselessly, yet without excitement.

Our heroes longed to ask questions, for they were bursting with curiosity, and they inwardly resolved to learn the language as soon as possible, if they were permitted to live here long enough. Already they had mastered the native terms for water, wine, food, chariots, leopards, lions, spears, helmets, and armour. This was a fair beginning. As for Cocoeni and his fellow-Kaffirs, they were devoting themselves most assiduously to the pursuit of their conquests, and, as they showed by their ardent glances, conquerors also. They appeared to be progressing fairly well, considering that looks were their only means of communication at present.

As they drove along, eight abreast, they noticed that they were causing a considerable stir amongst the pedestrians and other natives whom they met, overtook, or passed. They were also watching with great interest these inhabitants.

They could distinguish the men by their small stature and general spiritless condition. Woman seemed in this land to be the superior animal, both in stature, deportment, and position.

Armed amazons, on high-spirited horses, cantered or dashed past them, bestriding their beasts man-fashion. They were all splendidly costumed, and many of them very beautiful. Some drove chariots with trained lions and leopards as well as zebras and horses. It was a dazzling and picturesque sight that impressed our heroes deeply.

Elephants also paced the roads with their laden howdahs gaily caparisoned; others, again, drew heavy waggon. Oxen trailed along strange-looking carts and waggons, while the footpaths teemed with life.

The men alone wore white robes. Numbers of these were about, carrying or leading children as mothers do in other countries. Some had slaves to do this for them, and when they were so far blest, they carried the invariable whip, which they used unsparingly.

The chariots had now passed the fields and farm buildings, and were approaching the city.

Massive buildings and walls began to appear, with exquisite gardens and artificial terraces, from which wide steps led down to shady walks and fairy ponds. Vine tendrils hung over the walls, and formed delicious avenues. Ornamental trees and obelisks reared out of the under herbage. Mighty baobabs showed centuries of growth. Monkeys swung from branch to branch. Ibises, pelicans, and flamingoes were everywhere.

Between the spaces of those gardens and mansions, they had glimpses of the great lake that supplied the fertility of this highly cultivated region. On its surface they could see barges floating or moored to the embankment. Here were quays, with pillars and steps, also crowded with humanity and animal life.

Before them reared a many-columned arch, with battlemented walls on either side, and an avenue of sphinxes leading up to it.

They rolled through these, and then they were within the city, with its huge buildings, pillars, obelisks, stairs, fountains, awnings, arches, crowded side streets, and varied bazaars and shops. Our heroes felt abashed before these sublime, living tokens of a civilisation supposed to have been for ages extinct.

Chapter Thirty.

In the City of Ra-bydus.

The rain-season had come and gone, which meant that seven months had elapsed since our heroes were driven into the city of Ra-bydus.

They understood a good deal, by this time, about the people and language of Karnadama, for so the land was named, as the city was called Ra-bydus.

During these months they had been treated as honoured visitors; yet it was plainly intimated to them that they would not be permitted to depart until her majesty Isori had seen them. No one else could treat with them, or decide what course to pursue respecting them, during the great queen's absence; therefore they were held in a kind of honourable captivity.

They were lodged in princely quarters and all together. The regiment of young amazons who had discovered them were placed in charge of them—to attend upon them, escort them when they went abroad, and were made responsible for their safety and presence.

No one interfered with their actions so far. They were free to walk, drive, or ride about the extensive city, provided some of their bodyguard went with them. They could go out hunting, with the same escort, sail on the lake, and view the land as far as it could be viewed between sunrise and sunset. But they were expected to be within the city walls when the gates were closed. Only in this sense were they treated as captives.

Ned and his followers did not find the life they led at all irksome. It might become so in time, but they had no intention of staying here much longer. The queen was on her way home to her capital; when she returned they would either get permission to go, or else take French leave.

Meantime they were having pretty much the same kind of time as blue-jackets have when they get ashore in a foreign port. They were the heroes of the hour, and were made welcome everywhere, except to the temple. From that sacred portal they were most rigidly excluded.

Tutors were provided to teach them the language of the higher classes, so that they might be able to converse with her majesty when she arrived. She had heard about their advent, and these were her orders, sent by special messengers. Like President Kruger, no other language but her own people's was permitted at court. Our heroes made rapid progress in their studies. While the country was swamped, and the hot rains made the cool interiors of these the most pleasant places to pass the time, they had spent their spare time with the teachers, listening to their explanations, and mastering the meaning and sounds of their vocabulary. The Matabeles and Basutos, also, were apt pupils in the oral part of the instructions. As soon as they could make themselves understood, however, they discarded the male teachers, and took the rest of their instructions from their amazon guards. Ned, Fred, and Clarence went further. They practised the letter-writing, which was like shorthand, to the ordinary hieroglyphic carvings on the walls, and only practised by the educated class. They also asked many questions respecting the history, myths, and habits of the people they were amongst. In this way, and by keeping their eyes and ears open, they acquired a vast amount of knowledge in a short space of time.

The Karnadamains were a remnant of the older race, who had fled from Egypt at the time of the invasion of the Shepherd Kings. Like the Israelites, they had wandered far and encountered many vicissitudes before settling down on this remote and central portion of Africa. The history of their wanderings and early rulers was comprised largely, like that of the Greeks, of legend and myth.

They still retained the principal features of their ancient religions—that of animal-worship. The serpent, the crocodile, the cat, ibis, and other animals of certain kinds were considered sacred, and rigidly protected. To kill one of these marked animals, either wantonly or accidentally, was a sacrilege, the punishment for which was death. When our heroes learnt this, and remembered their indiscriminate slaughter of the pythons, they felt themselves in a mighty perilous position should any of their friends, the amazons, betray them. Ned took an early opportunity of sounding Captain Pylea on the subject. She, however, laughingly reassured him, and told him to be under no apprehension. Her subordinates were soldiers, not informers; while, as for the slaves who had removed the carcasses, they had been slaughtered to a man, so that they might not speak of what they had seen.

"It was a terrible crime you committed," she added, with a shudder; "for these were of the most sacred order, who are fed with slaves. But enough were left to swallow up the remains of their brethren and those who might have spoken about it, and we did not see you do the unholy deed."

Ned shuddered to hear the calmness with which she told this atrocity, grateful although he was for her and her comrades' kindness to them. She was a frank, generous, and courageous young woman, but she had not much womanly mercy in her composition.

"What would you have done, Pylea, if you had been attacked by those sacred—monsters?" he enquired.

She looked at him with a humorous twinkle in her dark eyes, and touched her bow and spear.

"Afterwards we'd have, as I advise you to do, forgotten all about it."

"Then you don't pin your faith too closely to this venerable creed of yours, Pylea?"

"We expect our fathers, husbands, and brothers to venerate the gods, and attend to their religious, with their other domestic duties, while we do the thinking and the fighting," she answered significantly.

"Do you know, Pylea, you belong to the emancipated sex. In my land the order is reversed."

"Ah, so it might be in mine, if our men were like you and your followers. But look at ours. Could any of them bend my bow or handle my spear? No; they are too fond of their couches, their pipes, their dinners, and their wines. They like to spend their time gossiping and making pretty things. All the exercise they care for is flogging the slaves, so we leave them to what they like best—to look after the children, make poetry, pictures, and pretty carvings, and discuss new dishes, while they fill their empty heads with smoke and strong drink."

"A great number of our men also are fond of the vices you charge yours with, Pylea," answered Ned, laughing at her

indulgent contempt of the lords of creation. "They also drink, smoke, and spend a good deal of time discussing fine dishes and works of art and literature. When they can paint or carve they get mighty conceited about it; but, as a rule, they don't practise the domestic virtues you speak about."

"Who does this, when there are no slaves?"

"Our women."

"And who does the thinking?"

"Also a good many of our women."

"And the fighting?" asked Pylea, wonderingly.

"Oh, the men are expected to do that."

"I cannot understand it. Once on a time, as our men are fond of singing and boasting about in their cups, they say our men could fight. But we who know them do not believe that, or they would never have fled from the land they ruled over then, according to the legends which they have invented. No," she continued thoughtfully; "they must always have been as they are, poor, treacherous, mean-spirited cowards, who dare not face a woman, but find a pleasure in tormenting slaves. They must always have been fond of lying upon litters and couches, of wine and tasty dishes. They never could have been trusted out of sight—not our men, who are good for nothing honourable, true, or brave."

"Yet you marry them," observed Ned.

"Oh yes; that is the custom. When we feel ourselves getting too stiff to fight or run, we take a man to keep our house and look after us and our children. We are always strong enough to make them obedient, and we never expect too much from them. They are poor things, who do not know what honour and truth are; only a little more to be tolerated than the slaves. They like to babble about their paltry pastimes, which they call work."

Here were the new woman's ideas and aspirations put into a nutshell, with man the despised placed on his proper footing.

"Once on a time, as our men sing, when they get together and we are out of hearing, their forefathers owned quite a number of wives, as we now own slaves. But they are never so far gone as to whisper that lie when they return home. They dip their bald heads in the fountains on the way back before they face us. This is about the only wisdom which I think they have," said Pylea, softly, as she laughingly left Ned with a military salute.

From what Ned had seen of the amazons, there was not much to fear respecting the python incident, unless Cocoeni and his comrades raised their jealousy. He resolved to warn them to be careful, and confine themselves strictly to brotherly attentions only. It would not be wise for them to play at love with those tigresses.

What Pylea had said about the male Karnadamains was all true, as he found out for himself. They were a cringing, lying, vicious-minded set of self-indulgent sots. When they could, they slunk off in company, and boasted about their mean vices as if they were actions to be proud of. A very little of their converse went a long way to sicken and disgust him. They spoke gently, and were choice in their expressions, for they were critical and refined over details, and artistic in their tastes. But the details were nauseating, depraved, and loathsome as slimy snakes. They were vile objects, without one redeeming virtue and with as much human emotion as lizards.

As artists, artificers, and musicians, however, he was forced to give them their meed of praise. They followed fixed and long-established rules with undeviating and unoriginal fidelity, and never attempted to break from their bonds.

During these months, the queen had been engaged on a warlike expedition with her army, raiding some of the neighbouring tribes to the north. It was from there that the slaves were procured.

While she was absent, the king, Sotu, who was also her brother, was left at home to look after the royal palace.

Although king, this royal object had no voice in the affairs of the state, or any rule, except over his male subjects, who were, like himself, rigidly excluded from all offices of dignity or authority.

The high officials of the temple were priestesses; likewise all the other positions of dignity were filled by women.

Sotu was king of the minstrels, poets, painters, musicians, sculptors, and cooks. He was considered to be a great authority on works of art, literature, and the science of the table. He was a profound gourmand, a most princely drunkard, and a superb judge of tobacco. He was also considered one of the best chess-players in the kingdom.

Our heroes and their followers had been entertained at the best houses. They also had spent one evening with the king and a select number of aristocrats whose wives were at the wars.

They had here the opportunity of witnessing the prodigality of an ancient feast with its curious customs. They also saw evidences of the vast profusion of wealth this nation was possessed of.

The feast was held in a magnificent hall, where stood a throne made of solid gold, covered with fine carving, and encrusted with diamonds. All round were richly carved and painted pillars. The walls and ceiling likewise were a mass of painting and plated gilding. The polished and tessellated floor was covered, ankle deep, with flowers. The stools were of ivory and gold; the cups, vases, and dishes were also of the same material, and like the throne, sparkling with diamonds. King Sotu came to the feast garlanded, as were his subjects. Candles burned in golden candlesticks,

and the whole air was filled with perfume.

It was a bachelors' feast, for none of the women would condescend to attend such revels; only slaves, single men, and married ones, who had stolen from their homes, were present, besides our heroes and their followers.

About a dozen of the temple male servants were in attendance to begin the feast with religious ceremonies, and to drag round the mummy-case before the drinking began.

The viands were multitudinous and exquisitely cooked, and while they ate, professional musicians played on various instruments. It was nearly the last night of liberty for the king and his subjects, and they had made up their minds to enjoy themselves.

Ned and his followers joined in lustily at the eating part of the ceremony, which caused the dull-eyed, yellow-visaged, and purple-nosed royal host almost to forgive them for their excessive strength and stature.

But they completely lost his favour when the serious part came on—the drinking. Ned sat for a short time, but rose gravely at the close of one of Sotu's favourite stories, and sternly ordered his followers to follow him.

King Sotu was too mean-spirited to resent their going, but after they had departed, and he had swallowed many cupfuls of fragrant wine, he shouted loudly—

“These cannot be men, for they can neither drink nor enjoy a good joke. We must get rid of them, or we shall not have the life of slaves when our wives return.”

Poor King Sotu! he felt at this moment brave enough to poison Ned and his followers.

But when morning dawned and he tremblingly seized the goblet of wine which his slaves brought him, he quaked in his sandals as he remembered what he had uttered in his festive mood. A hundred traitor ears had heard the rash words, and he felt sure they would be repeated to their wives.

“Oh, Osiris!” he moaned. “If Isori hears of this, I am undone.”

After several goblets, he called for his pipe and his whip, and spent the forenoon exercising himself on the backs of his slaves.

Chapter Thirty One.

The Queen Isori.

Queen Isori had come, and, with her army, was in possession of her royal capital of Karnadama.

She had taken away fifty-six thousand foot and mounted soldiers. She brought home forty-eight thousand six hundred and twenty able-bodied amazons. Seven thousand three hundred and eighty dauntless females had found the death they coveted, and over a thousand disconsolate widowers bewailed their fate loudly in the temple courtyards. It was the custom for those bereaved widowers to mourn in public for their departed spouses, while they prayed that their sins might be overbalanced by their good deeds, in the scales of the gods.

The men of Karnadama were unquestioning slaves to custom, therefore they covered their smooth heads with ashes, wailed, howled, and prayed during the hours appointed for mourning. Afterwards they met together in those vaults and shades where the wine was kept cool in great clay-baked jars, and drowned their sorrows as deeply as possible.

Bands of them reeled past the garden walls, over which Ned and his companions leaned, watching the bustling midnight streets in the moonlight. Some of them were trying to sing, others laughed hysterically, while a few of the morbid class, remembering the fine women they had lost, wept feebly while they recounted the departed one's charms. Ned almost pitied those ownerless and most degenerate goats.

Now that they had seen the great queen, Ned had only one desire left; that was, to lead his men safely from this city, and back to Rhodesia as quickly as possible.

He had passed through every street and alley until he knew each mart and building by heart. He and his companions had sailed on the lake and along the canals that intersected the city, hundreds of times. They had watched the men in their open shops: the working jewellers and enamellers, the carvers, sculptors, and painters; the armourers and blacksmiths; the confectioners, bakers, hairdressers, and loom-workers. These were all quaint and interesting for a time, but they had now grown stale. They abhorred the men, and did not feel over comfortable with those bold-eyed, combative women, beautiful although most of them were.

The day when Isori returned at the head of her victorious cohorts was the climax to all the brilliant sights they had witnessed; after that procession with the audience which followed were over, Ned began to feel that he could not get too quickly away.

The citizens had been preparing for days to give their queen a right royal welcome. For the past week advance messengers had arrived every hour, announcing the progress of the army as it approached. The roads and streets had been crowded with people flocking in, and every house of entertainment was filled.

In answer to his enquiries about the country, he was told that the lake was a hundred miles long by fifty broad. A wide river flowed from the eastern end of it, and, after a considerable distance, became a boiling cataract that

rushed through deep gorges into low marsh and forest lands. To the north lay a range of lofty mountains, precipitous and densely wooded, where dwelt the dwarfs, who were hunted, captured, and used as slaves. In their wild state those dwarfs were rather troublesome neighbours, being very numerous and fierce, also using poisoned arrows, the slightest prick of which was fatal. They were also cannibals of the most repulsive type, torturing their victims mercilessly when they could trap them. To the west, as in the south, spread vast deserts.

The climate of Karnadama was all that could be desired: our heroes and their followers had never had a day of sickness, even during the long and wet season. At present the weather was simply delightful.

Diamonds were found in great numbers about halfway between Ra-bydus and the mountains; and, as Ned had seen for himself, their gold-mine yielded them so plentiful a supply that the most ordinary utensils were fashioned from it. On the plains, which were well watered, dense herds of game roamed about.

Ra-bydus was the only city of importance, although there were several villages scattered over the country.

Queen Isori could call out an army of over a hundred thousand trained amazons. This, however, comprised the bulk of the female population; on ordinary occasions only the young warriors were kept constantly in arms. These seldom exceeded ten thousand, who were spread throughout the country in regiments.

The training of these young amazons was exceedingly hard. From their birth they were constantly exercised like Spartans, until they reached the age of sixteen. From that age to twenty-five they were constantly in harness, and kept single. After this age they were allowed to marry and settle down.

Pylea and her regiment were about the same age, having been enrolled together four years previously. They were then nineteen years of age, and had six years still before them of active service and enforced celibacy.

Ned asked how the population had been kept within limits all these centuries, and was horrified at the reply.

All decrepit and sickly children of both sexes were destroyed at birth. Every five years a census was taken, and judges sent round to weed out the surplus population. The victims were selected by the judges appointed, and ruthlessly destroyed by accompanying executioners. These executioners were appointed from the men, who found their opportunity then of indulging in their natural instinct of cruelty. Old age, on the male side, was no more respected than childhood, although the women were exempted from this wholesale massacre.

When the husbands became shattered with their vices, they were strangled. When they grew too obnoxious to live with any longer, they were at once made into mummies. The women were the judges and sole arbitresses of their fate. There were no divorces in this wise and loveless community. If a woman wished to be released from one husband, she made herself a widow, and picked out a younger mate. As Pylea had remarked, they did not expect too much from the poor things, so completely at their discretion. They persuaded them to drink, eat, and smoke as they liked, until they were tired of them, then they gave the final wrench to their rope, and ended that domestic worry.

It was a paradise for the fair sex, according to the modern ideas of the new womanhood. Also the ceremony of the mummy-case being drawn round the feasting halls was no empty or obsolete sign to the men. "Eat, drink, and enjoy yourselves, for tomorrow you die," was grimly significant to these degraded wretches.

When Ned explained these lop-sided laws and customs to his sable followers, they showed the whites of their eyes, and decided that prudence was the better part of valour when dealing with those fascinating amazons. All vowed that they would respect the obligations of the service, and not tempt the girls to break their military engagements for their sakes.

"Let us get out of this, baas, before it is too late," said Cocoeni, gloomily, as he recalled some pleasant evenings he had spent under the trees, while trying to master the language with one of the fair guards.

"Yes, we must," added Clarence, almost as seriously—"Even the forest will be healthier for us than this atmosphere."

"As soon as her majesty turns up, I'll make the move," answered Ned.

Our heroes were accommodated with horses on the morning of the arrival, while Cocoeni and his comrades walked. They were all in fine condition, and looked like giants behind the undersized bystanders.

Pylea and her regiment used their leopard-chariots, and drew up in line along the streets close to the palace to keep the sightseers back. Ned and his company occupied the post nearest the gates. Close to his side Pylea stood in her chariot, splendidly attired and looking her best.

"Isori is a great warrior, and the tallest woman of our race, as her mother was before her," she remarked while they waited.

"How old is she?" asked Ned.

"Thirty-three, but she has not lost her swiftness, agility, or strength."

The blare of instruments announced that the conquerors were coming, and soon afterwards the first of the procession appeared.

A thousand richly caparisoned elephants came first, laden with mail-clad warriors. Behind these came the miserable captives, chained to bars of wood, and drawn along by women on horseback, who cracked their whips over them constantly. Four thousand of these hideous dwarfs of both sexes had been brought alive from their native haunts. Following the elephants, they passed the palace walls, while the people looked at them silently.

A large troop of horsewomen came next, and then, at the head of her charioteers, appeared the victorious queen.

Our heroes looked at her as she stood upright in her golden chariot, resting on her massive spear, and they were dazzled at her majesty and the light that blazed from her.

Over six feet in height she stood in her jewelled sandals. Round her brows wound the royal serpent with uplifted crest, while from behind fell a fringe of blue, red, white, and yellow, barred with gold and crusted with precious stones. Her breasts and limbs were covered with golden links, while from her shoulders fluttered a rich light cloak, that trailed over the back of the chariot. Three young lions dragged the car. She was an imperial woman, with a pale face regularly featured, and great dark eyes that looked out coldly yet steadily as the car slowly glided forward.

Beautiful she was, in the full pride of power and matured strength, with a figure that was matchless. But it was a face to shudder before. It was so pitiless, and so icily composed.

No cry of welcome greeted her approach, but a great hush fell over the multitude, that was more impressive. She was in their eyes a goddess as well as a queen, and all bent their heads and covered their eyes. Ned and his followers felt decidedly uncomfortable.

As she passed the split lines of Matabeles and Basutos, she shot side glances over their stalwart figures without turning her head. Then she came to a dead stop opposite Ned, and fixed upon him her steady great black eyes. He bent his head under that passionless but strangely disquieting stare.

While she stood, from the palace gates came her brother consort, mounted on a white horse, and clad in royal robes that were also blazing with precious stones. He was taller than the male attendants who accompanied him, but, in spite of his tiara and rich robes, looked the trembling wreck that he was.

Isori looked at her bibulous-faced and purple-nosed consort with a mocking yet indulgent curl of her proud lip, as he bent humbly before her. Then she said, in a rich, clear voice—

“Hast thou composed many couplets during our absence, Sotu? I can perceive that thou hast partaken of many cups.”

“Immortal one, I have not been idle,” answered the poor king, fumbling nervously in the breast of his robe, and wisely ignoring the latter portion of this wifely greeting. He produced a roll of papyrus. “I have here a powerful epic to read to you, which I composed in honour of your victory, O brave Isori.”

“Ah! that is sweet. Keep it till after supper, when thou wilt be in thy best form.”

“But, gracious and great one, I hoped to read it here, before our people.”

“Ride thou at my side, Sotu, King of Karnadama, and give that roll to one of the servants,” she said, with chilling coldness.

Sotu sighed deeply, but yielded, and together the badly assorted pair went between the sphinxes.

About two hours later Ned and his followers were commanded to appear in the presence. It was a trying ordeal, but our heroes braced up their courage, and stalked through the crowd of courtiers and warriors with erect heads and bulging chests. They were no slavish male Karnadamains, and they meant to show what men ought to look like; what Britishers are in every land under the sun, except the Transvaal.

It was a much more extensive reception-hall than the dining chamber, vast although that was.

Four lines of columns with lotus capitals supported the flat roof. The walls were richly covered with varied coloured enamels and plated gold; the floor was of highly polished marble or granite of different tints wrought in subtle patterns of mosaic. It was a noble throne-room, the vast proportions of which dwarfed the humanity that it was meant to hold.

Five thousand amazonian captains, officers, and female grandees were assembled, besides the priestesses and other civic dignitaries. There were also the obsequious husbands, in dutiful attendance upon these their imperious mistresses. These, with the waiting slaves and court musicians, brought up the number present to considerably over twelve thousand. Yet there were wide spaces between the pillars, and our heroes with their followers were by no means crowded.

The queen and king sat on two thrones, side by side, only her throne was elevated several steps above his, and of a much more gorgeous description.

Fifty broad but shallow steps led from the hall up to the platform on which the thrones were placed. At each corner of the steps crouched sphinxes, as large as full grown lions, made from beaten gold. The throne of the queen, with its canopy and dais, were composed entirely of exquisitely carved ivory, encrusted with diamonds. That of the king was of gold, and, beyond the back, had no canopy.

Queen Isori had been bathed, perfumed, and re-costumed since our heroes had last seen her. She now appeared more like the conventional woman, and less like the paladin.

Her jet black hair was plaited, and hung down over her shoulders in two thick links, being placed also low on her broad forehead. Above this sat her serpent tiara.

Her superb arms were naked to the shoulders, except for the jewelled bracelets and wristlets that she wore. One

breast was also bare, the other being covered with golden scales. Large ear-rings rested against her cheeks, and a wide necklet of diamonds and a Scarabaeus made of emerald, as a pendant, encircled her smooth neck. From the snake zone round her waist, to her jewelled sandals, fell a robe of diaphanous and changing silk in numerous folds, which, closely plaited as these were, still exhibited her limbs beneath. In her right hand she held a sceptre of ivory, gold, and jewels, while at her sides kneeled eight slaves fanning her with large peacock feathers. In front of them crouched two living lions and four leopards.

Chapter Thirty Two.

King Sotu to the Rescue.

This was the gorgeous spectacle that greeted our adventurers as they were led by Pylea and her young warriors through the staring crowd of Karnadamains.

They paused at the bottom of the steps to make their best bow, yet they did not attempt to kneel as the amazons were doing.

The queen looked them over leisurely for a full minute, then she slowly extended her arm and lowered her sceptre towards them; as she raised it again, Pylea and her followers stood up.

"You are welcome, strangers, to our court," she said, in that clear, penetrating voice, so distinct yet so coldly smooth. "Approach, young chief," she added, pointing to Ned, who slowly went up the steps until he was a few feet from the lions and leopards; then he prudently paused.

"We have not beheld a man like you before. You are young and strong and, we hear, can fight. We are pleased with you."

Ned bowed and blushed deeply.

"You have a request to make to us. Reveal it without delay."

Ned cleared his throat, and, in the most flowing terms at his command, said that, having seen her greatness and been blinded by her glory and majesty, he was more than satisfied, and would fain take his departure, with his followers.

Her majesty frowned as she listened to this request, and when it was finished, she said in the some even tones—

"That may be, stranger. But many of my warriors require husbands, as they will be widows presently."

She looked round the hall with a slight smile, embracing Sotu in that sweeping glance before she stared once more at Ned. Poor Sotu shrank on his throne, while the male portion of the audience shook visibly.

"We hear you do not spend your leisure hours composing poetry and drinking wine, but that you run and wrestle as our women do. This is a new experience to us, of mankind, and we desire to see more of it."

Like Napoleon the First, and some other great people, Queen Isori was accustomed to utter her thoughts and wishes without the slightest regard for her audience. She continued, as clearly and smoothly as before—

"This is our pleasure. Tomorrow we shall hold a tournament of racing and wrestling. We choose you as our antagonist, and those of our warriors who have had enough of their present husbands shall select a man from your followers. If you prevail over us, then we shall be your servants; but if we prevail over you, then you shall be our servants to do with as we please. I have spoken. You may kiss my hand."

Yes; she had spoken, Ned thought, as he bent over the shapely ring-covered fingers extended to him, and touched them with his lips. She had spoken, and placed him in about as bad a fix as Paul Kruger had done.

He glanced at Sotu as he hastily retreated from the vicinity of Isori and her wild beasts. The king sat in a limp state of collapse most pitiful to see. His under jaw had fallen, his black eyes showed a bloodshot rim right round them, his saffron cheeks were bleached, and his sharp nose was blue. Already he felt the fatal noose closing round his thirsty throat.

"King Sotu gives a feast tonight, and we have promised then to listen to his powerful epic. Those warriors who intend competing tomorrow will be excused from this evening's revel."

Calm and smooth as ever was that dismissal uttered. Ned and his chums quitted that glorious hall in desperation.

Pylea went with them, with her company. They were all very silent and grave as they passed along the streets; nor did they utter a word until they were inside the garden walls. Then Ned could contain his feelings no longer.

"See here, Pylea; I cannot stand this sort of arrangement. Poor images as King Sotu and the other objects are; this is playing it too rough on them, and on us also. The stakes are too heavy. As a good chum, give us your advice."

"Her majesty has snared you, my friends," replied Pylea, sadly. "Whether you win or lose, she will keep to her purpose; for she never changes. If you conquer her tomorrow, it will be all the same as if she conquered you, for she has promised nothing. The king is doomed."

"Then we must escape at once. Will you help us?" Pylea sat silent for a long time, looking at her comrades, then she

said—

“The queen is immovable, but King Sotu is crafty, and may help us for his own sake. I dare not aid you by day, and no one can leave the city at night without an order from the queen, backed by her signet-ring. Now, Sotu is his wife’s secretary, and he alone dare approach her when she sleeps. Perhaps he will write this order and steal the ring. I shall go and see him while the queen is resting after her journey.”

“Good. Meantime see that your chariots are ready and your leopards well fed, and we will pack up!” cried Ned.

“Do not stir from here till I come. If I can, I shall bring the king with me.”

They had to wait a weary time before Pylea returned with her terror-stricken and dejected male monarch. As soon as Ned saw him he trailed him inside the hall and poured out a flagon of wine for him. This the king swallowed at a gulp, then he sank on a couch with a hollow groan.

“Pluck up, your majesty! If you help us to clear out tonight you’ll live to compose many epics, odes, roundelays, and couplets yet. It only wants an effort, and a little wit.”

“It requires more than all these to outwit Isori. I can write out the order—nay, it is here. I may also steal the ring while she sleeps if I can only keep sober enough. But ‘tis of this I fear; how can I keep so, having to give a feast? Why did you come here to trouble me? Oh, that fatal epic! It has been my ruin.”

“You must resist the amber and ruby for this once if you wish to have many more bowls. Let me tie this rope round your neck, and it will remind you of your doom if you swallow one cup too much.”

“No, thanks!” cried Sotu, shrinking back.

“I shall go to the feast,” said Pylea, quietly, “and guard you as much as I can. The queen will retire early. You must leave the feast immediately she goes; for a time, then I shall walk you about in the gardens till you are quite sober. After you get me the ring you may return to the table and enjoy yourself.”

“And what about tomorrow?” asked the king, fearfully.

“If you do not get the ring tonight, sire, tomorrow you will be dead,” answered Pylea, impressively.

“But who will take the blame?”

“I shall,” answered Ned. “I shall write a letter to the queen, and return the ring after I have used it; she will then think that I have taken it. Only get it first, and then make yourself dead drunk afterwards. That will remove her suspicion, if she has any respecting you.”

“I’ll keep sober and do it,” cried the king, almost resolutely. “Afterwards, perchance, I may empty a few goblets to avert suspicion. Pour me out another cup of wine.”

“No more at present,” said Pylea. “Remember what you have to do.”

His majesty was used to being controlled by his female subjects, therefore did not repeat his request. He did not stay long, however, after the arrangements were completed.

The gods had gifted him, as they generally do limited and feeble minds, with an amazing amount of vanity and self-complacency. He possessed all the composure, easy assurance, and superciliousness of a tenth-rate actor, weak author, singer, or juvenile critic. He was like the rest of his class, utterly depraved in his habits and instincts; cruel, selfish, crafty, and cold by nature, as well as timid and treacherous. But he was a most highly educated dilettante, and a proficient in those small imitative arts and sciences which his warlike spouse so openly despised; he could paint well, cook well, and play well, according to the stiff, faulty, and formal laws of a limited past. Every art, science, and tradition in this country stood still. Nothing had progressed during the centuries in this land except the women. In fact, he patronised and dabbled in most of the refined branches of that effete civilisation. He had no sense of humour. Shallow-minded and conceited people never are witty, nor can they appreciate a subtle jest. He affected cynicism, but it was of the feeble and tasteless order. In matters of tradition and custom he was a dogged believer and slave. Strength and authority he cringed abjectly under. Insult passed over him like water from the back of a duck. When not under the immediate influence of fear, he was as impervious to all other emotions as consuming vanity could make him. He considered himself as the super-refined salt of the earth, and his wife as a superb animal, who pleased his artistic senses with her matchless charms, and protected him with her strength. He was supremely satisfied with himself, and also with her, and delighted to speak about and extol her superior points.

As for the other little drawbacks of his self-indulgent existence, his ignoble place and loss of dignity, he did not feel any more shame in the servitude than a flunkey can; while regarding his eventual destiny, as long as he did not feel the noose at his neck, he was as happily oblivious to it as the contented pig is amongst the acorns.

“Death comes to all alike, in some form or other,” he would say cynically, when he saw the mummy-case sent round, “and we must pay some price for our pleasant lives.”

He had entered the presence of Ned and his followers the most woebegone and shivering wretch that ever stood on the gallows. But the sight of their stalwart forms and resolute faces restored his confidence. It was like a reprieve to the condemned felon, a week’s engagement to the needy and improvident actor. From abject terror he bounded into the regions of insufferable assurance, like an inflated air-ball.

He insisted on reciting his epic before he took his departure, and dwelt lingeringly over its choice language and far-

fetched imagery. Fortunately it was brief, for he was one of these poets whose muse is gaspy in her leaps, as well as obscure in her metaphor and phrases. Like a small phial, his mind could not carry or give much at a time, but he fondly believed that what he gave was quintessence. His thoughts were aged, stale, and feeble, but he dressed them well, and considered, as so many of our moderns do, that the dressing was all that need be considered or admitted. Our heroes bore the infliction meekly, for they remembered their own lost and adored diary; but Pylea and her companions, and also the Kaffirs, yawned most rudely.

Ned, thinking to please this royal poet, further presented to him a spare compass which he had, also a revolver and a rifle, with some ammunition. Sotu accepted the compass with effusive thanks, but he shuddered and recoiled before the other gifts.

"Send these to the queen; she will appreciate them, and they may soften her wrath, after you are gone. Meantime I must go, as I have to superintend my cooks. There is a new dish which I am introducing tonight from an ancient formula, and I find wonderful amusement in preparing it."

"Indeed," answered Ned, politely. "What is it?"

"The forgotten art of cooking quails. We pluck and partly boil them alive in oil before stuffing and roasting them. The natural juices are thus retained, and the flesh is tenderer than by keeping them until stale."

"Ah!" murmured Ned, trusting in his heart that this refined cook might also have a little slow boiling in oil before he was too stale.

"I have invented some pots, with lids specially contrived to keep the birds' heads outside. We plunge their bodies in the cold oil, and bring it very gradually to the boiling-point. We are able to tell in this way when they are sufficiently done, and that is the instant they expire. It is a pleasant sight to watch their heads during the process."

"Is it, sire? For the watcher, or for the birds?"

"The watcher, of course," replied the king, smiling, as he caught what he thought was the joke. "We remove them then, stuff them with garlic, pine-apple, and bananas, and slightly roast them within tamarisk leaves. I shall send you a dish of them tonight. They are most delicate in flavour and rarely succulent."

Ned bowed. He felt like kicking this callous and cowardly fiend, but policy forced him to dissemble.

"It will be also strictly necessary for you to take with you some royal gifts, so as to give colour to your leaving. I have control of the queen's treasure-house, and I shall attend to this, and send you some of our artwork in gold, with a few good stones. I shall also give you, as a parting gift from myself, some dainties of my own preparing to partake of on your journey."

Sotu smiled gently as he said these words, and took his departure.

"Have nothing to do with the king's quails and dainties. He is an adept at poisoning, and he only smiles like that when he meditates torture and death," said Pylea, earnestly, as soon as the royal wretch had gone.

"He is a genial gentleman," replied Ned, lightly. "I wonder he hasn't long since poisoned his wife."

"He dare not, for his own sake. When she dies his daughter will reign, and her first act will be to strangle her father."

"Blessed King Sotu!—happy land!" said our heroes.

By sundown they were all prepared to leave. In the dusk several mutes brought the promised gifts from the treasury. Some time afterwards the dainties arrived in golden vessels.

Our heroes emptied the eatables out on a shrub-covered part of the garden, but the dishes they packed up with the other articles of vertu. There were a water bag full of large diamonds, and over three hundredweight of cups, vases, and images of gods made from the purest gold. The hearts of our adventurers beat lightly as they distributed this precious weight amongst their packages.

Six hours after this they paced the ground and watched the illuminated palaces from the walls of their garden, in a fever of unrest and anxiety. Their hopes were all depending upon the self-restraint of this hopeless drunkard, and Pylea. Would she succeed?

The full moon shone over the city, so beautiful and stately, with its carved and painted walls, delicious gardens, deep canals, arches, and wide steps; on its monuments, obelisks, sphinxes, and mighty temples; on its crowded, broad avened streets and gleaming lake beyond, where floated the sloping-prowed barges, with their awnings and gilded saloons.

Would Pylea succeed and secure the ring? The chariots were standing laden inside the garden walls, ready for the leopards to be harnessed to them. The young amazons were fondling the fed and tamed beasts in their cages within the stables, or walking beside their sable friends in the side avenues. They were bidding the handsome Kaffirs, whom they could not keep, farewell. Womanlike, they would rather see them go than see them owned by more powerful rivals. But they were grave and melancholy at the coming sacrifice, and did not resent the dark manly arms that were round their armoured waists. Doubtless they were listening to words that they would not soon forget.

Gradually the streets emptied, and chariots rolled from the palace gates, drawn by the amazons who had been guests of the queen and king. Only the husbands were left behind with Sotu. The queen had retired. Another hour of fearful suspense passed, and then Pylea appeared with the signet-ring. King Sotu had kept his word for once in his

Chapter Thirty Three.

The Escape.

Swiftly and silently the leopards were harnessed to the chariots. Then each amazon took the reins, and, with her particular friend beside her, drove through the gates and into the almost deserted streets.

It was two hours past midnight now, and the citizens, with the exception of the guards and the male revellers, were long since asleep.

A lovely night for a drive, for young people particularly. Only the roaring of the confined beasts, with the calling of the frogs in the papyrus reeds, could be heard. Serene and mellow the moon looked down from a cloudless sky upon the restful city, the empty wharfs and stairs, and the fringe-lined lake, where also slept their god-ships, the crocodiles. It was a splendid country for women, cats, crocodiles, serpents, and other sacred and venerated things, but not so favourable to men. Our adventurers were leaving it gladly.

At the outer gate they had a little trouble, as Pylea had expected.

The commandress chanced to be one of the ladies who had decided to compete in the lists on the morrow. She had fixed her discriminating eyes upon Cocoeni, and when roused up by a subordinate, regarded the exodus with gloomy suspicion.

The order, however, was so definite, and the signet-ring beyond dispute; yet she wanted some particulars.

"It is the written command of Queen Isori, that these strangers pass through without delay. They go to offer sacrifice to their gods in the desert before the contest," added Pylea, with a dig of her heel at Ned, who crouched behind.

"Yes, dauntless captain," said Ned. "Your gods are not our gods, nor your customs ours."

"Are these the sacrifices you take with you?" asked the stately amazon, pointing to the packages.

"Yes," answered Ned, brazenly, "our offerings are all there."

"It is strange, for I was with the queen before supper, and she said nothing of this. Let me send a messenger to her."

"By no means. See, it is written here that she is not to be disturbed this night on pain of death. She is weary with her journey, and wishes to prepare also against the morning."

"Humph! it is my duty; pass on."

Ned waited with Pylea to see the other chariots go through. As they did so, the native amazon looked at each one keenly.

"Stop!" she cried, as Cocoeni was passing; "this is the man I have chosen to fight with. Step forth and let me look at you."

"Get out and satisfy the captain, Cocoeni," said Ned. "Show your muscles, and be quick about it."

Cocoeni rose, nothing loth, and stalked up to the side of the amazon. She turned him round, feeling his biceps critically, as an intending purchaser might examine a horse. Standing side by side, their heads were on a level, a splendid pair as to height and breadth of shoulders. But the woman had seen more than thirty summers, whereas Cocoeni was her junior by many years.

"You are a fine fellow, yet I think I can throw you," she said, while her black eyes sparkled with admiration. "Will you try once with me now?"

"Shall I, baas?"

"Yes," answered Ned. "Get her on the other side of the gate, over by the green bank, while we all pass through. Then, don't waste any time, grip her quick and pitch her into the lake, if you can. It will create a diversion."

He gave these instructions, in English; then, turning to the warlike dame, he said mildly in her language—

"The lord Cocoeni will take up your offer, brave lady; but as I have no desire to see either of you hurt on the hard stones, and so spoil our sport when the day comes, I fix upon yonder soft sward as the ground. One throw only."

"So let it be."

The dame retired for a moment to prepare herself and do up her hair. She had been standing up to now in her night costume.

While she was absent, Pylea whispered something to one of her band. The girl nodded, and, turning her chariot, darted back the way they came.

"Where is she going?" asked Ned.

"To keep watch in the shadows," whispered Pylea. "This woman is my aunt, therefore I know her well. She will send a messenger to the palace while she delays us, and that messenger must be stopped."

"Oh! Cannot we make a bolt for it while she is inside?"

"Two hundred bows would be bent if we did so. One bow will be quite sufficient," answered Pylea, calmly.

She was a plucky girl, quick and prompt in her actions, and had proved a first-rate chum all through to Ned and his friends, but she had no weak sentimentalism about her. She could remove a human impediment with the same utter indifference that country ladies kill pullets. As a friend, however, she was sans reproche. Ned felt that the present occasion was one in which he must not be too fastidious, yet he shuddered to think of the luckless messenger.

As the last of the chariots, except that one which had turned back, passed beneath the lintel of the archway, Ned saw a white-robed, bald-headed little man steal out of a side-window, and glide rapidly across the moonlight to the shadow side of the road. As he did so, Pylea again touched Ned with her foot.

"My aunt will be a widow sooner than she intended," she whispered. "There goes my uncle to meet his death."

Almost immediately afterwards the amazonian aunt came out of the guard-house door, clad in light chain armour, and with only a scarf tied tightly round her waist. She was barefooted, so that she might not slip easy. She looked a formidable figure as she strode over to where Cocoeni was waiting for her. A crowd of the guard was gathered round, leaving the gate open and unprotected.

"Wait one instant," said Pylea. "Ah, here they come."

The young amazon who had been sent back, drove her chariot and her Kaffir passenger almost noiselessly. She nodded slightly as she drew up, and murmured softly—

"He lies in the shadow, thirty yards distant. I removed the arrow from his heart as we passed him."

"Good," answered Pylea; then together they passed through the gate and drew up at the other side.

Pylea, having ordered her followers to drive on out of arrow-shot, remained behind with Ned and Cocoeni's driver to watch the contest.

The combatants stood face to face watching each other keenly, and looking out for a chance to spring in. The newly made widow was a wily old bird, and up to every feint. She was in no haste to close, as she wished to linger the game. Several times she pretended to be about to take the leap, always to draw back.

"Quick, Cocoeni; trust to your strength and finish it," cried Ned, who was chaffing at the delay.

"All right, baas."

Cocoeni walked slowly towards the amazon, who now began to retreat, but towards the edge of the water. Seeing this, she suddenly sprang to one side and attempted to pass him.

It was a fatal move; for Cocoeni, quick as lightning, leapt upon her, and gripped her sideways, slipping both arms under hers as she twisted round.

There was no question of chivalry or gentle treatment now. The woman felt, as those muscular long arms closed round her, as if she was in the embrace of a python. It was such a hug as she had never before received. Her ribs felt cracking, and her lungs compressed so that she could not breathe or use her arms. She was taken at a disadvantage and completely at his mercy.

Cocoeni had his back towards the lake, which was three yards distant. With a hoarse, savage laugh, he imprinted a loud kiss on the open mouth so close to him, and the next instant sent her flying over his head three feet clear of the bank. With a shrill cry and a loud splash, she disappeared into the water.

"There, baas, she will not forget the throw of Cocoeni," he shouted, as he clambered into his chariot.

Away they dashed at full speed—getting a parting glimpse of the drenched dame as she scrambled drippingly ashore; past the suburban villas and fields and out to the arid desert.

"My aunt Culpatra will not be content with one messenger," cried Pylea, as they rushed along. "We shall be pursued by the queen and her army. Fortunately, we have an hour's start, and these animals are the best in Karnadama."

"But extra loaded," answered Ned.

"Yes; yet you can shoot with your guns further than they can with their arrows."

"I hope we shall not have to do this."

Twice before daybreak did Pylea and her companions stop their leopards to feed them with those little cakes. After the animals had eaten these they went on with renewed speed.

"What is that you give them, Pylea?"

"Something to keep them fresh. A little does them good and removes fatigue. Too much will kill them, yet they will run with unabated speed until they drop dead. I fear most of these will be dead when we reach the mountain, for we

must not spare them this journey.”

Day came and almost passed, without any signs of pursuit. The only stops they made were those when more of the cakes were given to the animals. Then they went on again at full speed, seemingly as fresh as ever.

The sun was just dipping below the desert line when Ned saw a long low cloud appear. He did not need to call the attention of Pylea to ask its meaning. The pursuers were coming.

All that night the leopards ran at their swiftest, being fed often. When morning broke the gold mountain was distinctly visible; but so also were their followers. A long line of moving dust rolled in the rear, spreading miles wide. Queen Isori had brought half her army with her, and they were driving lightly. She was resolved to stop the fugitives if she could.

Onwards! The pursuers are gaining ground, but they are still as far off as the mountain, and it is stationary.

The leopards are fed recklessly, and rush along madly as if they were free. With long bounds they cover yards of ground at a time. Their eyes blaze fearfully, and bloody froth flies from their gaping jaws. They want no driving now; they are possessed with the most savage fury.

“They will reach the mountain. We dare feed them no longer; they are mad,” cried Pylea, looking only at the cliffs.

Ned was looking behind. How rapidly the pursuers were gaining! Already he could distinguish individuals where before he had only seen a confused mass. Their arrows were gleaming in the bright sunbeams.

At last! The chariot jolted suddenly and overturned, sending Ned and his bundle sprawling. Pylea had leaped lightly out and was helping him up.

The leopards lay gasping their last breath. All along the line the others lay in the same condition. Some had fallen exhausted, others the amazons had slain with their arrows, to prevent the maddened beasts from dashing against the rocks.

The drivers and passengers were running full speed for the archway, carrying their loads with them. From the desert came a hoarse roar like the sound of waves breaking on shingle.

It was the army of Karnadama urging on their lions and leopards.

“Quick!” panted Pylea, no longer calm.

Ned got up and ran, as he had never done before, through the hall, and up the long stairway that led to freedom.

“Run on for your lives, and look not back; we will follow,” cried Pylea, as she ranged her warriors in front of the stairs.

Up they went, one after the other, as fast as they could scramble, those thousands of steps. Exhausted at last, they reached the chamber of the pythons.

Here they sank down breathless to wait on Pylea and her regiment.

Not a sound could be heard from below. Had the brave girls remained there to face their infuriated queen? For the second time in their lives our heroes felt themselves to be mean cowards. The first time had been when they killed the baby gorilla.

“We can never leave these brave girls in the lurch like this, lads. We must return and save them, or die with them,” cried Ned, in sharp tones of agony.

Gripping his revolver, and followed by his men, he rushed with frantic steps down the stairs.

At the fourth landing he stopped suddenly. There before him leaned against the wall the friend of Coccoeni, with the blood dripping through her fingers as she pressed her hand against her side.

“Come no further,” she gasped faintly. “I only am left alive.”

“What!” cried Ned, starting back in dismay. “Are they all slain? Is Pylea also dead?”

Coccoeni by this time had reached forward, and was holding the dying girl in his arms, the hot tears running down his cheeks.

“All,” replied the girl. “I was sent forward to close the wall at the first stair. Before I reached it they were cut down. I saw Pylea fall even as I received this wound, but I had strength enough to close the stone door and creep up the stairs thus far.”

Her head sank as she uttered the last words against the breast of Coccoeni.

“Bring her up to the hall, Coccoeni,” said Ned, brokenly.

Not a dry eye was amongst them.

Coccoeni carried her up as gently as he could, but before they reached the sculptured hall, she was almost gone.

As he laid her down, she opened her eyes and smiled wanly. Then she whispered so faintly that they had to bend

close to hear the feeble accents.

"They cannot open the door I closed, for hours. You have time to escape. Destroy the stairs at the top and you are safe."

Her military trained mind was still planning, even although the life-blood was nearly drained from her heart. Another long pause, and then she opened her lips and her eyes for the last time.

"Cocoeni, you are only a man, after all, for you are weeping just as ours do when they are hurt. Kiss me, as you did two nights ago in the garden, for which I rebuked you then, but I am now as weak and foolish as you are."

Cocoeni pressed his warm lips to her cold ones. When he removed them her lips remained apart. She was dead.

Chapter Thirty Four.

The Return.

"It is a wonderful story, boys. With those stones and bric-à-brac to support it, I am the last man in the world to cast doubts upon its veracity. I wish, however, that you had brought with you that quarter cohort of young amazons; we could do with them now in Rhodesia. However, go on and finish your yarn. What did you do with this poor girl?"

Dr Jim had received our heroes at Bulawayo.

At present they were on their way from the capital of Rhodesia to Mafeking with a train-load of native allies. Other laden trains were following in their track.

Much had happened during their absence from the field of progress, as their captain informed them. The Transvaal Government only, like the kingdom of Karnadama, stood still.

The suzerainty dispute had swallowed up many mouths, while Kruger, with his usual policy of aggressive arrogance and false professions, had lain like a great tortoise in the way, pushing its head out, and drawing it back again before it could be chopped off.

He was making a move at last. Emboldened by the quiet deportment of Britain, he considered that the hour had arrived when he could show his head plainly, and walk on as he wanted.

Crafty and timid although he was, Kruger had not been idle inside his shell. He had watched the political troubles that threatened his enemy, until now he considered their hands too full with outside affairs to be able to send much help to South Africa.

It was a fixed belief with Kruger and his countrymen that England was in the same position that the Roman Empire had been when her legions were recalled from Albion. He knew how her power was envied by the other great nations, and how isolated she stood facing the world. He had intrigued with those ill-wishers until he considered himself sure of support.

Only blind hatred moved him now. To break the power of this abhorred race, he was prepared to sacrifice the Republic and make his countrymen serfs, so that he might be allowed to have a life-post as governor, and see the Uitlanders crushed.

"You have just come in time to take a hand in clearing the board, if you are not afraid to venture once more into Krugerland," Dr Jim had told them when he met them.

"We have sure intelligence that he intends to abrogate the Convention of London, and declare the absolute independence of the South African Republic on the tenth of this month. We have a copy of his intended ultimatum. He will allow the Uitlanders only twenty-four hours to decide whether they will declare themselves as enemies to their native land, or else be driven from the country, or imprisoned, with their property confiscated. A general massacre is clearly intended of all who dare resist.

"It is now the third of October, so that we have seven days before us to prepare for the old murderer. We have not been idle any more than Kruger has, and this time we have played his own game, the hiding one. From Fourteen Streams to the Portuguese border on the north we have the Transvaal environed and practically hemmed in; from Fourteen Streams to Usuta they are also isolated, although they do not know it; the natives of Swazi and Gaza lands are ready to rise at the signal, and pour across the border; a fleet of warships protects Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Durban, so that the tactics of Mr Schreiner are so far defeated.

"We have hundreds of volunteers on their way from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. They are bringing arms and ammunition enough for all purposes. They will land at Durban and Cape Town in a few weeks at latest. Yes; I think we are nearly ready this time for the tortoise when he puts out his head, without having to trouble our mother for too much help, except those who man her fleet."

"And what can we do?" asked our heroes. "Command us, for we are ready."

"Well, I want you, Romer, to take a message into Johannesburg, and wait there till the fun begins."

"Yes," replied Ned.

"You must have some kind of disguise. I see you have grown a crop of down on your cheeks. I think you might sacrifice that, and you'll make as smashing a young woman as one of your amazons."

Ned laughed, and said he was willing to change his sex for the time.

"All right," replied the doctor. "We'll put the dressmaker of Mafeking on to you and your chums, and send you in to cajole the Boers. You, Raybold, must go to Pretoria. And you, Weldon, to Bloemfontein. I shall want Cocoeni and his fellows along with me.

"There must be no hesitation this time amongst the Uitlanders. On the midnight of the eleventh they must rise to a man, and hold the different towns until the outside forces join you. If all goes well, as I cannot see how it can miss, take possession of the trains and telegraph offices, so as to let no message go out or enter the land. Our part of the game must be finished before the world can hear about its opening, and this rotten Republic will then be a thing of the past. We intend to hold the kopjes this campaign, and force these skunks into the open; also to avoid bloodshed as much as possible, only the victory must be on our side—and complete."

Dr Jim gave our heroes a great many other details and instructions on the journey down. He had been training and moving men to different parts for the past seven months in anticipation of this event, as settlers and their servants, as unostentatiously as he could manage it. While Kruger had been busy coquetting with foreign powers, and buying the latest improvement in weapons, Cecil Rhodes had been quietly stocking and populating the lands adjacent to the Transvaal.

"By the way, Romer, I have some personal news for you, which might have interested you more deeply than it is likely to do now that you have made your own fortune."

"Yes?" asked Ned, curiously.

"Mr Rhodes has been home, and looking into your affairs. He always finds time to attend to the interests of those he takes in hand, with all his other big concerns."

"And what has he discovered about me?"

"That your father first, and afterwards you, trusted as scoundrelly a thief as was ever transported, to manage your fortune."

"Ah!"

"Yes; this Jabez Raymond, the solicitor, has robbed your late father and you systematically for many years, forging papers and creating mortgages wholesale. Mr Rhodes knew your father and the position he held during his life, so he set ruthlessly to work and unveiled the sanctimonious scoundrel. He is at present doing a seven years' stretch at Dartmoor for his delinquencies, while your property is being looked after by a respectable agent. You are at present the possessor of a comfortable fifteen hundred per annum and a fine estate in Devon, free of all incumbrances. This, however, is a flea-bite to what you will have when these stones are sold."

"Do you think they will realise much?"

"Two or three hundred thousand pounds at the least, I should say."

"But by rights they belong to our employer, Mr Cecil Rhodes."

"He will be content with a share in the mine you have discovered, if it ever gets into the market. These were presents given to you, therefore they are undoubtedly your own property," said the doctor.

"And our followers."

"Nonsense! These Kaffirs were your servants. Besides, so much money would ruin them. Divide the stones between you three, for they are undoubtedly your property. As for the idols and cups, you can lend a few of them for our Salisbury Museum. Now finish your yarn."

Dr Jim leaned back on the cushion, smoking his pipe, while Ned resumed his story. As he told the tale, the train ran smoothly over that country which so lately had been an unexplored wilderness.

"We had no time to mourn long over the poor young amazon who had fallen a victim to friendship. We knew that our pursuers would spare no efforts to reach us as soon as they could do so.

"Therefore, satisfied that she, Rhae, was no more, we opened one of the mummy-cases, and, taking out the original lodger, we placed her inside instead. We wrapped her up in the outer linen of the mummy, after reading the service over her, and replaced the lid of the sarcophagus. Properly, I suppose, she should have been embalmed, for, according to her religion, her soul was in jeopardy by her being entombed in this fashion. But I dare say she'll find her body again at the resurrection day quite as easily as any of her countrywomen will find their more carefully preserved earthly shells.

"This done we started up the stairs, carrying the mummy with us. We did this so as not to horrify the Karnadamains too much with our sacrilege. We reached the top all right; then, remembering the dying advice of Rhae about breaking down the steps, I took back with me a good charge of gunpowder and dynamite, and, placing this in a wide crevice about a couple of dozen steps from the top, I ran up a train of gunpowder to the hall above.

"I had hardly finished this operation when we heard them coming. We could hear their shouts and the clashing of

their armour as they filled the chamber below and crowded up the stairs. At once I fired the train, and bolted as hard as I could spin to the outer door of the hall.

"I had only taken about a dozen leaps when the explosion took place. Into the vast hall the smoke and dust flew from the smaller room, accompanied by the crushing and tumbling of the blasted slabs.

"As soon as the sounds ceased and the smoke cleared, we ventured back to look at the damage done. We had demolished not only the stairs, but torn great masses out of the walls of the room as well. Where the entrance to the stairs had been now lay several tons of broken masonry; the passage was completely blocked up.

"We listened, but heard no sounds from below; then, satisfied that we were at last safe, we left the large painted hall.

"Outside we went on the walls and looked over. There a vast crowd of chariots were standing, with a number of amazon guards. They saw us, and several bent their bows, but we could afford to laugh at this display, as the arrows only reached a short distance up the cliffs.

"We at once hurried away, however, for suddenly a thought occurred to me that there might be some other way up, and we had no desire to be captured.

"Another thing made us not linger in that deserted citadel. We had plenty of ammunition and wealth, etc., but we had very little provisions, and only about one bag full of water.

"Fortunately we were going down the hill, and knew exactly how long we should take before we reached the Rhodes fountain. But for all that, we were nearly dead from thirst before we reached it.

"Those awful bashikonay ants were in our minds also, all down that hot and parching defile. If we should meet them here, there was no hope for us. Luckily we did not, nor did we see any of them again.

"The stream was still running as clearly as ever. We felt happy when we reached it, even although we had not half a meal each left out of our scanty stock.

"Nor did we taste anything after that until we were a full day's journey from the mountain. Then we killed a couple of lions, and had to satisfy our appetites on them until we got once more amongst the game.

"Here we were all right. We stayed three weeks on the plains, hunting and drying meat, and otherwise preparing ourselves for the dismal forest. We had not lost a man since starting, and for this we all rejoiced; but in the return through the forest we were not quite so fortunate, and I am sorry to have to report the loss of ten, whom we had to bury there.

"One day we ran right into a camp of those active little nomads, who surrounded us and gave us battle. How many they were we could not tell, as they dodged us amongst the trees and brushwood.

"There must have been thousands, for although we shot about fifty of them and kept the rest at bay, yet we suffered from them night and day afterwards. Not until we were clear of the forest were we able to shake them off.

"They were dreadful and revengeful pests; nor were we ever sure when we might be pierced with one of their poisoned arrows.

"Three of our boys went down during the first conflict, and after that the rest of the ten died from the effects of the poison, one after the other. They had been touched in vital parts, or else neglected to look after their wounds at the time.

"I got one arrow in the ankle, but my boot so far protected me, that my wound was better in a week. Cocoeni was wounded in the arm, and suffered dreadfully for three weeks. The others who were hit managed to suck the poison out quickly and wash the wounds with disinfectants, so that they managed to escape.

"None of us had fever, however, coming back. The constant excitement we were kept in by these dwarfish, light-coloured savages, with the quick marches we took, must have saved us from that evil.

"After the forest was over, the rest of our journey was only a matter of time. You may judge of our astonishment, however, when one day we saw the corrugated iron roof of a railway station where some months before we had passed through a country peopled only by natives. You cannot, however, realise our delight when amongst those who came to welcome us we beheld you—the hero of South Africa."

"I was as delighted to see you, my lads, and so will Mr Rhodes, when he lands in Cape Town and gets my telegram announcing your safe return. Let me congratulate you on your remarkable success. You have more than answered our expectations, and I am proud of your achievements."

"That repays us tenfold for all we have gone through," answered our heroes, with beaming faces and exultant hearts.

Chapter Thirty Five.

"To your Tents, O Israel!"

At Mafeking our heroes received their final instructions, and were metamorphosed into three large-boned, amazonian young women, more awe-inspiring than beautiful to look upon. They were costumed in a homely fashion, as they

were acting the character of domestic servants. Under this disguise they passed scrutiny and were not suspected by their fellow-passengers. Tall women are by no means a novelty nowadays, nor are awkward and masculine women, since bicycles and feminine athletics are the vogue. Indeed, to find a gentle, soft-voiced, graceful, and retiring lady traveller is now the exception rather than the rule.

Therefore, when our heroes forgot their acting and took big leaps in and out of carriage doors, or crossed their legs and their arms, it did not strike any one as peculiar behaviour. Women of this generation do all that men were at one time only privileged to do. They raise their dresses and plant their feet on the cushioned seats opposite them, and do all sorts of things that were at one time supposed to be most indelicate. Our heroes, being well-bred, gentlemanly young fellows, conducted themselves a great deal more decorously than the majority of nineteenth-century ladies would have behaved. Indeed, their native politeness made them appear singularly superior servant-girls.

They left their treasures with Dr Jim to bank for them at Mafeking, and went on together as far as Bloemfontein, in the Orange Free State.

They had changed trains at De Aar, and again at Tuur Berg for the Boer line.

At Bloemfontein the first of their partings took place, where Fred went off.

Ned and Clarence felt a bit melancholy when they said good-bye to their faithful and long-trying chum. They reckoned that some fighting had to be done before they were re-united, if ever they were. If it could have been managed they would have liked to do the fighting in company, yet as it could not be so, they bore the parting bravely.

As the pair crossed the border at Viljoen's Drift, and saw the train boarded by the hateful Boers, they felt the old rage again possess them, which had so long been almost forgotten. These arrogant, uncouth bullies, who treated male and female with the same rough brutality, made them clench their teeth and draw their brows together until they looked very forbidding females indeed.

But the officials were wonderfully pleasant towards them, considering their unfriendly demeanour. They admired muscle and bone like theirs, and said audibly that they would be fine vrows some day, when they got fatter. They were passed on much more easily than they expected. Once Ned had to correct an impertinent German, who tried to make himself agreeable in the fashion some cads have with unprotected females. Ned promptly knocked the ruffian down and kicked him under the seat. Then he leaned back calmly and gazed out of the window, until he suddenly recollected that he should have called the guard instead. He did this at once as soon as he remembered his sex, and had the man removed in a very dejected and dilapidated condition.

This German did not recover his presence of mind until he reached Johannesburg. Then, when he saw Ned on the platform, he ran panic-stricken out of the station, vowing that these Englishwomen were demons, and that it would be a long time before he wasted his attentions on another of this ungrateful nation.

"Good-bye, Clara," said Ned, as he stood with his bonnet-box and bag on the platform. "Take care of yourself, dear, and don't go falling in love with a Boer."

"Don't be afraid, Edwina darling. I'll go for the cruel wretches if they try to persecute me, as you did with that nasty German."

"Dort's all right, meme leetle pigeon," shouted a bearded burgher, showing his big face near. "You just wait till you are asked, then you vil be von fine old woman."

"Don't mind the rude fellow, Clara," cried Ned, warningly. But Clarence was too quick; with a back-handed slap he sent the Boer staggering backwards a dozen paces.

"Couldn't hold my hand back, Eddy dear. Englishwomen aren't used to these compliments, you know."

"Be careful," said Ned. "Remember our positions." The burgher took his blow, however, without resentment. Several of his countrymen were laughing at him, therefore he slunk away quietly.

"Good-bye, and trusting we may meet soon."

Ned watched the train start with watering eyes, then he stalked out of the station and straight to the Three Ace Club.

As he passed through the streets he noticed that things appeared much quieter than when he was there before. The police did not interfere so much with the citizens, nor were the armed Boers so aggressive. It seemed as if a more tolerant spirit was ruling their behaviour.

Knowing what he did, Ned was not at all deceived by these false signs of amiability. When the Boer is meditating some extra treachery he is always the most amiable. It is only part of his crafty and deceitful nature. He likes to lull his victim into a trusting condition, so that he may have him at a disadvantage. He likes to play like a cat with his prey, and surprise him suddenly.

Ned knew that Kruger had given orders for this extra tolerance, so that the citizens might be lulled into security, and that his thunderbolt might fall the more startlingly upon their devoted heads. This was only in keeping with his malicious, torture-loving, and savage nature. These smiling, hard-faced men who looked so grimly indulgent on the unarmed citizens whom they were deluding, were inwardly thinking gloatingly on the coming massacre.

He saw them clinking glasses in the bars with their unconscious victims, and laughing loudly at their jokes, while their revolvers stuck out behind—the revolvers that they intended using shortly on the jokers. Knowing what he did, Ned hated those double-faced wretches with more intensity. They were less tolerable in their sullen and insulting state

than in their surly humour.

Once he almost betrayed himself by the start he gave. He had passed Stephanus Groblaar with his broken nose, standing with some exchange men at the door of a hotel.

Stephanus saw him also, and winked leeringly at him as he passed. Stephanus was a modern city-bred Boer, therefore of the advanced school, who laughed at religion and morality. With these added vices he retained all the other evil instincts of his race, so that he was utterly graceless.

Ned passed him swiftly with eyes cast down. He glanced over his shoulder after he had got a little distance, and gave a sigh of relief, when he saw Stephanus leering on a couple of ladies who were passing. The supposed servant had only attracted him momentarily. He had failed to recognise his nose-breaker.

Ned felt savagely glad that this vindictive foe was in the city. He trusted he would stay in Johannesburg till the night of the tenth, for he wanted to have it out with him.

When he reached the club it was almost empty, but the manager recognised him and took him upstairs to a bedroom. Here he had a wash, and some lunch brought to him. Then he lay down and rested for a few hours.

He was wakened by some one shaking him, and when he opened his eyes he saw his old friend, Philip Martin, by the bedside. Ned started up and shook hands.

"Well, my fine young woman, so you have got back."

Ned laughed, and told his message, which the other listened to with sparkling eyes.

"We have been ready and waiting for this message for months past. So Kruger is going to make the grand move at last? He will get a mighty surprise, instead of giving us one, as he intends."

He rubbed his hands gleefully.

"I for one am heart-sick of all this long suspense and inaction. I shall welcome the hour with the greatest delight. Only there will be some bloodletting before the affair is settled."

"I don't mind that," answered Ned. "Before I arrived in Johannesburg I did not know what hatred or revenge meant. It was Kruger and his Boers who planted these passions in my heart on my first visit. During my absence the plants did not thrive much. Now that I have returned, however, the Transvaal air seems to have revived them suddenly."

"Yes," said Philip Martin. "Hatred, envy, deceit, revenge, greed, and gracelessness are plants that grow well and quickly in the South African Republican garden. They are fine Dutch bulbs, and take kindly to the Transvaal air. Since you have given me the news of this crowning scheme of perfidy on the part of the crafty and senseless tyrant Kruger, I also feel as if I don't mind shedding some gore if I can only help to put him in his proper place—the felon's cell. Lately he has been playing one of his favourite games with us, which to those in the 'know' means 'spoofo' eventually. He has been acting the part of 'Codlin' as the only real friend of the Uitlander—the kindly old humourist of Pretoria, the simple-minded farmer chief."

"Yes; he tried to make traitors and spies of us in that way," remarked Ned.

"Just so. He has been talking about conciliation and the blessedness of unity amongst brethren. Every Sunday of late he has occupied the Dopper pulpit, and his orations have been noted for their breadth and mildness. The police wink at small offenders where before they pounced upon them rigidly. A general tide of indulgence and generosity appears to be setting in towards us in every direction. There are rumours that the franchise and full burgher rights will be proclaimed on the tenth. This the Volksraad have already formally passed, with certain conditions which are to be told us by the president himself on that momentous day."

"Yes," replied Ned, grimly; "the conditions you might have suspected all along, knowing Kruger's tactics of old. He seems to be an animal of instinct and habit. Like the dog, he always turns round the regulation number of times. He never varies in his movements, and never changes."

"You are right, Romer; he does not. He will humour us up to the last moment, and then give us our option—to become traitor burghers and rebels to our queen, or else be shot down ruthlessly. There will be no mistake about the shooting if we decline, therefore we must take time by the forelock, and anticipate the kindly intentions of Oom Paul. What are you going to do meanwhile?"

"I shall stick to my present disguise, and live most of my time in the kitchen," continued Ned. "I can also do any little messages you may want about the city."

"Yes, that will be best. I'll tell you how you may also serve us, if you can play your part safely."

"In what way?"

"Get a sweetheart in the barracks if you can, and we may, with your help, be able to surprise them on the eventful night, without having to dynamite them. It may be a great saving of life on both sides."

"It is a low game you ask me to play, Philip; but, as the Jesuits say, 'the end justifies the means.' I'll try it on."

For the next few days all went quietly in Johannesburg. Those outsiders who were not in the secret were happy that their trouble had blown over, and that better times were now approaching. The Three Ace club-men went about their

business, and pretended to be satisfied, as the ignorant were. The armed Boers behaved like brothers.

The past sins of Oom Paul appeared to be condoned. Every one praised him now as the kindly old patriarch of Pretoria, who was at present hard at work growing a pair of angel's wings.

Ned had succeeded in fascinating a big German Zarp, and spent a portion of each day in his company. Ned took the Teuton in preference to a Dutchman, as he had not any repugnance to this nation, yet it was a sacrifice to be amiable even to him.

On the ninth of the month he had two letters, one from Fred, who called himself Fanny, and the other from Clarence. They had arranged on terms by which they would be understood by each other, that might be read without suspicion by any one.

Fred wrote—

“Dear Edwina,—

“When I reached my situation I found that my place was already filled up, and that I was not wanted. I intend, therefore, to come to Johannesburg, and be near you and Clara. I'd like to see the shops of Pretoria, as I hear they are grand affairs. Crowds are going from here, so I expect there will be a city full presently.

“Your loving cousin,—

“Fanny.”

Between the lines Ned read—

“The Orange Free State will join with the Transvaal in the coming struggle. The Uitlanders here are all prepared, and have efficient leaders. Volunteers are coming in to help you in great numbers. I am also coming to take a hand.”

Clarence wrote—

“Dear Edwina,—

“This is such a pretty place, and I am most comfortable in my situation. I trust you are the same, I have found a sweetheart, after all, amongst the Boers, such a nice, useful, frank fellow. He took me to the Dopper Kirk on Sunday to hear the president preach. What a noble old gentleman he is, to be sure! So full of Christian charity and fatherly sentiment. I fairly fell in love with him, as you will, I am sure, when you see him. My sweetheart is his footman, so that I have been introduced to the household, and can find my way about. I have a plan how to manage something, and have already quite a host of friends here and am doing well. Are you coming up to see me when Fanny comes? Do so if you can, and I'll get Johann to show us over the private garden of the dear old president. A lady friend of mine is writing this for me, as I have hurt my right hand.

“Your loving friend,—

“Clara.”

Ned interpreted this note as follows:—

“Game all right. Have got the old humbug Kruger under my eye, and have a plan how to make him my prisoner when the time comes. Friends here ready for emergencies. If you can come up and help, do so.”

That same afternoon Fred arrived, and the two took the night train to Pretoria, having forwarded a wire for “Clara” to meet them.

Once more our heroes entered the abode of Kruger, ushered this time by a back entrance under the guidance of the friendly footman Johann.

They spent the night together and studied their plans. When Clarence revealed his scheme they admitted that it might be done. If he could capture Kruger, it would be a big feather in his cap.

“Oom Paul is not the man to be taken by force alone,” said Clarence. “He is game enough to put a pistol to his own head rather than yield. Now that Fred is here, my plan is that one of us shall offer to change clothes with him when he is hemmed in, and take him unawares somehow. We'll trust to chance for the how, when the time comes.”

Then it was all duly arranged, and they prepared themselves for the morrow.

It was a hot day in Pretoria, and the town was crammed with visitors. Church Square was blocked with people, and every other street was filled almost to suffocation.

At the hour appointed the president and his wife drove up, surrounded by a close line of guards. He took his place on the platform that had been raised above the crowd outside the Government buildings. He was greeted by thunders of applause and a salvo from the forts; then, as he rose, breathless silence succeeded the noise.

He began by reading over the resolutions and decrees of the Volksraad with respect to the Uitlanders. The reforms were granted even more completely than the Uitlanders had hoped. There were clauses, however, to each of these generous concessions which, to those who knew what the termination would be, crippled and nullified the most important. But the general audience was not in a critical mood. It roared itself hoarse with wild applause.

While this shouting was going on, the burly president stood grinning upon the crowd like an amiable gorilla. Then, when silence was once more restored, his expression suddenly altered. His cheeks became puffed, and his eyes sunk back beneath his heavy brows, while his big ears stood out. Then with a thunderous growl, like an angry beast, he read the declaration of independence first, and the defiance to England, and finished his oration in his harshest accent.

“To your tents, and consider whether you will be with us or against us in this holy struggle for independence. My ultimatum is already on its way to this verdomde government, that would deprive us of our rights. In twenty hours from this, every subject of England will be our enemy, be imprisoned, and shot if we think fit, or expelled from our country and their property confiscated. To your tents and consider, for your fate is in your own hands.”

These words the grim president thundered out to the dismayed Uitlanders; then he turned abruptly and left the scene as he had come, protected by his armed guard.

For a moment stupefaction held the crowd silent, then a deep growl went up from the masses who were being dispersed by the Zarpes.

At this instant Ned Romer felt a touch on his arm, and, looking round, he saw Philip Martin at his side.

“This ultimatum has changed our plans,” he whispered, as he drew the three friends out of the crowd. “The English Government will now decide the question, and we must do nothing inside the Transvaal to disturb their plans. Our orders are now to clear out before this ultimatum expires, and give Oom Paul no excuse for his next step.”

Philip Martin was gloomy, and the faces of our heroes also fell considerably.

“And are we to do nothing, Philip, after all our preparations?” asked Ned, in a disappointed tone.

“Nothing inside the Transvaal. Our work will be outside, and there will be lots to do there, you take my word. We must follow the example of the Jews, and skedaddle if we can, before the lines are closed. Johannesburg must be left for the present, until we can come back with the British army. Tomorrow Natal and Cape Colony will be invaded, and then England can no longer hold back. I am off to join Baden-Powell, at Mafeking. Dr Jim has gone to Ladysmith, and you three fellows are to proceed to Kimberley, where you will find Mr Cecil Rhodes. It is a bit disappointing, I will allow; but this is going to be a bigger and a more complete affair than we could have accomplished, therefore we must be content to leave it to the proper hands to clear the board.”

Philip Martin shook hands with them, and walked quickly away to warn others of his own party, while our heroes prepared for their exodus.

Chapter Thirty Six.

The Relief of Kimberley.

This most inhuman and bloody-minded Kruger, who misquoted Scripture, as he so often did, considered himself safe to order his victims to their empty tents. He had stripped them, as he fondly thought, of all means of protecting their wives and children. As he imagined, they had only their naked fists to support their manhood against his armed hordes; therefore he could be as bold as a bushranger who has bailed up a household. He had them, or, as he impiously remarked, “The Lord of the Boer hosts has put them into our hands, even as He gave the Amalekites up to the vengeance of Israel.”

To those who were not in the “know,” the Jew dealers and other aliens, who had no patriotic interest in the land, this ultimatum fell like the first ashes of Vesuvius upon Pompeii. It was definite, clear, and curtailed. They had either to join in and fight with the Boers, or else be treated with those who stood for English authority.

There was no equivocation, or holding aloof. Johannesburg, with its riches, must be abandoned, and at once, i.e. within the next twenty hours at latest. Those who remained in that city would be forced to take up arms by the Boers, when the time of grace was over. They were driven like sheep into the pen, where they were to be slaughtered if they did not declare themselves enemies of England, and “bind” themselves to the masters of this Boer rebellion.

Poor, miserable, and terror-stricken wretches—these gold and diamond traffickers, who had come here only to make money, and who were without a single molecule of courage in their composition,—they were placed between two fires, and knew not where to turn for safety. They were likely to be shot or hanged whatever side they decided to take.

They drove home in their flash traps, or in the saloon cars, with bloodless, flabby lips and staring eyes. Inside their swell houses they collapsed, and found the champagne and brandy of no more aid to them than coloured water.

Their wives, however,—the painted, illiterate, dyed-haired, and outrageously dressed and be-diamonded ex-shop girls, ex-barmaids, and ex-variety actresses,—were not going to let the twenty hours pass before making up their minds what to do. The Boers were at their doors, and at present bosses of the show. Like Simon, Lord Lovat, they believed in serving the customer who was in possession.

By six o'clock that night thousands of these mercenaries had signed the papers of allegiance to the Republic, and left Johannesburg in detachments, escorted by their masters, while their women were driven out of the country to become paupers at Durban and Cape Town.

After a frightful and never-to-be-forgotten train journey, our disguised heroes at last found themselves on British soil,

with hearts burning with rage and hatred at the vile treatment they had received in the trains.

The rush for trains by that panic-thralled crowd of refugees resembled a stampede of wild cattle. Delicate women and children struggled frantically for places with rough, strong men, and were glad to find themselves packed in open trucks. Order was at an end, and gallantry rarely displayed by that pushing, shouting, and sweltering crowd, while the Boer officials only mocked at their despair.

By reason of their personal strength, however, and taking advantage of their disguises, our heroes managed to secure good places for themselves; and also to protect a number of ladies, who would otherwise have fared badly. During the journey, also, the burghers had reason to regret insulting and trying to frighten these three strapping young females.

When they reached Cape Colony they learned much more than they had been aware of before.

Paul Kruger and his burghers were in a better condition for warfare than had been suspected. The loyal colonists had also been trifled with and hoodwinked by the Honourable Mr Schreiner and his traitor gang. In fact, the British forces were so scanty and ill-provided, while on the enemy's side were so many spies and rebels, that the young men no longer wondered at the courage of the Transvaal chief.

Already war had been declared, and Cape Colony and Natal invaded in force. If the rebels had only proper leaders, the English possessions were in extreme danger.

England also seemed bristling with renegades and pro-Boers, whose yelpings disturbed the loyal colonists greatly.

But the lion was rousing up for action, and the nation shouted out for punishment to be meted out to those insolent rebels. From every part of our mighty Empire came the offer of help to the mother country. The Boers, by their invasions, had united Englishmen as one people. When our heroes heard this news, they saw the wisdom of letting the Federals have the first blow.

They were now going to join the man they adored, and take a hand in the great coming struggle.

It was November 3rd before our heroes managed to pass the rebel lines and get into Kimberley. Here they found the town in a state of siege, but well prepared. Cecil Rhodes was calm and cheerful, with no doubts as to the results of the war.

He welcomed the adventurers warmly, and heard the account of their travels with pleasure. The news they brought him also from the outside gave him great satisfaction.

"There is nothing else to be done now but to make ourselves as comfortable as possible here, and defend ourselves until we are relieved. We shall all have enough work to keep us from being dull."

He was right, as our heroes found as the weeks rolled past. General Cronje and his army kept them in a constant state of attention and excitement.

Thanks to the personal magnetism of Cecil Rhodes, with his unfailing serenity and constant exertions to amuse the besieged townspeople, the first two months, although nerve-trying, were not unpleasant from a social point of view.

Balls, concerts, and parties filled up the intervals of bombarding and repelling the enemy. The town had been well provisioned, and the great empire-maker had taken previous precautions to outwit his rival, W.P. Schreiner, as far as could be done. Had the loyal colonists trusted implicitly in the Cape Premier, Kimberley, as well as Mafeking, must have succumbed in a month. This Bond leader had played his cards well to serve his friends the Boers at the expense of his fellow-subjects; but Cecil Rhodes, like Baden-Powell, found himself equal to the occasion.

Inadequately garrisoned as it was and imperfectly armed, the mines which they were protecting proved of invaluable service to them. From the débris they formed perfect forts and trenches, and soon made the place impregnable. They had a splendid mayor, a commander of infinite resources, and a garrison of undaunted heroes. The result was that they kept Cronje with his hosts and Long Toms at bay, and went on eating, drinking, fighting, and enjoying themselves in spite of the deadly dangers that environed them. Yet it was nerve-trying, and added grey hairs to every head in that beleaguered town, young and old. Out of bravado they might speak of those bursting shells and those numerous attacks as subjects for joking, but all the same, the sport was grim and heart-corroding.

Every hour had its casualties, with wounded and killed. No one knew the moment their own hour might come.

As time went on and they became more isolated from the world, it took a lot of pluck to keep a bold front to the relentless, treacherous, and dastardly foe. If they had not occasionally received news of the outside world by special runners, they must have lost heart long before their provisions became short.

But they did get reliable news now and again, and that kept them up to concert pitch. The brave fellows knew that the world was watching their heroic efforts, and that the Empire had risen and was pouring out its best sons to help and rescue them. They heard what Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were doing. They knew that the home Government was now working with might and main to repair its former errors of undue trust and confidence. They would not be deserted, nor would England neglect her duty now. The iniquitous and false Boer would be crushed, even although it cost England her best and bravest. This braced them up and enabled them to endure all that they were called to endure.

They knew that the enemies of England—those wretched traitors, traducers, and fratricides—were repudiated by their countrymen as obnoxious vermin. They knew that the gold which Kruger and his hireling Leyds had scattered broadcast, had failed to influence the people. The people of England were not to be biased by paid demagogues.

They demanded that right should be done, and the Government obeyed the universal voice. The defenders of Kimberley were holding this post for the Empire, and they did so bravely, now that the Empire appreciated their efforts. While a man was left, and an ounce of food remained, Cronje might bark his loudest, they would never cave in.

This was the kind of spirit which moved the whole camp. When food began to fall short and they had to buckle their belts tighter round their waists, they did so with a jest, for they knew that the end must be victory.

They heard the news about Ladysmith, and all about the British disasters. But they also heard that, instead of sixty thousand men being sent out to help them, England was packing off two hundred thousand of her best soldiers, and ready to send at the back of that six or eight hundred thousand, if wanted, to clear the board. That assurance braced them up. The Lion and his cubs were in earnest now, and the inflated rebels were doomed. The Boer had thrown off the mask too completely ever to be trusted with a rifle again. He must be disarmed and kept so until he was civilised. The master villains, Paul Kruger and his weak-minded catspaw, Steyn, would be arraigned for their crimes against civilisation and quashed. This Cronje, the vile and brutal murderer, would yet be tried for his atrocities, and punished as he deserved. Schreiner and his brother traitors would have to give account of their stewardship and be properly rewarded, and the land would be free for honest colonists to cultivate.

Not a man in this beleaguered garrison but rested assured that those Irish Nationalists, those paid Boer agents and home-bred renegades, as well as the treacherous Cape Afrikanders, would yet get the just reward of their atrocious treason; and this braced them up to endure half and quarter rations, and to stand to their guns while famine, fever, and shells thinned their ranks day after day. They trusted in their country to do her duty when the hour of retribution arrived, and to punish those dastards who used explosive bullets, fired on hospitals and the women's quarters; who used the sacred white flag for murder, wantonly slaughtered the wounded and their benefactors in spite of the red cross flag; who ravenously destroyed and looted farms, and did in a hundred ways what savages would have been ashamed of. They trusted that all these dastardly actions would be sifted and punished, in individuals as well as in masses, therefore they kept up their spirits and held to their posts without a thought of surrender. Let England remember the lacerations and wounds of her brave and dauntless sons when the hour comes for dealing with this most unworthy and despicable foe.

They have fought well, but so do many of the most atrocious murderers, pirates, and bushrangers, when driven into a corner, yet all the same the pirates are hanged when caught. A rat, a snake, or a scorpion will also face up under such circumstances, yet these vermin are crushed all the same. Desperation and brute viciousness is not heroism, any more than tolerated treason is a token of nobility.

Ned Romer and his comrades did their part like brave men during this prolonged siege. It was a magnificent education to them as sons of the Empire.

Fortunately they escaped so far woundless, and also kept off the sick list; yet during those four and a half months they had plenty to do, and, like the rest of the defenders, had little time to rest.

And while they were holding their own they heard how gallant Baden-Powell was guarding little Mafeking, and how Sir George White was keeping the enemy at arm's length in Ladysmith. Never a thought of surrender troubled any soul at either of those places. All the world was watching them, and they meant to come out right.

It did not trouble them too much that Sir Redvers Buller was stopped on the Tugela, or Lord Methuen at the Modder River. They knew what men and cavalry these generals had at their command, and how impossible the task was, before proper reinforcements came, so they were content to wait and trust.

Then came the glorious news that Lords Roberts and Kitchener were on their way with all the men and armament required.

"Now for the clearing of the board!" cried Cecil Rhodes, exultantly. "We shall soon be on full rations again."

Many thought the news too good to be true, but their fears were groundless. In a few weeks more the bombardment suddenly ceased. On a happy day General French rode in, after a message, "French coming to relief of Kimberley," and their woes were over.

Cronje was in full flight, and the first decisive blow had been struck at the rebels. Then there was rejoicing in Kimberley, and our heroes were at liberty to follow the rest of the war.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Clearing the Board.

After their long confinement in Kimberley, our heroes were rejoiced to get the chance of a gallop over the veldt with the hunters of Cronje and his flying army. They therefore joined General French, who with his cavalry hastened from Kimberley to cut off one line of retreat. On Sunday, February 18th, the Boers were brought to bay at Klip Drift, and a most desperate rearguard action was fought and won. Outflanked and surrounded on all sides, General Cronje took his last stand in the bed of the river, and prepared himself for his fate.

How many men he had on that Sunday will probably never be known, yet ten thousand was the estimated number. When he at last surrendered, only four thousand men were left to lay down their arms.

It was a terrific massacre, which lasted for ten days, as Cronje, with the desperation of a doomed pirate, sullenly

refused to give in even after hope was extinguished, preferring to see his men and women slaughtered like rats in a trap, rather than own that he was conquered.

Doubtless his past atrocities and treacheries made him consider himself a doomed man if taken alive by the people whom he had hated so malignantly and treated so mercilessly. After the first few days, when he saw division after division come up and occupy the surrounding kopjes in grim and overwhelming numbers, this must have made him abandon hope of any outside aid. He was trapped, and in a position that was impossible to hold for long. As the guns poured their deadly fire over his laager, blowing up his ammunition carts and provision waggons, and destroying both men and cattle wholesale, he must have felt that just retribution had at last overtaken his blood-stained soul. Thinking possibly that, if taken, the only fate he could expect was the rope, he settled down sullenly to die at his post. With his customary callous indifference to the fate of others, he allowed no thought of his countrymen and their wives to influence him now. As he had ever been, he remained in this last tragedy the incarnation of ferocious obstinacy. He was Piet Cronje, the master criminal of the Transvaal.

It was not a pleasant task for the British or their leaders to continue this pitiless, yet necessary slaughter. During these ten days Cronje was given repeated chances to surrender, but he sullenly refused, even when he knew that the Boers had been driven off on all sides, who had come to break the environment of death. Trapped on the banks of that river in which they had burrowed like rabbits, he still continued fighting desperately, with the alternatives of death from lyddite, death from starvation, or death from drowning when the river became flooded.

This insensate and wasteful courage, while it filled the world with horror, yet won a certain admiration also. Had he and his men been only there, he might have been admired as a hero. But when he sacrificed women and children as well, it was utterly revolting. The heroes of Ladysmith, Mafeking, and Kimberley took every precaution to protect their women, but Cronje could not where he was placed. Therefore, as a brave man, he ought to have yielded. To hold out as he did was the act of a savage monster, not a man. While his character must for ever make him an object of loathing, as we loathe the memory of those black-hearted ruffians of the Spanish Main, his stubborn courage during those ten hellish days can only merit qualified respect.

It was like the last stand of Dan Morgan, the bloody Australian bushranger, and Morgan was as game as Cronje, with fewer crimes on his conscience.

While the artillery filled the sky with hurtling death, the captive balloon floated above and indicated the targets. It is not surprising if six thousand Boers perished during those ten days. The wonder is that four thousand escaped death. It also speaks significantly for Cronje's discretion, that, when he surrendered, he was unwounded.

Our heroes saw a good deal of action during this time, as they were with those who had the duty to keep back the relieving forces. But they were trained soldiers now, and the constant movement and fighting made them happy. Meantime Lords Roberts and Kitchener watched keenly the progress of the siege, and let no chance escape for bringing it to a close with the least possible loss to their soldiers. Day after day the cordon drew closer round that death-trap, until the Imperialists were almost within speaking distance of the rebels.

At last the Canadians brought their trenches to within four hundred yards of the enemy; then the Boers would fight no longer. The thought of the next stage, cold steel, cowed them completely. Thus the sullen Cronje submitted, and placed himself and his followers at the discretion of his chivalrous conquerors. The shame of England, and the everlasting disgrace of those who placed this stain on our flag, was avenged. On the anniversary of Majuba Hill, February 27th, its blot was wiped out.

In his gracious reception of Cronje, Lord Roberts proved to posterity how impossible it is for a Briton to cherish revenge for private wrongs. He had lost his son at Colenso. His heart must have been bleeding for that loss, yet this gave no tinge of bitterness to his kindly and flattering welcome to his captive. He granted freely all that Cronje asked, and treated him with the same consideration that an honourable enemy might have expected. This is one of the greatest acts in a life covered with glory.

Now began the triumphant march to Bloemfontein, with the joyful tidings of the relief of Ladysmith. In every direction victory favoured our British armies. The Boers fled panic-stricken before them. Their day was over, and it was all in vain that the ogre of Pretoria, Oom Paul Kruger, hurried to the front, with his accomplice Steyn. They could not stop the run.

Oom Paul shed tears, for he was an adept at this kind of thing. He threatened to throw up his post as president, if they did not show fight. But as even, to the most ignorant of his burghers, that post was already over, this threat was poured into deaf ears. The Lord of battles had been appealed to, and He had decided with justice and humanity against murder and oppression.

Two of our heroes, however, were fated to stop their battle career outside of Bloemfontein. Ned Romer and his friend Clarence Raybold each received wounds in the same charge as they approached the town, and were carried to the rear. Fortunately the bullets were neither explosive nor coated with verdigris, so that no amputation was necessary.

But the wounds were serious enough to incapacitate them from further fighting that campaign. The young men were therefore taken down to Cape Town, leaving Fred Weldon to represent them on the triumphant march to Pretoria. It was a sorrowful parting between the three heroes, but neither anticipated it would be long before they were together again.

"We can only pray that you may be in at the wind-up of our old enemy, Oom Paul, Fred," they said on parting. "Also that you may escape any of these Mauser button-holes in your carcase, that we have to carry with us."

"Cheer up, boys," cried Fred. "I guess you'll both be up again at the front before we reach Pretoria. I want you to help

me to capture Paulus—that is our ambition, you know.”

Bloemfontein had been taken two days before they were permitted to leave with the other wounded, and the doctor assured the two invalids that, if they took care, they would be ready for the saddle again in a week or two. Ned had a puncture through his sword-arm, and Clarence was wounded in the thigh, but the wounds were clean, and already showed signs of mending.

Among the wounded who were brought in before they left were several Boers, who had been abandoned by their countrymen. In one of these Fred recognised Stephanus Groblaar. He had died a couple of hours after his admittance to the hospital. When this news was communicated to Ned, he murmured—

“I am glad he did not owe his death to me. It is better to miss than to accomplish a private revenge. ‘Bobs’ has set us all a splendid example in forbearance.”

“Yes; that noble action of Lord Roberts represents the feelings of the British army from commander to private. To think only of one’s duty to the Empire, to fight only for right, to subdue all private feelings and sink animosity,—this is the code of honour of all true empire-makers.”

Necessarily our story cannot end at present, since our three heroes have been so busy seeking after adventure that they have not yet had time to fall in love, and no story can be quite complete without a wedding.

Therefore, while two of our heroes are recovering from their wounds, and the other is riding under the orders of the gallant General French, we may safely prognosticate the future of the rotten Transvaal Republic with that of its foolish victim, the Orange Free States.

Universal law and order for South Africa, with equal rights for Boer and Briton under the Flag that means equality and freedom for every human being, white-skinned or black. Blue for truth, red for love, and white for purity,—these are the signs of the Union Jack, and the combination means freedom, equality, and fraternity, while Justice holds it in her grasp. Where it waves, oppression and slavery cease to exist.

As for the rebels and traitors. Forgiveness towards the misguided, after they have paid their fines for their sins. To the traitors, punishment and contempt. To the hoary sinner, who has led these two nations astray and destroyed them, the same punishment which he meted out to the reformers—imprisonment; until he has disgorged his ill-gotten and secreted wealth. After that, watchful surveillance, such as ticket-of-leave convicts are placed under, so that during the scanty remnant of his blood-grimed life he may do no further harm to humanity. He has been the plague-spot of Africa. Let him be placed where he may propitiate his Maker, if he can. Years after this the Boers, as they become educated and civilised, will marvel at their stupendous folly, and curse the hated name of Kruger; therefore, like Attila and other historic monsters, his memory is not an enviable one. No human punishment can meet his case. He must be left to God.

Our heroes have won riches, therefore it is not impossible that they may also obtain happiness.

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EMPIRE MAKERS: A ROMANCE OF ADVENTURE AND WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA ***

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