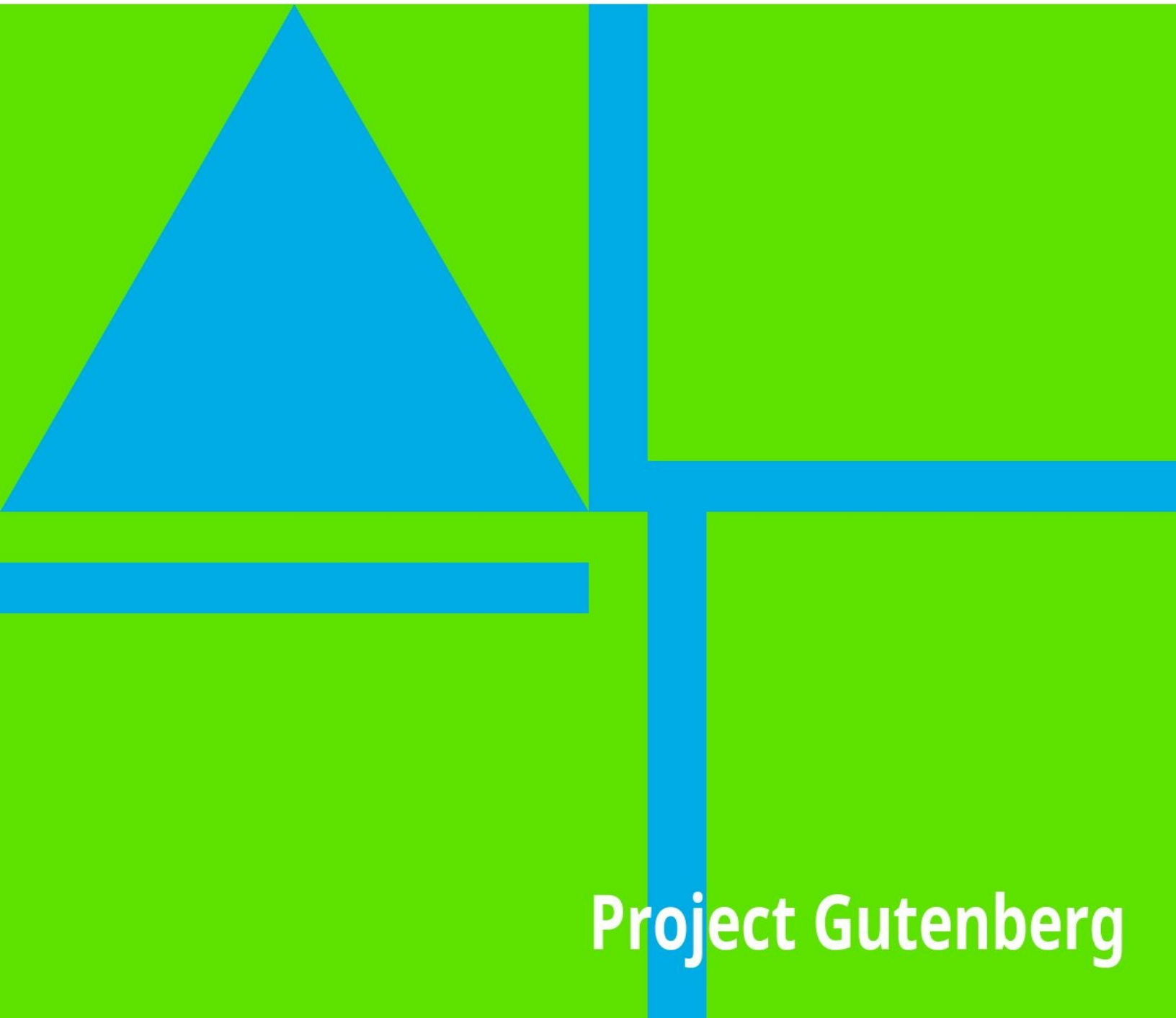
Aletta

A Tale of the Boer Invasion

Bertram Mitford



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Chapter One.

Book I—The Transvaal Emissary.

The delegate from Pretoria was in full blast.

The long room was packed full—full of male Boers of all ages: that is to say, from those in earliest manhood to the white-bearded great-grandfathers of the community—Boers of every type, Boers hairy, Boers shaven, moleskin-clad and collarless Boers, and Boers got up with near approach to European neatness; Boers small, dark, and wiry, still, after generations, preserving the outward characteristics of their Huguenot and French ancestry; Boers tall, large-limbed, fair, of Saxon aspect and descent.

What sitting accommodation the room held was absorbed by the older of those present, for the patriarchal tradition is very strong among that old-world and conservative race. The residue stood in a closely packed mass, literally hanging on the words of the orator.

The latter was a tall, elderly man, all fire and energy both as to speech and words. His face, strong and bronzed and lined, was of the Roman type, and the brown of his short beard was just beginning to show threads of grey. Standing there in his suit of black broadcloth, his sinewy figure seemed hardly in keeping with such attire. It seemed to demand the easier and more picturesque hunting costume of the veldt. Andries Erasmus Botma was his name, and he ranked among his fellow-countrymen as a “Patriot,” second to none as deserving their closest attention and deepest veneration.

On the table before him stood two lighted candles, throwing out the lines of his strong, rugged countenance, and between them a ponderous Dutch Bible, upon the closed cover of which one great hand constantly

rested. On one side of him sat “Mynheer,” as the local *predikant*, or minister, is commonly known among his flock; on the other Jan Marthinus Grobbelaar—or Swaart Jan, as he was popularly termed—the owner of the farm on which the gathering was taking place. The minister was a puffy, consequential-looking man, with long, shaven upper lip and a light beard cut after the pattern of that worn by the world-famed President, a white tie, reaching nearly from shoulder to shoulder, standing aggressively forth from the clerical black. The farmer was a wizened individual, with a pronounced stoop, and, at first sight, of retiring temperament; but a long nose and deep-set eyes, together with two teeth projecting tusk-like from each corner of the mouth out upon a lank, grizzled beard, imparted to him an utterly knowing and foxy aspect, in keeping with the reputation “Swaart Jan” actually held among his kinsfolk and acquaintance.

The delegate from Pretoria was in full blast. The meeting, which had opened with long prayer by the *predikant* and a long speech of introduction and welcome from Swaart Jan Grobbelaar, was now just beginning to become of intense interest—to the meeting itself. Beginning far back, with the insurrection under Adrian van Jaarsveldt and the capitulation of the Cape by General Janssens, the orator had hitherto been rather academical. Even the emancipation of the slaves, with its wholly farcical system of compensation, did not appeal over much to a younger generation, to whom it was all ancient history of rather too ancient date. But when he came to the Slagter’s Nek tragedy, he had got his finger on a chord that would never cease to vibrate. The tense attitude of his listeners was that of one mind, of one understanding.

“Brothers,” he went on. “Brothers—and sons—for many are here to-night who are the men of the future—the men of the very near future—to whom the one long life-struggle of their fathers in days of old is but a name; to whom, however, the righting of the wrongs of their fathers is bequeathed; to whom life—yea, even life itself, has been given and allowed by the Lord above that they may carry out the solemn bequest of righteous vengeance which their fathers have handed down to them; that they may have ever before them, ever in their thoughts, the deliverance of this their dear land, their splendid fatherland, from the hated English

yoke. You then—you younger men especially—stand up day by day and bless God for the noble privilege which is yours, the privilege of the patriot, of the man who sacrifices all, worldly possessions, even life itself, for the sake of his beloved fatherland. Not many days since I stood upon that spot, that holy ground, where five of your fathers were cruelly done to death for no other crime than repudiating the rule of a bloody-minded king, an English king who was not their king, whose sovereignty they had never owned. There they were hung up to the infamous gallows where they died the most ignominious of deaths, with every circumstance of barbarity which could have been practised by the savage heathen against whom they have ever striven. Standing upon that spot I could see the whole of it again. I could see those five men hauled beneath the English gallows-tree, I could see the brave and noble fortitude wherewith they went to their death. I could see the weeping crowd of their fellow-countrymen—of Our fellow-countrymen—and women—gathered to witness their sufferings. And the five patriots—the five martyrs—were dragged up by ropes to their doom. But, brothers, God intervened. Heaven intervened. Even as the lions' mouths were shut to Daniel—as the fiery furnace kindled by the idolatrous king passed over the three servants of God unhurt—even so Heaven intervened to render the slaughter instruments of the cruel English king of no effect. The apparatus of death gave way, and the five patriot martyrs fell to the earth unharmed. What then? What then, sons and descendants of those great ones? Did the English recognise the hand of God? Did they recognise that even their puny mockery of justice had to bow before the manifestation of His will? They did not. In the face of the tears and supplications and bitter grief of those who beheld; of those in whose veins ran the blood of the martyred men, those five patriots were once more put through the bitterness of death. This time Heaven did not intervene. And why? In order that the death agonies of those tortured patriots should be held in remembrance; that they should be ever before the eyes of their descendants as an earnest of the death agonies of the hated and hateful race which was their oppressor and is ours. Brothers, I stood upon that ground, that very spot, that holy ground, and I prayed and gained strength that I might fulfil the purpose for which I am here. Slagter's Nek! The infamous name which was given to that holy spot has gone down to generations in its infamy, and ever will. Is there here a

Bezuidenhout, is there a Meyer, is there a Faber, is there a Snyman—yea, and I could name a score of others, a hundred others, a thousand others—in the veins of whom runs the blood of the patriot martyrs? Let them not forget the English butchery of Slagter's Nek; then, when their rifles are pointing straight, let their watchword be 'Slagter's Nek'!"

The speaker paused. Utterly carried away by his own feeling; his whole frame was in a quiver. His eyes were flashing, and the sinews of his great hand resting upon the holy volume leapt out into knots. The *predikant*, seated at his right, poured out a glass of water from an earthenware carafe on the table, and thrust it into his hand, and he swallowed the contents as with an effort, and in choking gulps. The effect upon the audience was marvellous. Thoroughly overawed, its feeling was expressed by exclamations deep rather than loud, and several of the old men present uncovered—for all wore their hats except the orator himself—and mumbled a fervid prayer. The fact that the historical tragedy had been enacted eighty-three years previously was quite lost to view. It might have taken place yesterday for the effect the recalling of it produced upon the gathering.

The orator proceeded. He drew vivid pictures of the exodus of the original Dutch settlers, sacrificing all to be free from the hated English rule; of their intrepid and simple and God-fearing lives; of their daily hardships and toil; of their peril at the hands of fierce and warlike tribes; and while setting forth their endurance and heroism, he never wandered far from the main point, the text of his whole discourse—viz. how all that their fathers, the old Voortrekkers, had to endure was the outcome of the oppressive rapacity of the English yoke. The myrmidons of England would not leave them in peace and quietness even when they had avenged the bloodshed and treachery of the Zulu despot, and had reason to believe they had at last found the land of promise. Let them look at Natal to-day. They, the Dutch, had bought it from Dingane, and had occupied it. But the English had come and had seized it from them, had robbed them of the fruit of their labours and of their toil, and of their outpoured blood. Let them look at the Transvaal of to-day. It was the same there. A horde of English bloodsuckers had poured in, fevered by the lust of gold, and still more and more, until the land was overrun by

them, as the land of Pharaoh under the plague of locusts. And not only that, but they had brought with them every life and soul destroying vice which Satan and his hell-kingdom, Europe, could bring to bear to contaminate and utterly corrupt a God-fearing people.

The speaker went on to portray in lurid colours the vices of Johannesburg, a town, he put it, purely English, which those emissaries of Satan had raised in their midst, contriving to put his finger, with considerable native astuteness, on the darker spots inseparable from the advance of European methods and progress. He further drew contrasts between the simple life of the young Boer of a quarter of a century back, and the smart, educated, English-speaking, English-dressing, young Boer up to date, so vivid and so little to the advantage of the latter, as to cause several there present perceptibly to wince.

“Brothers,” he went on, “the time for purging away these iniquities is at hand. The eye of God is ever upon His people, and His wrath upon their oppressors. Who turned back England’s might, now nineteen years ago? Who turned the hearts of her trained and drilled soldiers into water, so that they fled down the sides of Majuba like hunted bucks before us—before a few farmers, whom they despised as so many ignorant Boers? Who smote them hip and thigh at Schuins Hoogte, and, indeed, everywhere, down to the wicked attempt upon our land—our beloved land, two years ago? Not the arm of our brave burghers, but the arm of the Lord. His arm brought us in triumph forth from the midst of our enemies, and assured our peace and safety, and prosperity, in the land wherein we dwell. And as the might of the Lord was over us then, so is it now. England may send out her ships, as she is doing—may pour her soldiers into our land, as she is doing—may threaten our noble President, as she is doing—but what is that to us? When a nation, a God-fearing nation, is in peril, God will raise up for that nation a deliverer. He has raised up one for this nation, and the name of that deliverer is Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger.”

The roar of applause which went up at the mention of the great name—held in veneration by every Dutchman from the Zambesi to Cape Agulhas—would have drowned the speaker’s voice, even if he had not been sufficiently master of his craft to pause in order to allow this touch to

have its full effect. It was long before he could continue, and then with his right hand impressively laid upon the holy book before him, he thundered forth a volley of passages therefrom, deftly applied so as to work upon his audience, in such wise that many among it were by no means sure that the President of the South African Republic was not actually mentioned by name therein, while a few were quite certain he was. The whole constituted a strange and instructive scene, for these enthusiasts were, with the exception of the orator himself, all British subjects, dwelling and prospering within a British colony, enjoying a responsible government and equal rights and representation for all.

At length arose shouts for order and silence, and the speaker was able to resume:

“Brothers, I have heard it said that ye are our brethren no more; that we of the two Republics are of another nation, of a different blood; that you on this side of the Groote Rivier have become English now—”

“*Nee, nee*!” burst from the audience, in roaring negative.

”—That you will not raise a rifle in the holy cause of your brethren, I believe it not. Our watchword is not ‘Africa for the Transvaal,’ or ‘Africa for the Free State,’ but ‘Africa for the Afrikanders’.”

Again a shout of acclamation greeted the words.

“Brothers, I have been in England; I have seen her millions of people, her splendour, and her enormous wealth. But I have seen more. I have seen her weakness. I have seen her large cities, and their vice and squalor. I have seen the frivolous luxury of her rich, and the hideous misery and want and desperation of her poor; and I tell you that for all her outward strength she is a weak nation, a rotten nation, with all her best blood poisoned by disease, and her common blood turned to water by foul air and hunger and drunkenness. And this is the nation which is greedy for our land, is ravening to steal the gold which it contains.” Then, raising his powerful voice to thunder pitch: “Brothers, shall this go on? Now, nay, it shall not, I tell you. All is in readiness. For years *we* have been in readiness, increasing our armed might, and now we are ready to

strike—to strike with a force and terror that shall amaze the whole world. Be in readiness, too, brave burghers, patriots all; and to deliver this message to you am I here to-night God does not will that this rotten, frivolous, and enfeebled nation shall rule over you any longer. Be ready, for the day is at hand. ‘Africa for the Afrikanders!’ is our watchword, and the flag that shall wave over that United Africa is this.”

With the celerity of a conjurer he produced the four-coloured flag of the Transvaal Republic, and with one fierce jerk of the hand unfurling it, he waved it above his head. Instantly every hat was off, and round after round of deafening cheering hailed the symbol. Then, led by the emissary himself, the whole assembly struck up the “Volkslied,” the national hymn of the Transvaal, roaring it forth in a manner that left nothing to be desired in the way of fervour, but much in the way of time and tune, and which must have impressed the numerous baboons infesting the crags and krantzes of the surrounding Wildschutsbergen with the instinct that it was high time to quit that section of country, never to return.

When the singing and cheering had subsided the emissary invited any of those present to express their opinions, but few cared to do so. One or two of the old men got up, but their remarks were mere quavering comments—interspersed with pious aspirations—upon all that the speaker had said, and fell woefully flat after the fiery periods and power of eloquence of the delegate from Pretoria. And the secret of that power lay in the fact that the man was so terribly in earnest. No timeserving, self-seeking stump-agitator was Andries Botma. Every word he uttered he implicitly believed, and that the whole Dutch race in South Africa were under special Divine protection, and the Anglo-Saxon under the Divine curse, he no more doubted than that the sky was above and the earth beneath. Though a hopelessly fanatical patriot, he was essentially an honest one, and this his hearers knew.

The *predikant* having made a speech to high Heaven, in the guise of a long prayer thoroughly in accordance with the prevailing sentiment of the meeting, the latter broke up. A few, mostly the older men, remained behind, talking over the ideas they had just heard with all seriousness, but most of them had crowded into another room where Vrouw Grobbelaar, aided by her trio of fine and rather pretty daughters, was

dispensing coffee and other refreshment. These, too, were talking over the situation, but with a breezy boisterousness which was absent in their elders.

“It’s coming now, Tanta, it’s coming now,” cried one young fellow, thrusting his way to the front. The old lady looked at him across the table.

“What is coming now?” she repeated shortly—a way she had with those of the speaker’s age and type.

“Why, the war, of course. We are going to drive the English out of the country. The Patriot says so.”

The old lady snorted.

“*You* look like driving anybody out of the country, Theunis Venter, even the English. You’d be afraid to lie behind an antheap waiting to shoot *rooi-baatjes* for fear of spoiling that pretty waistcoat of yours”—looking him up and down contemptuously. “And his tight riding-breeches—oh!—oh! wouldn’t they split? And the rings! And yet you don’t look like an Englishman, Theunis, not even in your grand English clothes.”

A roar of applause and derision from that section of her hearers which had not enjoyed the advantage of a South African College education and a parent with advanced ideas and generous bank-balance greeted the old woman’s scoffing words.

“*Ja, Ja*, Theunis, that is just what the Patriot said,” they chorussed. But the young fellow looked sulky—very much so. He was one of that type of young Boer who no longer thinks it the mark of a man and a patriot to sleep in his clothes and wear his hat in the house. Nor was he the only one of that type there present. Others took his side, and hurled corresponding gibes at the conservative party, and the uproar became simply deafening, all talking and bellowing at once.

But if it be imagined that this turn of affairs caused the slightest uneasiness or alarm to the fair sex as there represented, the notion can be dismissed forthwith. There was a twinkle of mirth in the old lady’s eyes

which belied the sardonic droop of her mouth, and as for the girls they looked as placid and unconcerned as though some thirty odd infuriated males were not bawling the very house down within a couple of yards of them.

“There—there!” sang out Vrouw Grobbelaar when she had had enough of it. “Make not such a row, for dear Heaven’s sake! Theunis, you are not such a bad sort of boy after all, for all your trimmed moustache and English clothes. Hendrina, give him a *soepje*—that is to say, if he does not turn up his nose at the good liquor his father drank before him. I’m told that the English get drunk on stuff made from smoked wood, down in Cape Town. Only one, though—I won’t encourage young men to drink, but the night is cold, and he has a long way to ride. After all, it isn’t his fault they tried to make an Englishman of him.”

Boer brandy, when pure and well matured, is about the best liquor in the world, and this was the best of its kind; wherefore under its influence, aided by the smiles of the ministering Hendrina, the youth’s ruffled feathers were soon smoothed down, and three or four of his sympathisers claiming to join in the privilege, good-humour was restored and plenty of mirth and good-fellowship prevailed before they separated for their long ride home over the moonlit veldt; for Boers are by nature sociable folk among themselves, and the younger ones, at any rate, addicted to chaff and practical joking.

In the other room, where refreshment had been taken in for their physical weal, sat the more serious-minded.

“Jan,” said Andries Botma, turning to his host, “where is Stephanus De la Rey? Is he sick?”

“No!”

“Why is he not here to-night?”

Swaart Jan shrugged his shoulders and grinned, his two tusks protruding more than ever.

“How do I know, brother? Only we must not forget that his wife is half an Englishwoman.”

“Ah!” said the delegate, who appeared to be struck with the idea.

“Oom Stephanus would not come,” put in a young man reverentially. “That is all I know about it.”

The speaker had been one of the most fervid listeners to the “Patriot’s” discourse, and with much trepidation had lingered behind among his elders, preferring their conversation to the boisterous merriment in the other room.

“It is Stephanus’ nephew, Adrian De la Rey,” said Jan Grobbelaar.

“Ah! a good name. A good name,” declared the delegate. “Bear it worthily, nephew, when the time comes.” Then, turning to the *predikant*, “We must win over Stephanus De la Rey, Mynheer. We must win him over.”

“He is the only ‘good’ man here whom we have not won,” was the reply, given dubiously.

“*Ja, ja*!” assented Swaart Jan, shaking his head softly. “*Ja, ja*! we must win over Stephanus De la Rey.”

Chapter Two.

Sidelights.

Down by the river bed a girl was standing. The river bed was dry. So, too, was the wide, flat expanse of veldt stretching before and around her, and the slopes of two low cliff-crowned mountains which at some distance off relieved the dead level of the arid plain were brown where they should have been green. The only green spot visible upon the whole landscape was formed by an extensive cultivated patch lying around a farmhouse half a mile away, and this was the result of irrigation, not of

the opening of the windows of heaven. But, although the sun shone down from a cloudless sky in the full glory of his midday splendour, his rays were without power, for there was a keen icy edge upon the air, stirred by a light breeze that was suggestive of exhilaration combined with warm clothing, and imparted a very entrancing touch of additional colour to the cheeks of the girl standing there.

She is a pretty girl, the large pupils of whose blue eyes lend to those attractive orbs a velvety softness which is in strange contradiction to the firm cut of the chin and the full though decided lips. She is of medium height, and her well-rounded figure is arrayed in a blouse and skirt, about as neat and serviceable a form of feminine attire as exists—on the veldt or elsewhere; but her hair, wavy and golden, is, save for a rebellious lock or two over the forehead, concealed within an ample white *kapje*, or sunbonnet—so becoming a framework to a pretty face.

Standing there among the dry mimosa bushes which fringe the river bank, her eyes wander meditatively forth over the brown and treeless plains beyond. Here and there, black dots moving near or far represent the staple wealth of that section of country, in the shape of male ostriches in full plumage, and now and again the stillness is broken by a triple booming, as that most truculent of bipeds lifts up his voice; but these are everyday sights and sounds and of them the girl takes not the smallest notice, nor yet of the antics of one great savage bird, who, with all his jetty plumage bristling in wrath, towers up to a formidable height as he presses against the wires of the dividing fence in his futile efforts to reach her and kick her into smithereens.

Suddenly her eyes dilate and she gives a slight start—even losing a little of her colour. For this yon black demon stalking up and down in impotent menace but a few yards off is in no wise responsible. The fence will take care of him. Can such an effect be produced by the sight of that tourniquet of dust, far away over the plain, yet whirling nearer and nearer? Perchance, for no mere erratic “dust-devil” is yonder cloud. It is raised by the hoofs of a horse.

Yet no assignation is this. Not for the purpose of meeting anybody is this girl here to-day. For all that her breast heaves somewhat, and her

forsaking colour returns with a little more added as she glances round nervously towards the farmhouse, and finds herself wishing she had on headgear less conspicuous than the snowy whiteness of a *kapje*.

On comes the dust-cloud, powdering up from the road at each hoof-stroke as the horseman advances at a canter. He, whoever it may be, is yet a great way off, and a speculation, in which hope is about equal to disappointment and disgust combined, escapes those pretty lips:

“Only some Dutchman, I suppose.”

But a very few minutes of further watching suffices to bring back the light to her face, and an eager, expectant look, which she strives to repress, shines from her eyes. For the rider is very near now, and instinctively she moves a little further down the river bank in such wise that the dip in the ground where the drift lies conceals her effectually, white *kapje* and all, from view of the homestead.

The horseman, who is now descending into the drift, perceives her and turns his steed, so as to join her among the thorns.

“Why, May, this is good of you,” he says, as he joins her. Seen dismounted he is a tall, well-set-up man of about five-and-thirty, with clean-cut features and a dark moustache. His brown eyes are clear and searching, and there is a certain quickness about his speech and movements which is totally disassociated with any suggestion of flurry.

“What is ‘good of’ me? You don’t suppose I came down here on purpose to meet you, I hope?” is the characteristic rejoinder, uttered with a certain tinge of defiance.

“Why not? It would have been very nice of you—very sweet of you, in fact, and I should have appreciated it. Don’t you run away with the idea that the faculty of appreciation is exclusively vested in the softer sex.”

They were still holding each other’s hands—holding them a good deal longer than the usages of social greeting exacted.

“Well, I’m glad I came, anyhow,” she answered, in a softer tone,

relaxing her grasp of his with ever so perceptible a final pressure. “The slowness of this place gets upon my nerves.”

“You’ve spoilt it now,” he laughed, looking her in the eyes. “For penalty you deserve what I’m about to tell you. I haven’t time to off-saddle. I’m going straight on.”

She started. The bright face clouded over. The new arrival, who had never removed his eyes from it, needed all his self-command to refrain from an uncontrollable burst of merriment.

“If you pass our door to-day or any other day without off-saddling I’ll never speak to you again,” she declared.

“Why should I not when you indignantly vow you would not come this little way to meet me?” he rejoined, still with a faint smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

“You know I would,” she flashed forth impulsively. “Don’t be horrid, Colvin! I didn’t, exactly come to meet you, but I did walk down here on the—offchance that—that you might be coming. There. Why is it that you always make me say everything right out—things I don’t in the least want to say? Nobody else could. Yet you do.”

For answer Colvin Kershaw deliberately placed one arm around the speaker, and, lifting her face with his other hand, kissed her on the lips. He did not hurry over the process either, nor did she seem anxious that he should. Yet these two were not lovers in the recognised and affianced sense of the term.

“How pretty you look in that white *kapje*!” he said, as he released her. “It suits you so well. If it hadn’t been for the glint of the white catching my eye I believe I should have passed you without seeing. And of course you would have let me?”

“Of course I should. But we had better go back to the house now, because if Frank or mother saw you ride down to the drift, they will be wondering how it is you are so long in getting to the other side. Come!”

They strolled up the stony river bank together, he leading his horse. But a sort of constraint fell upon the girl as they drew near the house. She had noticed her mother looking at her strangely of late when the talk had turned upon the man now at her side. He, for his part, felt no constraint at all. In point of fact, he never did.

No dogs heralded their approach with loud-mouthed clamour. No self-respecting dog given to erratic movement, and poking his nose into every corner where he should not, could live a day on a well-organised ostrich farm by reason of the poisoned morsels—carefully planted out of the way of the birds themselves—wherewith the run is strewn; for the benefit of cats and jackals, and leopards. One ancient and wheezy cur, however, incapable of any lengthier peregrination than a hundred yards, greeted their approach with sepulchral barks, and behind it came the owner, with his coat half on half off.

“Hallo, Colvin!” he sang out. “Why, you’re quite a stranger these days. Haven’t been here for weeks. Plotting treason with your friends the Dutchmen, I believe?”

“That’s it, Frank. We’re going to hold your place up for arms and ammunition first thing. Then they’re going to make me State Secretary of the new Cape Colony Republic on condition I do the shooting of you with my own hand. So now you’re warned.”

The point of these amenities lay in the fact that Colvin Kershaw was not without pronounced Dutch sympathies at a time of strong political tension. Whereas Frank Wenlock, though on good enough terms with his Dutch neighbours individually, was one of those not uncommon types who labour under a firm conviction that the Powers above built this planet Earth primarily for the benefit of—and eventually to be solely and absolutely ruled from north to south, and from east to west by—England, and England only.

Personally considered Frank Wenlock was a presentable young fellow enough. Externally of medium height, strong and energetic, his face, lighted up by a pair of blue eyes not unlike those of his sister, though not handsome, was open and pleasing. In character, though

somewhat quick-tempered, he was the soul of good-nature, but withal no part of a fool. He and Colvin Kershaw had been fellow-pioneers together in Rhodesia, and had fought side by side throughout the grim struggle of the Matabele rebellion.

“Now, Mr Kershaw, can’t you and Frank get together for a moment without fighting about the Boers?” interrupted a brisk, not unpleasing, and yet not altogether refined voice. “But where did you pick up May?”

Colvin turned to greet its owner; a well-preserved, middle-aged woman, not so many years his senior, good-looking too, after a fine, fresh, healthy type.

“Oh, we haven’t begun upon them yet, Mrs Wenlock,” he replied, ignoring the last query. “We’ll worry that out after dinner.”

“You’re not going on to-night?”

“Yes, I must I want to get to Stephanus De la Rey’s. There’s a joker there I want to meet.”

“Is that the Transvaal emissary?” said Frank, looking up quickly from his plate, for they had sat down to dinner.

“I suppose that’s what you’d call him. But, do you know, all this rather interests me. I like to hear all there is to be said on both sides.”

“Why they’ll hold a meeting and simply spout treason all night,” rejoined Frank vehemently. “Good Lord, if I were Milner, I’d have that fellow arrested and shot as a spy.”

“My dear chap, you can’t shoot ‘spies’ when we are not at war with anybody, and Botma, I suppose, has about as much right to hold a meeting among his countrymen here as a British labour delegate has to organise a strike. These are among the advantages of a free country, don’t you know?”

“Did you come straight here from your place to-day?” said Mrs Wenlock, by way of covering the angry growl with which her son had

received the other's words.

"No. I slept at Swaart Jan Grobbelaar's."

"That's the old buck who brought away a lot of British skulls from Majuba," burst in Frank. "They say he sticks one up at a couple of hundred yards every Majuba Day, and practises at it until there isn't a bit left big enough for a bullet to hit."

"He must have brought away about a waggonload of them, then, considering that Majuba happened eighteen years ago," said Colvin. "But I don't know that it isn't all a yarn. People will say anything about each other just now."

"I hear there's a lot of war-talk among the Dutch in the Wildschutsbergen now, Mr Kershaw," said Mrs Wenlock. "You must hear it, because you're right in among them all."

"Oh, they talk a good bit about war, but then what do we do? When I was down at the Port Elizabeth show all the English were busy taking the Transvaal. It was the same thing along Fish River and Koonap. If two or three fellows got together on any given farm they were bound to spend the evening taking the Transvaal. In fact, no Boer could give a shoot on his place without his English neighbours swearing he was rifle-practising for the great upheaval. We talk nothing but the war, but if the Dutchmen do it becomes menace, sedition, and all the rest of it right away."

Those were the days subsequent to the failure of the Bloemfontein Conference, and racial feeling was near attaining its highest pitch. Frank Wenlock, as we have said, got on with his Dutch neighbours more than passably, which was as well, considering that his English ones were but few and at long distances apart. But even upon him the curse of a far-off dissension had fallen. Colvin Kershaw, on the other hand, was a man of the world, with a well-balanced mind, and somewhat unconventional withal. He took a judicial view of the situation, and, while recognising that it had two sides, and that there was a great deal to be said for both, he distinctly declined to allow any political considerations to make any difference to the relationship in which he stood towards his Boer

neighbours and their families, with several of whom he was on very good terms indeed.

A wild effort was made to abandon the burning subject, and for awhile, as they sat upon the stoep smoking their pipes—the conversation ran upon stock and local interests, and the prospects of rain to carry them through the winter. But it soon came round again, as, indeed, in those days it was bound to do, and the hotter and hotter grew Frank Wenlock on the subject, the cooler and cooler remained his opponent. May, for her part, sat and listened. She mostly shared her brother's prejudices on that particular subject; but here was one whose opinion on most subjects she held in the highest regard. Clearly, then, there was something to be said on the other side.

"Why need you go on to-night, Mr Kershaw?" struck in Mrs Wenlock. "Your room is always ready, you know, and it's quite a long while since you were here."

"It won't be so long again, Mrs Wenlock. But I must be at Stephanus De la Rey's to-night, because, over and above the delegate, I made an appointment with Piet Lombard over a stock deal."

"Not to mention other attractions," cut in May, with a mischievous look in her blue eyes. "Which is the favoured one—Andrina or Condaas?"

"How can one presume upon a choice between two such dreams of loveliness? Both, of course," was the mirthful rejoinder. But there was no real merriment in the mind of the girl. She had hoped he would stay, had mapped out a potential afternoon's stroll—it might be, by great good luck, the two of them alone together. And things were so slow, and times so dull, there where they saw no one month in month out, save an occasional Boer passer-by, or a travelling *smaus*, or feather-buyer, usually of a tolerably low type of Jew—and therefore, socially, no acquisition. Yes, after all, that was it. Times were so dull.

"Don't be so long finding your way over again," was the chorus of God-speed which followed the departing guest as his steed ambled away.

He, for his part, seemed to find a good deal to think about as he held on over the wide brown plains, dismounting absently to let himself through a gate every few minutes, for the whole veldt was a network of wire fencing. Ostriches, grazing, lifted their long necks, some in half-frightened, some in half-truculent curiosity, to gaze at him, then dropped them again to resume their picking at the dried sprigs of Karroo bush.

His acquaintance with the Wenlocks dated from just a year back: with the family that is, for he and Frank had, as we have said, campaigned together in Rhodesia. On returning to the Colony at the close of the rebellion he had come to visit his former comrade-in-arms at the latter's own home, and had spent three months there while looking about for a place of his own. He had soon found one to his liking, and now owned a 5,000-morgen farm in the Wildschutsberg range, where report said he got through more game-shooting than farming. If so, it didn't seem to matter greatly, for Colvin Kershaw was one of those phenomena occasionally encountered—an habitually lucky man. What he undertook in a small and careless way was wont to turn out better results than ten times the carefully prepared labour and forethought exercised by other people. Furthermore he was uncommunicative as to his own affairs, and whatever was known about him among his neighbours amounted to just nothing at all.

"Come again soon," had been May's parting words, and the blue eyes uplifted to his during that last handclasp had been wondrously soft and appealing.

Was it upon this his thoughts were dwelling so intently as he rode along mile after mile? Perhaps. Yet he had often bidden her farewell before.

Chapter Three.

A Boer Farm.

Ratels Hoek, the farm owned by Stephanus De la Rey, was situated in a broad, open basin, surrounded by the craggy, cliff-crowned hills of

the Wildschutsberg range.

It was a prosperous-looking place. The homestead was large and roomy, and not unpicturesque, with its deep verandah shaded by growing creepers, which, however, at that time of year were destitute of leafage. A well-kept flower garden, which was a blaze of bright colour in good seasons, went round two sides of the house, and behind, abundant stabling and shearing sheds and kraals and dipping tank testified to the up-to-date ideas and enterprise of its owner. Beyond these again large patches of cultivated lands, shut in by high quince hedges, sloped down to the Sneeuw River, which took its rise in the Wildschutsberg, and which, normally dry or the merest trickle, could roar down in a terrific torrent at very short notice what time thunderstorms were heavy and frequent in the mountains beyond. Away over the veldt, which, until joining the grassy slopes of the surrounding heights, was gently undulating and fairly covered with mimosa bush, ostriches grazed, or stalked defiantly up and down the wire fencing which divided one large “camp” from another.

If Ratels Hoek was a creditable example of the better class of Dutch farm, no less was its owner an excellent specimen of the better type of Dutch farmer. Stephanus De la Rey was a tall, handsome man of about fifty. He had a fine forehead, blue eyes, and straight, regular features, and the masses of his full brown beard had hardly yet begun to show threads of grey. His character was in keeping with his general appearance, for though quiet-mannered, he was the most straight forward and genial of men, and was immensely looked up to and respected far and wide by such few English as the neighbourhood contained, no less than by his own compatriots.

His wife was a bright, cheerful, brisk-mannered little woman, who, as we have already heard it stated, was half English in that she had owned an English mother. Their family consisted of a liberal eight, of which those now at home represented the younger two of each sex.

Stephanus De la Rey was seated on his stoep, smoking a meditative pipe and thinking deeply. He had just been reading the newspapers, and there was enough in them at that time to give a thoughtful man plenty to

think about. His own sympathies were not unnaturally with the Transvaal, where two of his sons had settled, and for its President he entertained a very warm admiration. But he was no fiery patriot. War was a terrible thing, and war between two white nations—two Christian nations, in a land swarming with heathen barbarians—seemed to him hardly justifiable under any circumstances whatever. Even if the worst came to the worst, let the Republic fight its own battles. He and his neighbours had no grievance against the English Government under which they dwelt—save grievances which were purely sentimental and belonging to ancient history; and as he gazed around upon his own prosperous lands the gravity of his thoughts deepened. This was momentarily diverted by the approach of two of his sons—who had just come in from the veldt—tall, light-haired, quiet-looking youths of two- and three-and-twenty respectively. They seemed to be under the influence of some unwonted excitement.

"We heard some news to-day, Pa," said the elder of the two. "We are to have a visitor to-night. Who do you think it is?"

"I cannot guess. Who is it?"

"The Patriot," burst forth the other. "*Ja*, that is good! I have wanted so much to see him."

Both looked furtively at each other and then at their father. The latter did not seem overjoyed at the news. In point of fact he was not. Personally the presence in his house of the Transvaal delegate would have afforded him the keenest gratification but that he knew as surely as though he had been told that the latter's visit would be purely of a political nature, and Stephanus De la Rey preferred to leave politics severely alone. Not only that, but that his own conversion to the ranks of the secret agitators was the motive of the visit he more than suspected.

"Where did you hear that, Jan?" he said.

"Adrian told us, Pa. We saw him as we passed Friedrik Schoemann's. He is coming up to-night too. *Ja*! you should hear him talk of the Patriot. He heard him two nights ago at Jan Grobbelaar's. The

Patriot spoke to him too—to him, Adrian. He says in a month or two we shall have driven all the English out of the country. See, Cornelis," turning to his brother, "I wonder if that second post from the gate away yonder were an Englishman how long it would be standing there," and he levelled his long Martini as though to put the matter to the test. But the reply which this demonstration elicited from their habitually easy-going and indulgent father both surprised and startled the two youths, and that mightily.

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, Jan, to stand there before me and talk such wicked nonsense? Is that the sort of Christianity the teaching of Mynheer, as well as of your own parents, has implanted in you, that you can talk about shooting men—Christian men like ourselves, remember—as you would talk of shooting buck? I have nothing to do with Adrian's movements or ideas, although he is my nephew, but I have with yours; so listen to me. There is a great deal of wild talk being flung around just now, but I wish you to have nothing to do with it. Of course you cannot help hearing it from time to time, there is too much of it everywhere unfortunately; but I enjoin you not to take part in it. It is shameful the light way in which such weighty and serious subjects are discussed. When our fathers took up arms to defend their rights and liberties and their lives they did so prayerfully and with the full weight of their solemn responsibilities, and that is why they were victorious. But now such matters are bragged and chattered about by a herd of thoughtless boys. Leave them alone. The times are quite troublous enough, and things may come right or may not, but the only way in which we can help is to be quiet and to attend to our own business."

"*Oh, goeije*! What are you giving those children such a scolding about, father?" chimed in a cheery voice, whose owner came bustling out on to the stoep.

Stephanus De la Rey turned his head, with a smile.

"I am giving them a little good advice," he said, relighting his pipe. "And I don't think I've ever given them any bad. Have I, boys?"

"No, Pa," they answered, meaning it, too, but not sorry that their

mother had come to the rescue: yet profoundly impressed by the stern earnestness of the paternal expostulation.

“Here come people,” said Stephanus, gliding easily from the subject, which he had no wish to prolong. “Can you make them out, Cornelis?”

“I think so,” replied the youth, shading his eyes, and gazing at two distant but rapidly approaching horsemen. “One is Adrian, and the other —I believe it’s an Englishman from the way he holds his feet in the stirrups. *Ja*—it is. It must be Colvin Kershaw.”

“Is it?”

“Where?”

And the utterers of both queries came forth on to the stoep, causing their brothers to break into a splutter of mirth. The younger of the two girls took after her mother. She was short and dark, and rather too squat for her seventeen years, but had fine eyes. The other, who was a year older, was taller, fair and blue-eyed, and rather pretty.

“Which *is* it, Andrina?” whispered Jan to this one mischievously. “The Englishman, of course! You all go mad over him.”

“Do we? Who’s ‘we,’ and who is ‘all,’ I should like to know?” retorted Andrina, with a toss of her golden head.

“I know I don’t,” said the other girl. “Why, we fight too much for that. But I like fighting him. I wish all Englishmen were like him though. He is so full of fun.”

Stephanus welcomed both arrivals with his usual geniality, not allowing the fact that he disapproved of his nephew politically to make the slightest difference in his manner. The young Boer, however, whose self-confidence was lacking in the presence of one to whom he looked up so much, felt somewhat constrained. However, his message had to be delivered, so he jerked out:

“The Patriot will be here at sundown, Oom Stephanus.”

“So?”

“He addressed us for nearly three hours at Jan Grobbelaar’s two nights ago. *Ja*, it was magnificent to hear him,” went on the speaker, losing himself in his enthusiasm for The Cause. “I wish you would hear him, Oom Stephanus. He would soon convince you.”

“Make a ‘patriot’ of me, you mean, Adrian. I am that already in the real meaning of the word. Well, Colvin, what have you been doing lately? It’s a long time since I’ve seen you.”

“That so, Stephanus? Oh, all sorts of things—farming, and hunting, and taking it easy generally.”

“And making love to that pretty Miss Wenlock,” said Condaas, the younger girl, in a sly undertone.

Colvin turned, with a laugh. He and this household were upon quite intimate terms, and he had been exchanging greetings all-round during the colloquy between uncle and nephew.

“There would be every excuse, wouldn’t there?” he answered, entering into the joke, and, moreover, hugely amused, remembering that almost the last words May had spoken to him had been to chaff him about these very girls, and now almost their first words had been to chaff him about her.

“You ought not to say that in our presence,” said Andrina, with a mimic pout.

“Of course not. But if you had not interrupted me I was going to add —‘but for the fact of the propinquity of Ratels Hoek and the entrancing but utterly perplexing choice of counter-attractions it affords.’”

“Why will you make those girls talk such a lot of nonsense, Mr Kershaw?” laughed Mrs De la Rey. “They always do whenever you come here. I declare you are making them very dreadful.”

“Didn’t know I exercised such influence over the young and tender

mind. It isn't I who do it, Mrs De la Rey. It's Adrian there. Depend upon it, he is the delinquent."

Now Adrian was a good-looking, well-set-up young fellow, who, his fiery "patriotism" notwithstanding, had his clothes built by an English tailor and talked English fluently. Indeed, in the De la Rey household it was spoken almost as frequently as the mother tongue, and the above conversation had been carried on about equally in both languages, gliding imperceptibly from one to the other and back again.

"Adrian? Why, there isn't a grain of fun left in Adrian these days," said Condaas, mischievously. "See how solemn he looks. I believe he thinks about nothing but fighting the English."

"Well, we have just ridden two solid hours together, and he didn't want to fight me," said Colvin.

But the young "patriot" was not enjoying this form of chaff, for he turned away, indignantly muttering to the effect that some matters were too high and too great to be made fun of by a pair of giggling girls.

"Now we have made him *kwaatj*," said Andrina. "See now, I'll get him to laugh again." Then, raising her voice, "Adrian! Adrian! wait. I want to stroll round the garden with you and hear about The Cause."

"That has made him more *kwaat* than ever," whispered Condaas; for the badgered one, who had hesitated, turned away again with an angry jerk, scenting more chaff on his sacred subject. Andrina looked knowing.

"Adrian!" she hailed again—"Wait. I want to tell you about Aletta. Really. You know, I heard from her yesterday."

The effect was magical, also comical. The affronted "patriot" stopped short. There was no irresolution now about his change of front.

"Come, then," he said.

With a comical look at the other two, Andrina tripped off, and that she had satisfactorily carried out her stated intention was manifest by the

animated way in which they appeared to be conversing.

“That drew him,” chuckled Condaas. “You know, Mr Kershaw, he was awfully mashed on Aletta the last time she came home.”

“Condaas, what sort of expressions are you using?” said her mother reprovingly. “I don’t know where you learnt them, or what Mr Kershaw will think.”

“Why we learnt them from him, of course, Ma,” replied the girl. “You don’t suppose we picked up that kind of thing from the very solemn old maid you got for us as English governess.”

“Not from me. Maybe it was from Frank Wenlock,” said Colvin, who was speculating how the object of their present merriment could pass by the charms of Andrina, who was undeniably a pretty girl, in favour of her elder sister. The latter he had never seen. She had been absent in Cape Town, at school or with relatives, ever since his own arrival in that part of the country, but there were photographic portraits of her, decking the wall of the sitting-room and the family album. These, to his impartial eye, conveyed the impression of rather a heavy-looking girl, at the awkward stage, with bunched-up shoulders and no pretensions whatever to good looks. To be sure, he had heard a great deal on the subject of the absent one, her attainments and attractiveness, but such he unhesitatingly attributed to family bias.

Struck with a sudden idea, he moved into the sitting-room, and casually, as it were, drew up in front of a framed portrait which stood upon the piano.

“That is the latest of Aletta,” said Condaas, who had followed him in. “She sent it up to us only a post or two ago; since you were here.”

“So?”

He bent down and examined it intently. It represented a girl of about nineteen or twenty. The idea of awkwardness conveyed by the other portraits was no longer there, but in looks he failed to detect any

improvement Aletta De la Rey was plain, assuredly plain, he decided.

"*Oh, goeije*! here come a lot of people," exclaimed Condaas. "The 'Patriot,' I suppose."

A rumbling sound was audible, drawing nearer and nearer. Both made for the window. A cavalcade of Boers was approaching the house, and in the midst, as though escorted by it, moved the white tent of a Cape cart.

Chapter Four.

The Conversion of Stephanus De La Rey.

A striking contrast no less than a striking personality was offered by the two leading figures in this group as Stephanus De la Rey advanced to welcome his noted visitor. Both were fine types of their nationality and class—the one calm-faced, reposeful, with the air of a thoroughly contented and prosperous man; the other bright-eyed, restless, alert, with the nervous rapidity of movement of one existing in a state of chronic tension. The greeting between the two was cordial enough, and there was much handshaking, as the others, to the number of a round dozen, dropped in by twos and threes.

“Why, who is this?” exclaimed the delegate, a shade of distrust coming into his face as he shook hands with Colvin Kershaw—for among Boers the ceremony of introduction is but seldom performed. “An Englishman, I believe?”

“That is so, Mynheer Botma. And one who is very proud to make the acquaintance of so famous and gifted a man as yourself,” replied Colvin, who spoke the *taal* very fairly well.

The delegate shot a keen glance at the speaker, then he became quite cordial. He hated the English, but it suddenly occurred to him that this particular Englishman had a look of one who might be turned to some account. Accordingly he engaged him in conversation, during which Colvin adroitly contrived to insinuate that his sympathies were all with the Transvaal cause, and that for the person of Oom Paul in particular he entertained feelings of the profoundest admiration.

“That is good,” said Jan Grobbelaar, showing his tusks approvingly. “We were having much talk about this only last evening, brother,” Turning to the delegate: “Colvin is a neighbour of mine. He is not like other English.”

Whether the object of this comment was gratified thereby or not, he

made no sign; but one result of the voucher thus made was that the assembled Boers, to most of whom he was well known, conversed with far less restraint—both then and during the course of the evening. And the burden of their conversation was confined well-nigh entirely to the very strained relations then existing between the Transvaal and the suzerain Power, and what was going to be done upon the final and certain rupture thereof.

Not much was said during the evening meal, and that little was mainly confined to local and farming matters and the prospects or the reverse of a speedy rain. The Boer guests fell to with a will, and did ample justice to the springbuck stew and other delicacies of the veldt as there set forth in abundance; for Mrs De la Rey had anticipated just such an inroad as had taken place. Moreover, she was a model housewife, and possessed of wonderful Dutch recipes of old-time Cape and Batavian origin, and within her domain here were none of the insipid and over-sweetened dishes which prevailed in the ordinary and rougher class of Boer household. After supper—when pipes were in full blast, in such wise, indeed, that it was hardly possible to see across the room—it was not long before the subject engrossing all minds came to the fore.

"*So*, Colvin. *You* smoke Transvaal tobacco, then?" said one young Boer with a wink at his neighbours, and affecting surprise.

"Rather, Marthinus. Why not?"

"Why, because you're an Englishman, to be sure."

"Ha-ha. But then, Marthinus, I happen to be an Englishman who smokes what he likes. And I like Transvaal tobacco. Shall I tell you what else I like? I like *dop*. So just send along that decanter that's at the other side of Barend Van Zyl's elbow, will you?"

There was a great laugh at this, and Barend Van Zyl aforesaid made believe to withhold the decanter on the ground that its contents might impair the speaker's patriotism. It led to a lot of chaff with regard to the political situation, some of which, albeit good-humoured, was keen enough to have thrown some Englishmen, Frank Wenlock, for instance,

into a real fighting rage. This one, however, was made of different stuff. It didn't ruffle him in the least. Moreover, he knew that they were merely "taking the measure of his foot."

"And they say that we can't shoot any more, we young ones," said another Boer. "I saw it in a Cape English newspaper which Piet Lombard had sent him. They say that we are all going off in our shooting, and are good for nothing; that we cannot bring down game like out fathers could."

"*Maagtig*! but they are liars, those English newspaper men," assented somebody else. "*Nee wat*. I would like to get the miserable ink-squirter who wrote that, and make him run at five hundred yards from my Martini. We would soon show him whether we young ones are so *sleg*."

"Hallo, Marthinus, that's a little too loud," cut in Colvin Kershaw with a laugh. "Why, man, how about that old springbuck ram I saw you miss twice running that shoot we had at Tafelfontein at the end of last season there, *oerkant*, by the vlei? He wasn't a step over four hundred yards. Come now, what would you do with your runaway man at five hundred?"

"That's true," assented Marthinus a little crestfallen. Then brightening up: "But then the English newspaper man would be running too hard. *Ja, kerelen*. Now, an English newspaper man *would* run!"

"Do you know how I was taught to shoot, Colvin?" asked a wiry, middle-aged Boer with a long light beard, pushing his tobacco bag made of dressed buckskin across to the Englishman. "When I was eight years old my father used to put a loaded rifle into my hand. It was a muzzle-loader—we had no Martinis or Mausers in those days. *Maagtig*—no. He didn't give me a second charge for reloading either. He would start me out into the veldt at daybreak, and if I returned without having shot a buck I got no breakfast. Then he would start me off again, and if I returned a second time without having shot a buck I was allowed some dinner, but first of all I got plenty of 'strop.' Then I was turned out again, and if I failed again I got still more 'strop,' and went to bed without any supper. But it was not more than two or three times that happened. *Nee, kerelen*! Well, that is the way to teach a youngster to shoot."

“That’s all very well, Izaak,” replied Colvin; “but it might be the way to teach some youngsters not to shoot. The fact of knowing they hadn’t another chance might get upon their nerves and make them miss.”

But the other, whose name was Izaak van Aardt, and who was known amongst his neighbours as second to none for a sure and deadly game shot, only shook his head, unconvinced.

“But,” struck in the young Dutchman who had started the chaff about the Transvaal tobacco, “it is only English youngsters who have nerves. Boer youngsters have no nerves.” And he winked at the others as at first.

“Haven’t they?” responded Colvin Kershaw, with a tranquil smile. “No, especially when you tell them some yarn about the *spoek* that comes out of the waggon-house at night and yells.”

They laughed somewhat foolishly at this, the point being that Boer children, filled up as they are with all sorts of Hottentot stories, weird and grotesque, are no more intrepid under the circumstances named than would be other children.

The above conversation, however, was significant of two things. One was the high-pitched tension to which racial feeling had attained among the northern border Dutch. It bristled with sly digs, and open ones too, at the English. They could no more keep such out of their conversation than could Mr Dick keep King Charles’s head out of his classic memorial. The second was the exceedingly friendly terms upon which this one Englishman, alone in their midst, stood towards them. Had it been otherwise, while they would have refrained from intentionally saying anything that might have been offensive to their fellow-guest, and one held in so much esteem by the people under whose roof they found themselves, they would have sat taciturn and constrained, confining the conversation for the most part to heavy monosyllables. And as emphasising these two points it is worthy of record.

Now the talkers began to break up, some, however, remaining rooted to their chairs, talking out the situation with increasing vehemence. Others went out to see after their horses, while others again had

convened music in the other room. The Boer, as a rule, is fond of music, even if it takes no more aspiring form than the homely strains of a concertina; and whereas both the De la Rey girls could play, and one could sing, fairly, well, their audience listened with a whole-hearted appreciation not always to be found under like circumstances in the drawing-rooms of the fashionable and of the would-be artistic. Colvin Kershaw likewise was in great request, for he had a smattering of ear knowledge which enabled him to rattle off snatches from most of the comic operas of the day, and these were hugely in favour with his somewhat primitive hearers. He could, too, on occasions, as when performing for the benefit of some old-fashioned and highly orthodox old "Tanta" who deemed all secular music an invention of Satan for the snaring of souls, turn such and similar lively strains, by an alteration of time and expression, into the most solemn and soul-stirring of psalm tunes; to the convulsive, because concealed, delight of Andrina and Condaas and others in the know, and to the ecstatic edification of the antiques aforesaid, who would go away thinking that if only "Mynheer" would induce the performer to play on the harmonium in church on Sunday, what a long way they would travel in order to be present.

But the lighter side of life is never far removed from the momentous, and this was represented in another part of the house, whose owner was closeted in long and earnest conversation with "the Patriot."

"You are the man we want, Brother De la Rey," the latter was saying in his quick, emphatic voice, having spent an hour setting forth his mission in all its fulness, and that with the convincing earnestness of a man who thoroughly believes in it. "Just consider. The whole of this district is with us, and not merely the whole of this district but the whole of the Northern border. Others, too, as far as the seaboard on one side and the Cape on the other. You cannot stand aloof. You cannot be the only one to refuse to side with your countrymen, those of your own blood, in their struggle for freedom and power."

"We had better not talk too much about freedom," was the reply, with a grave head-shake, "I should like to know, Brother Botma, under what Government we could enjoy greater freedom than that under which we are now living."

“‘Under which?’ Yes, that is just it. ‘Under which.’ But we ought not to be living ‘under’ any Government but our own. Our independence—that is the star to which our eyes turn. That you yourself dwell happy and in comfort here, Stephanus De la Rey, is but an unworthy way of looking at it. Are the ties of blood-brotherhood nothing? Are the ties of nationality nothing? Is our independence nothing? Selfish considerations must be thrown away now. Why, even you have two sons with us. They will fight in our ranks. Will you, then, fight in those of the enemy?”

“I do not desire any fighting. I deplore this trouble. If the Kafirs were to rise, for instance, I do not think you would find me backward. Ask those who know me if I am not speaking true. But this is a struggle between white men, and in a land, too, where they ought to be brothers.”

“Brothers? We and the English can never be brothers. Listen, Stephanus,” laying an impressive hand upon the other’s arm. “It is a struggle for life and death between us and them. To this end they have been working. To this end have they been throwing all their adventurers into our land. Yes; how many from this country, this very British colony you are so proud to belong to, have come to us without a penny—unable even so much as to make a living under the British flag—have come to us on the very verge of bankruptcy, and actually through it—to make not merely a living, but in many cases large fortunes? And these are the people with a grievance! These are the people who fatten on our land, and then want to seize it because it is richer than theirs. That is why they desire the franchise, that they may oust the burghers who fought for their independence; whose fathers shed their blood like water in withstanding the heathen savage, who went forth determined never again to submit to the English yoke.”

“That is true,” rejoined the other. “Yet it seems to me that it is because of them that the country has become rich. Had they not come there, what then? Who would have worked the gold and the mines?”

“We could have done without the gold and the mines,” was the fiery response. “We did not desire them. We were better as we were. And look, brother. Did these Uitlanders come into our land to benefit our land?

If so, why do they not stay there when they have enriched themselves out of it? Do they? Not so. They return to spend the wealth they have made out of us among the Babylon sinks of vice, the large cities of Europe. They came into the land to enrich themselves, certainly not to enrich our land. But now that it is rich they want to seize it."

The listener made no immediate reply. He sat in troubled meditation, his brow clouded. The speaker, watched him the while with a kind of hungering anxiety. This was the man he desired to win over, a man of weight and standing, whose influence thrown into the scale would bring hundreds to the Afrikander cause and confirm hundreds more who might be wavering. He went on:

"Everything is ready now. The President will never yield to their demands, and even if he would the burghers will never allow it. If we gave them the five years' franchise they would then ask for two, then for none at all. And where would we be? Where would we be, I ask you, remembering the shameful attempt upon us three years ago? Mark now, brother. We are about to put forth our strength. We know our strength, they do not. They know not that we are ten times stronger than they think. They boast that by the end of the year the English flag will wave over Pretoria. Will it? We shall see.

"They think that they have only to threaten us and we shall collapse. They have forgotten the lessons of 1881. A God-protected people fighting for its liberties is a terrible thing, Stephanus, and that is what we were then and what we are now. We have for years been collecting arms and ammunition which will render us strong enough for the whole British Army. And then when the whole British Army is hurled against us there are European nations who will hurl themselves upon England. They will not lose their opportunity. They hate England too much for that. Then is our time. Now, Stephanus, will you be the only man who refuses to join his own nationality? I go from here to-morrow, for my mission is at an end, and it has been fruitful beyond my hopes. When I return it will be with our conquering forces to help plant the 'Vierkleur' over our new Republic, which shall extend from the Zambesi to the Cape. My dear brother, think. We want you; we want such men as you among our leaders. Throw selfish considerations away, and link yourself with the

holy army of patriots.”

The speaker ceased. Carried away by his own fervour, he could hardly any longer bring out his words with sufficient coherence. And that very fervour had carried his listener with him. Stephanus De la Rey was, to tell the truth, deeply impressed. True, he himself had no reason to be otherwise than perfectly contented; but had he any right to consider his own prosperity, his own well-being, when the cause of his countrymen was at stake? Transvaal, Free State, or Cape Colony, were they not all of one blood—all Dutch? Many a man would have considered what advantages might accrue to himself by joining the movement, what risk, even danger, was incurred by abstaining; but this one was honest to the core. The patriotic side was what appealed to him, that and that only. And looking at him as though reading his thoughts, Andries Botma, the Transvaal delegate, was filled with a whole-souled elation. He knew he had won, and that however much time and thought he might give to the situation between this and then, the moment the forces of the allied Republics crossed the border Stephanus De la Rey would be upon their side.

But this Stephanus De la Rey did not know himself, not, at any rate, at that time.

Chapter Five.

Signs.

“*Jij verdomde Engelschman! Stil maar! Ik saal nit nou jou kop afslaan*!” (Note 1.)

The speaker is a big Dutchman, the scene the stoep of a roadside hotel in the Karroo, the spoken-to Frank Wenlock. We regret, however, to be obliged to record that our friend has taken on board a glass or two more than he can stow with absolute regard either to equilibrium or strict decorum. A Cape cart and a buggy, the harness hung loosely to the splashboard, stand out-spanned by the broad dusty road, and three or four horses with their saddles on are grouped beneath a stumpy,

spreading mimosa, as rooted to the spot by the mere fact of two or three inches of their bridles trailing on the ground as though tied fast to anything solid and tangible.

For reply to the threat, Frank Wenlock utters a defiant laugh, then once more lifts up his voice in song:

"Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom-de-ay!
Oom Paul op een vark gerij,
Af hij val en zier gekrij,
Toen klim op en veg gerij."

With a growl and a curse the big Boer comes at him. He is nearly a head the taller and far the heavier and more powerful man; but Frank Wenlock knows how to use his hands a bit, and, "sprung" as he is, he parries the sledge-hammer blow aimed at him by his large assailant, and stands ready. The latter begins to parley:

"What do you insult our President for, then?" he growls.

"Can't I sing a song if I want?" returns Frank. "Besides, Oom Paul isn't your President."

"Ah, but he soon will be. And won't he make the *rooineks* run?"

"Well, here's a *rooinek* you can't make run, Hermanus Delport, elephant as you are. Come along and have a try, will you? What? You won't? You're a bally coward then—and you're twice my size.

"Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom-de-ay,
Oom Paul op een vark gerij—"

he begins again in a tone that is insulting and defiant to the last degree.

There are other Dutchmen on the stoep. These, who have laughed hitherto, expecting to see their huge compatriot simply double up the smaller but foolhardy Englishman, now spring to their feet with incensed shouts.

“Go at him, Hermanus. Knock him down and lay your *sjambok* about him. Cut him into *riempjes*. We’ll give him Oom Paul!” are some of the cries wherewith they nerve their champion on to war.

There is no backing out of it now. Delport hurls himself upon Frank, who stands there, squaring up, and still singing the nonsensical—and to Boer susceptibilities offensive—quatrain. But a very hard right- and lefthander meets him, and that in each eye, causing him to stagger back. Frank, however, has not come off unscathed, for the big Boer’s fist has more than grazed his cheekbone. The others crowd up behind their champion, renewing their shouts of encouragement.

“Come on, come on! I’ll take the bally lot of you, when I’ve polished off that elephant there,” shouts Frank in English, waltzing towards the group, his hands up and ready.

“No, you jolly well won’t, Frank,” cuts in another English voice, whose owner tranquilly steps in between the combatants. “Come now, stop making a fool of yourself, of all yourselves.”

“I shan’t. Get out of this, Colvin, and—mind your own business,” retorted Frank, speaking none too articulately. “Old elephant Hermanus said he could make rooineks run. I want him to make this *rooinek* run—if he can.”

“He insulted the President,” shouted the Boers. “*Ja*, he sang an insulting song.”

“Now, Frank, you know you did, for I heard you while I was getting ready to inspan,” said Colvin Kershaw in his most persuasive tones. “And look here, old chap, fair-play you know is fair-play. If one of them had sung such stuff as that about the Queen—rotten, contemptible stuff as it is—how long would it be before you sailed into him?”

“Not one bally second,” replied Frank briskly.

“Well, then—you’ve trodden on these chaps’ corns pretty hard, and you might as well tell them you were only larking.”

The speaker was on tenterhooks, for he knew by experience what a difficult customer Frank Wenlock was to manage on the few occasions when he had had a drop too much. The chances that he would become obstreperous and provoke a general row or not were about even. But either the moral influence of his mentor was paramount, or some glimmer of the logical faculty had worked its way into Frank's thoughtless but good-natured mind, and he was amenable.

"*Toen, kerelen*, I didn't mean anything," he called out in Dutch; "I was only larking. Let's have another drink all-round."

"No, you don't, Frank," said Colvin quickly and in an undertone. "You've quite enough of that cargo on board already."

By this time the horses were inspanned, and the two went among the group of Boers to bid farewell. Some put out a paw with more than half a scowl on their faces, others turned into the house to avoid the necessity of shaking hands with Englishmen at all. Among these was Hermanus Delport.

"*Ja*, wait a bit!" he growled, half aloud. "Wait a bit, friend Wenlock! If I don't put a bullet through you before this year is dead, I'll—I'll become an Englishman."

And he rubbed some raw spirit on his now fast-swelling bruises, a dark and vengeful scowl upon his heavy face. The seed scattered by Andries Botma had been well sown.

Chucking a sixpence to the ragged, yellow-skinned Hottentot, who sprang away from the horses' heads, Colvin whipped up, sending the buggy spinning over the flat Karroo road, the dust flying up obliquely from the hoofs and wheels in a long, fan-like cloud. They were returning from Schalkburg, the district town, and had a good two hours of smart driving to reach Spring Holt, the Wenlocks' farm, before dark—for they had made a late start from the township. For the first hour Frank was a bit drowsy, then, when he had pulled himself together a bit, his guide, philosopher, and friend judged it time to deliver something of a lecture.

“Frank, you know this won’t do. I thought you had more self-control. The last two times we have been into Schalkburg together you’ve come out boozy.”

“Oh, hang it, old chap, it was so beastly hot! If we had started before breakfast instead of at twelve, it would have been all right. But Schalkburg is such a dry hole, and you get such a thirst on!”

“I don’t. But you will get liquoring up with every man Jack who speaks to you.”

“Well, but—you can’t refuse. And then you only go in there once in a blue moon. Surely one can have a bit of a spree.”

“No, you needn’t—not that sort of spree. And you can refuse. I often do. No—no—old chap, you can’t afford to make a Hottentot of yourself, and remember, you’ve got womenkind to look after.”

“Er—I say, Colvin, you know. Don’t let go anything to them about this, will you?”

“Of course not. Don’t you know me better than that? But squarely, Frank, unless you undertake to get on another tack I’ll never go into Schalkburg with you again.”

“Anyone would think I was a regular boozer,” said Frank, sulkily.

“That’s just what I don’t want you to become. And look here, you jolly near got up the devil’s own row at Reichardt’s. Those Dutchmen will spread all over the country that we were both roaring tight. Besides, what if that row had come off—we should come home nice objects with our noses broken and our teeth kicked down our throats? For remember they were a round dozen, and we only two, and some of these very ones, I happen to know, are pretty tough customers. Here, Frank. Take the reins, so long. There are a couple of fine *pauw*. Think we can get any nearer?”

“No. Let go at them from the cart.”

They had just topped a light swell, and there, about two hundred and

odd yards from the road, stalked the great bustards. Quickly Colvin slipped from the buggy, and keeping on its other side, rifle in hand, watched his chance. Taking a careful and steady aim, he fired. Both birds rose, and winged their flight, but, after a few yards, the hindermost half dropped, then, flopping along a little further, came heavily to the earth, where it lay with wings outspread and quite dead.

“That’s good!” observed Colvin; “I knew he’d got it, heard the bullet ‘klop’.”

They picked up the splendid bird and regained the road. But before they had gone half a mile they made out a horseman riding furiously after them as though in pursuit.

“It’s old Sarel Van der Vyver,” said Frank, looking back. “Let’s give him a gallop, eh? He looks in a devil of a rage.”

“No—no! We must smooth him down,” answered Colvin, drawing the pace in to a slow trot. Very soon their pursuer galloped up, and they made out an old Boer in a weather-beaten white chimney-pot hat, and wearing a bushy grey beard. He seemed, as Frank had said, “in a devil of a rage,” and brandished in his hand a long-barrelled Martini.

“*Daag*, Oom Sarel!” called out the two in the buggy.

But the old man met this amenity with a torrent of abuse. What did they mean by coming into his veldt and shooting his game without his leave, and scaring his ostriches all over the place? He did not keep game to be shot by *verdomde rooineks*, not he. And much more to the same effect.

Both were rather surprised. They had never been on other than the friendliest of terms with this old man, and now he was rating them as though he had never seen them before in their lives. Well, here was another very significant sign of the times. But it gave Colvin an idea.

“Take the bird, Oom Sarel,” he said, making as though he would pull it out from the back of the buggy. “I only shot it for the fun of the thing—

and besides, it was possible that Andries Botma might be at Spring Holt when we got back, and a fine *pauw* might come in handy for the supper of the Patriot."

The effect of the name was magical.

"*Kyk*! Do you know Mynheer Botma, then?" asked the old Boer, in round-eyed astonishment.

"We had a great talk together at Stephanus De la Rey's the other night, Oom Sarel," responded Colvin; "but come along with us, and see if he has arrived at Wenlock's to-night."

This invitation the old man declined, though somewhat reluctantly. "He could not leave home," he said. "But the bird—of course they must keep it. A friend of the Patriot! Well, well, Colvin must not mind what had been said at first. He," the speaker, "had been a little put out that day, and was growing old." Then exchanging fills out of each other's pouch, they literally smoked the pipe of peace together, and parted amid much cordial handshaking.

"There's a sign of the times for you, Frank," said Colvin as they resumed their way. "Andries Botma's name is one to conjure with these days. But note how his influence crops up all along the line! Even old Sarel Van der Vyver was prepared to make himself disagreeable. Not a Dutchman round here will hesitate to join the Transvaal, if things go at all wrong with us."

"I'd cut short his influence with a bullet or a rope if I were Milner," growled Frank.

Soon, in the distance, the homestead came in sight Colvin dropped into silence, letting his thoughts wander forth to the welcome that awaited him, and the central figure of that welcome spelt May Wenlock. He was not in love with her, yet she appealed to more than one side of his nature. She was very pretty, and very companionable; and girls of whom that could be said were very few and far between in the Wildschutsberg surroundings. Several of the Boer girls were the first, but few of them had

any ideas, being mostly of the fluffy-brained, giggling type. May was attractive to him, undeniably so, but if he tried to analyse it he decided that it was because they had been thrown so much together; and if he had evoked any partiality in her, he supposed it was for the same reason —there was no one else.

“Who’s that likely to be, Frank?” he said, as they drew near enough to make out a male figure on the stoep.

“Eh? Who? Where?” returned Frank, starting up, for he was drowsy. “*Maagtig*, it looks like Upton, the scab-inspector. *Ja*. It is.”

No—there was nothing lacking in the welcome that shone in May’s eyes, thought Colvin, as they exchanged a hand-pressure. And he was conscious of a very decided feeling of gratification; indeed he would not have been human were it otherwise.

“Well, Upton, what’s the news?” said Frank, as they were outspanning, and unpacking the contents of the buggy. “Is it going to be war?”

“Don’t know. Looks like it. The troops in Grahamstown and King are getting ready for all they know how. Man, but things are looking nasty. The Dutchmen up in the Rooi-Ruggensberg are as bumptious as they can be. Two of them wouldn’t let me look at their flocks at all. I shall have to summon them, I suppose.”

The duties of the speaker being to overhaul periodically the flocks of all the farmers, Dutch and British, within a large area, in search of the contagious and pestilential scab, it followed that he was in the way of gauging the state of feeling then prevalent. Personally, he was a very popular man, wherefore the fact of his having met with active opposition was the more significant as to the state of the country.

“They’re just the same here,” said Frank. “For my part, the sooner we have a war the better. I wish our farm was somewhere else, though. We are too much in among the Dutch here for things to be pleasant for the mother and May when the fun does begin.”

Now Master Frank, though carefully omitting to specify what had led up to the incident of the road wherewith this chapter opens, expatiated a great deal upon the incident itself in the course of the evening, thereby drawing from his mother much reproof, uttered, however, in a tone that was more than half an admiring one. But in that of May was no note of admiration. It was all reproving.

“You are much too quarrelsome, Frank,” she said; “I don’t see anything particularly plucky in always wanting to fight people. It’s a good thing you had someone to look after you.” And the swift glance which accompanied this should have been eminently gratifying to the “someone” who had looked after him.

“Oh, if you’re all down upon a chap, I shall scoot. I’m going round to give the horses a feed. Coming, Upton?”

“*Ja*,” replied that worthy; and they went out. So did Mrs Wenlock, having something or other to see to in the kitchen.

There was silence between the two thus left. Colvin, sitting back in a cane chair, was contemplating the picture before him in the most complacent state of satisfaction. How pretty the girl looked bending over the ornamental work she was engaged in, the lamplight upon her wavy golden hair, the glow of freshness and health in her cheeks, the thick lashes half veiling the velvety-blue eyes!

“Well?” she said softly, looking up. “Talk to me.”

“Haven’t got anything to say. I’m tired. I prefer to look at you instead.”

“You are a dear to say so,” she answered. “But all the same I want livening up. I am getting a dreadful fossil—we all are—stuck away here, and never seeing a soul. I believe I shall get mother to let me go away for quite a long time. I am horribly tired of it all.”

“And of me?”

“You know I am not.”

The blue eyes were very soft as they met his. A wave of feeling swept over the man. Looking at her in her winning, inviting beauty as she sat there, an overwhelming impulse came upon him to claim her—to take her for his own. Why should he not? He knew that it lay entirely with him. He made a movement to rise. In another moment she would be in his arms, and he would be pouring words of passion and tenderness into her ear. The door opened.

“Haven’t those two come in yet?” said Mrs Wenlock briskly, as she re-entered, and quietly resumed her seat, thus unconsciously affecting a momentous crisis in two lives. Was it for good or for ill? We shall see.

Note 1. “You d—d Englishman! Be quiet. I’ll knock your head off just now.”

Note 2.

“Oom Paul is riding on a pig—
He falls off and hurts himself,
Then climbs up and rides away—”

A nonsensical bit of popular doggerel. In Dutch it makes a jingling rhyme.

Chapter Six.

Colvin makes a Discovery.

“Gert.”

“Baas?”

“Saddle up Aasvogel after breakfast. I am going over to Krantz Kop.”

Thus Colvin Kershaw to his henchman, Gert Bondelzwart. The latter was a bastard Griqua—an elderly man, of good height and powerful

build. He had taken part in the Langeberg rising, but had been “slim” enough to slip away just in time, and had contrived to put a large section of country between himself and the scene of his former misdeeds. At this man Colvin’s neighbours looked askew. He had “schelm” writ large all over his yellow personality, they declared. Colvin himself thought them likely to be right; but then Gert suited him. He was a good servant, and had never given him any trouble. Moreover, he had an idea that the fellow had, for some unaccountable reason, conceived an attachment for himself. Anyway, he did not choose to part with him to please anybody.

“Did you hear what I said, Gert?”

“*Ja*, sir.”

“Then why the devil don’t you answer, and go and do what I tell you, instead of standing there shaking your silly head as if a bee had stung you in the ear?”

“Krantz Kop is up at the far end of the *berg*, sir. Boer *menschen* up there very *kwaai*.”

“Well? What’s that to you? I didn’t say I wanted an after-rider.”

“Gideon Roux very *schelm* Boer, sir. Strange things happen at Krantz Kop.”

“Oh, go away, Gert. Get in Aasvogel from the camp—no, he’s still in the stable. Well, give him another bundle, so long.”

“What am I to ride, sir?”

“You to ride? Confound you, I said I didn’t want an after-rider.”

“I would like to go with Baas.”

Something about the persistency of the man struck Colvin. This yellow-skinned henchman of his was a wonderful fellow, and there was precious little he didn’t know. Well, he would take him.

“You can go then, Gert. You’ll have to ride Pansy, and she’s in a camp full of *kwaai* birds. Cobus and the others can help get her out—but hurry up, for I don’t want to be kept waiting.”

Colvin turned into his house and sat down to his solitary breakfast, waited upon by Gert’s wife, a middle-aged well-looking woman, as neat in her attire and person as the table arrangements were scrupulously clean and well served; a very jewel of a housekeeper, he was wont to declare, for a miserable bachelor establishment in the Karroo. The house itself was of no great pretensions—being merely a type of a not very well-to-do farmer’s residence—it having just passed out of the possession of that class of Boer. But there was plenty of room in it, and it could easily be improved, if its present owner made up his mind to remain on in it. And, indeed, it was a matter not very far from foreign to the question of improving and remaining on in it that was occupying the said owner’s mind as he sat alone at breakfast that morning.

How would May Wenlock look in her bright, sweet freshness, making a second at that solitary table? Her personality seemed to be creeping more and more into his life. Why did he not ask her to share it, the more so that he had no doubt as to what the answer would be? He was not a conceited man, but he was a fairly experienced and clear-sighted one, and would have been a born fool had he failed to perceive that the girl was more than partial to him.

Propinquity—that is, opportunity—has much to answer for. They had been thrown together a great deal, for have we not said that he had spent some time with the Wenlocks while looking about for a farm of his own? Moreover, he had come there handicapped by a kind of spurious heroic glamour, in that he was supposed to have saved Frank’s life on one occasion in the Matopo Hills, what time they were hotly pressed by the Matabele, and that rash youth had chosen to hang back when he should have been retiring with the column. He had collected half a dozen volunteers and brought him out just in time. To his own mind it had been all in the day’s work, but others had seen fit to make a great deal more of it than it seemed to deserve. Of course the girl had begun by making a sort of hero of him. Again, he himself personally was the kind of man that women take to—cultured, travelled, well-bred, and full of *savoir vivre*. It

would have been strange if, considering the life the girl led, the few men she saw, of her own nationality at least—for although several of the young Dutch men around were both well-looking and well educated, she could not take to them—she should come to think a great deal of her brother's friend, and their only English neighbour. Hence the intimacy that had grown and ripened between them.

Now he sat there thinking everything out. How near he had been only the evening before last to asking her to share his life! A fraction of a moment more would have done it, but for the interruption—timely or otherwise. Which was it? He loved her—how indeed could he help doing so, when in addition to all her attractions she was always so sweet and lovable to him? But he was not *in love* with her. He had passed the age for "falling in love;" had reached that wherein men become wholesomely critical. May Wenlock *as* May Wenlock was one personality—and a very charming and alluring personality at that May Wenlock with a proprietary interest, and a legally signed and sealed vested right in himself, was another. He had not been slow to descry in her a very strong spice of natural temper and wilfulness; and although now her demeanour towards himself was invariably sweet and winning, would it always be so? And this was a side of the picture which did not allure.

Propinquity! He had seen repeated instances, of the results of this, had even experienced some. The girl or, woman who "could not live without you" to-day might be voting you a bore of the first water by this time next year, or even earlier. Personally he had never felt disposed to find fault with this development. It cut both ways, as often as not in point of fact, his experience told him. But on one occasion, long years ago, it had not. He had been hard hit, and the process had left a bruise, a scar, not readily obliterated. Now, however, applying the recollection of that case to this, he decided that the symptoms were wanting. He was not in love with May, much as her presence appealed to him, and yet the consciousness of what he knew his presence meant to her afforded him a gratification he would not have been human had he not experienced.

Preferentially, too, he was not inclined to embark in matrimony. He had seen too much of it—too many instances of the weary humdrum chain thus riveted, the welding together of two lives into a deteriorating

round of petty frictions which it furnished. But in this instance there was a still greater and, to his mind, more fatal bar. With all the advantages, the free and easy social code, and republican waiving of social distinctions which colonial life afforded, the fact remained that the Wenlocks were some little way from being his social equals. And he was a great believer in birth and breeding. In which connection he could not but admit to himself that the mere fact of the interruption by Mrs Wenlock of their *tête-à-tête* the other evening had jarred less upon him than a something in her tone and speech when effecting it. More uneasily still, he was constrained to admit that he had on certain rare occasions detected manifestations of lack of breeding in May herself, such indeed as he had never traced a sign of, at any time or under any circumstances, in the De la Rey girls for instance, or in any member of that family. And yet Stephanus de la Rey was “only a Boer.”

At this juncture the sound of horse hoofs outside cut short his meditations. The morning air was fresh and keen, and Aasvogel, a tall, deep-shouldered iron-grey, having been stabled for some days, gave him plenty to take care of when first mounted. But Colvin was fond of riding, so presently, letting out the powerful animal for all he wanted over the wide Karroo plains, a sense of keen joyous exhilaration scattered all serious thought to the four winds of heaven.

Soon the plain was left behind, giving way to a steep, rugged mountain-road winding between the spurs. Higher and higher it led, overhung by craggy cliffs, resonant with the shrill scream of the *dasje* and the loud hoarse bark of the sentinel baboon.

“Look there, Baas,” said Gert Bondelzwart, pointing to a cleft which ran up into a krantz where the slope ended not very high overhead. “That is where Gideon Roux shot a Kafir. He is a *schelm* Boer is Gideon Roux.”

“Was it during the war?”

“*Nee, nee*, sir. The Kafir had come to take away a girl Gideon Roux had on his place. Gideon did not want her to go, but the Kafir insisted—said he had been sent by her people to fetch her. So Gideon had him tied to the waggon-wheel and thrashed him with an *agter os sjambok*, till he

should promise not to ask for the girl any more. He would not; so Gideon left him tied up all night, promising him some more sjambok in the morning. But by then the Kafir had managed to get loose. He hadn't much start, though, and they hunted him with dogs. He tried to hide in that hole there, but Gideon and Hermanus Delport they called to him to come out. He wouldn't. He had climbed on a rock inside to escape the dogs and was afraid to move. So they shot him dead."

"When was this, Gert, and what did they do with the body?"

"About three years ago, Baas, or it might have been four. Do with the body? *Maagtig*, sir! There are holes and pits in these mountains where you or I might conveniently disappear and never be heard of again."

"Are you cooking up a yam, Gert, just to pass the time; for don't you know that in this country you can't shoot even a Kafir and stow him comfortably away without being tried for murder and hanged?"

The man shook his head, with a very humorous look upon his yellow face. It bordered almost upon amused contempt.

"It can be done, sir, and it was done. All the country knows it. Gideon Roux and Hermanus Delport only laugh. Not a man in the Wildschutsberg or the Rooi-Ruggensberg would dare accuse them, or dare come forward to give evidence. *Nee*, sir, not a man, white, brown, or black. There are very *schelm* Boers in these mountains, and whoever tried to stir up that affair his life would not be worth a tickey. They would shoot him as they did the Kafir."

Colvin reined in his horse to the slowest of foot-paces, and stared at the cleft as though struck with an idea.

"Have you ever been into that hole, Gert?"

"*Nee*, sir."

"Then how do you know there is a rock in there the Kafir could jump on to escape Gideon Roux's dogs?"

“That is the story, Baas.”

“Well, I’m going to have a look inside there. You remain here with the horses, and if anyone passes you can say I have gone after a reebok under the krantz.”

The ascent, though steep, was not long, and soon Colvin was standing within the mouth of the hole. It was a jagged fissure—running about twenty feet into the cliff, then narrowing to a low tunnel of about ten more.

Yes, this was quite correct. There was a rock—or rather a boulder. Colvin pictured, by the light of a flaming vesta, the hunted man standing gingerly on the apex of this to avoid the excited springs and snaps of the dogs. There was no sign, however, of any human remains—but—wait. Hallo! what was this?

The tunnel, which narrowed in from the end of the fissure, was half blocked. Colvin lighted another vesta, and bent down. Through the piled-up dust he made out what looked like a square rectangular stone. Stone? No—it was wood. It was one of three long flat packing-cases, piled one on top of the other. His nerves tingled with excitement. What discovery was he on the point of making? At any rate, whatever it might be, he would make it.

Now that his vision was accustomed to the semi-gloom he had no need of artificial light. The glimmering that entered from the outer day was sufficient. He hauled out the uppermost case. But how to open it? That might be done. Fortunately, he was provided with a large pocket-knife, containing various appliances which included a strong screwdriver. What was he going to discover? Human remains? Perhaps. Why, there might be others stowed away in like manner; victims of the wild and lawless inhabitants of this remote mountain district.

Then it occurred to him that the chest was very heavy. What on earth could it contain, and, by the way, what right had he to pry into its contents? For a moment he paused. But the curiosity and excitement attending upon this discovery were too great. Possibly, even, these

chests and their contents had lain there for years and years unknown to anybody—even to the owner of the wild, and stony, and scattered stock-run on which they were hidden, but remembering Gert's story that did not seem likely. Anyway, he would share the mystery with whoever held it. That could do no harm to anybody.

The lid was strongly screwed down. A few minutes of vigorous perspiring work and it was up. Whatever the contents were, they were protected by a thick wrapper of oilskin. This he proceeded to unwind, but carefully, so as to be able to replace it readily. Then a quantity of tow, also well oiled, and then—

No human remains, no shining coins, no old and massive silver, no treasure of any kind met his eager gaze. But there, in the top of the box, lay several rifles in a row.

He took one out, carried it as near the light of day as he dared go, and examined it. The weapon was one of the newest pattern—a Mauser. The others on the top layers were all alike. Allowing for the depth of the chest, he reckoned that it must contain at least a couple of dozen rifles. Here was a discovery. What was the meaning of this secret armoury? There could be only one. For only one purpose could these weapons be stowed away thus in the caves of the rocks—for the arming of the rebel Boers when the word went forth for them to rise, and join their brethren in the Transvaal and Free State, to throw off the British yoke from the Zambesi to Cape Agulhas.

Replacing the rifle, he rapidly screwed down the case, and stowed it away in the hole whence he had taken it, carefully piling up the dust and loose earth against it and the others so as to obviate all trace of interference. Hardly had he done so than the sound of hoof-strokes and harsh voices without struck upon his ear. Peering cautiously forth, he beheld, down upon the track from which he had ascended, two armed and mounted Boers, and they were in close confabulation with Gert Bondelzwart, his retainer.

Chapter Seven.

An Evil Ambush.

Standing there within the cave, which had now become his hiding-place, Colvin Kershaw was conscious of very mingled feelings. His hiding-place! Why should he be in hiding? why should he not go forth? Only that to do so would place his life in very serious jeopardy—not at the moment perhaps, for they would hardly venture to murder him openly and in broad daylight; besides, he had his revolver on. No, it would be afterwards, when they could waylay him at some unexpected part of the track—and what was the use of a revolver against the rifles of two or more cleverly ambushed foes? They could shoot him down without the slightest risk to themselves, and shoot him down he knew they would, and that without a moment's hesitation, once they became aware that he had discovered their perilous because treasonable secret. He would never get out of the mountains alive.

Nor was it reassuring when he satisfied himself as to the identity of the new arrivals, for they were none other than Gideon Roux himself and Hermanus Delport, the big Dutchman who had fallen foul of Frank Wenlock at the roadside inn. Both bore characters of evil repute.

Would they never go on? They were talking voluminously, but were too far off for the burden of their words to travel. The big man was holding his rifle aloft as though threatening Gert with the butt thereof; but the Griqua stood his ground, calm and unintimidated. Would they never go on? Colvin felt his position growing more and more ignominious. Then again, what if they should conclude to come up and investigate? But they did not. To his intense relief they put their horses into the track again and cantered off in the direction whither he himself was bound.

"Very *schelm* Boer, Gideon Roux, sir," said Gert, in reply to his master's questioning. "They asked where my Baas was, and I told them gone after a reebok. They laughed over an Englishman shooting reebok with a revolver, when he could not even shoot anything with a rifle. Then, Baas, Hermanus he said I was a lying Hottentot, and threatened to knock my brains out with the butt of his gun. He said Hottentots and Englishmen were equally liars."

“Well, it’s of no consequence. But I’m afraid the chances of getting my money out of Gideon Roux to-day are very poor.”

“Does Baas want to get money out of Gideon Roux, then?”

“Of course *I* do, you ass. He hasn’t paid for those sheep yet.”

“One hundred and twenty-five pounds, Baas. If I had ten pounds I would not offer it for the chance of that hundred and twenty-five pounds;” and Gert shook his head, puckering his face into the most whimsical expression.

“Well, Gert, I believe you’re right. However, I may get some of it. But I don’t think we shall see Gideon. Now that he knows I’m coming up he won’t be at home.”

The contrast between Ratels Hoek and Gideon Roux’ farm was about in proportion to that between their respective owners. A long, low building, with dirty whitewashed walls and thatched roof, standing against a bleak and desolate hill-slope—the front door opening in two parts—dilapidated stone kraals, situated on the slope aforesaid, so that in time of the rains all the drainage thence rushed round the back wall of the house—some draggle-tailed poultry, and two or three fever-stricken sheep—this is what Colvin saw as he rode up to his destination. The while, the air was thick with an awful combination of adjacent dead goat and a partly decomposed oxhide, in process of preparation for the making of reims.

Even as he had expected, Gideon Roux was not at home. His wife, a large, fat, and albeit quite young, already shapeless person, untidy and slatternly of attire, came forward and tendered a moist paw, with the simple salutation “*Daag*!” or “good-day”—an example followed by her sister, who was a replica of herself though a trifle more shapely and less slovenly but not less awkward. Several brats, in varying stages of dirt, hung around, finger in mouth, gaping at the new arrival. There were some strange Boers there too, with whom Colvin exchanged greetings; but their manner was awkward and constrained. It was a relief to him when his hostess declared that dinner was ready.

It was an appalling meal to the civilised palate and digestion that to which they now sat down. There was a stew, fearfully and wonderfully made, of leathery goat, sweetened to a nauseating point with quince jam, and, for vegetable, boiled pumpkin, containing almost as much water as pumpkin. The cloth was excessively grimy, and, worse still, bore many an ancient stain which showed that the day of its last washing must have been lost in the mists of antiquity, and there was no salt. The coffee, moreover, tasted like a decoction of split peas, and was plentifully interwoven with hair, and straw as from the thatch. The women did not sit down to table with them, but handed in the dishes from the kitchen, and then sat and waited until the men had done.

Through all her natural stolidity it struck Colvin that both the countenance and manner of his hostess wore a flurried, not to say scared, look. She seemed to try and avoid conversation with him; and it squared with the fact of Gideon Roux being from home. Could any information be got out of her? To this end he began to question her in an artless conversational way.

“Gideon will be in directly, Juffrouw?”

“*Nee*, Mynheer Kershaw. He will not be in. He left home yesterday morning and I do not expect him back until to-morrow night.”

“*So*? That is strange. Why, I thought I saw him just now, the other side of the *poort*—just half an hour’s ride from here. He was coming in this direction too.”

“*Nee, nee*—that cannot be.” And the look of alarm upon the woman’s face seemed to deepen.

“Strange that. Why, I even recognised the man who was riding with him. It looked like Hermanus Delport.”

There was no mistaking the effect this time. She looked downright hideously scared. It could not be, she reiterated. He must have been mistaken. And then to cover her confusion she turned away to a cupboard, and, unlocking it, brought out a decanter of Boer brandy, which

she placed upon the table.

"*Maagtig, kerel*!" cried one of the Dutchmen, seizing the bottle gleefully, and pouring out a copious *soepje*. "It is true you must have been seeing *spoeks*. The *poort* is said to be haunted, you know."

Colvin fell into the humour of the thing seemingly, and replied in like bantering vein. But he was thinking the while, and thinking hard. The fear evinced by Gideon Roux' wife would not be manifested by a stolid practical Boer woman under the mere circumstances of a neighbour having come to press her husband for the payment of a by no means ruinous debt. It was something deeper than that. It was more like the demeanour of a naturally respectable and law-abiding person who was made the involuntary sharer of some grim and terrible secret, which she dared neither to divulge nor even hint at. It set him thinking, and the burden of his thoughts was that his return home should be effected as much as possible by daylight, and as far as possible by a different route.

Now, Gideon Roux was no fool of a Boer, neither was his confederate Hermanus Delport, consequently, having disappeared over the neck in the direction of the former's home, they proceeded to execute a backward manoeuvre. Leaving their horses standing about twenty yards the other side, and well out of sight, they stealthily retraced their steps until they could gain a point which commanded a view of Gert Bondelzwart and the two horses under his charge. Not long had they been there before they saw all they wanted to see. They saw Colvin emerge from the cave under the krantz, and descend to where he had left his servant. But they did not wait until he had rejoined the latter. Mounting their horses, they sent those astonished animals along at a break-neck gallop, which brought them to the homestead fully twenty minutes earlier than the expected visitor. It took them less than five to execute their next move, which was to exchange their long Martinis for a Mauser rifle apiece—a weapon which had not then, openly at any rate, reached the Wildschutsberg section of country, and which they fished out from some hidden recess. Cartridges and a bottle of 'dop' they placed in a haversack, and with a significant injunction to their fellow-countrymen there gathered, to keep the Englishman talking and making merry as late

as possible, they rode off into the veldt again, taking a line which would put them out of sight of the house in about three minutes.

“He knows too much, that damned Englishman,” snarled Gideon Roux, shading a match to light his pipe, while his steed took him along at a fast “triple.” He was a sinister-looking, swarthy-faced Boer, with a short black beard and a great hooked nose like the beak of a bird of prey. “We must teach him—him and his Hottentot—not to come pushing his snout into other people’s affairs.”

“That is so,” assented the other. “But, Gideon, what if there is a noise made about it, and they are found afterwards? The English will hang us. And he is a friend of Oom Stephanus.”

“*Maagtig*! By the time they are found the English will not be here to hang anybody, and we, *ou’ maat* (old chum)—we shall have deserved the thanks of all true patriots for having put out of the way an enemy of our country. Oom Stephanus—well, he is a patriot now, his own nephew, Adrian De la Rey, told me so. What is one cursed Englishman more than another to a good patriot. He cannot be a friend to such.”

“That is so,” replied the big Boer laconically.

For about an hour they kept on their way, and their way was a rough one, for they avoided the regular track, winding in and out among the mountains, now putting their horses up a steep boulder-strewn slope, then being obliged to dismount in order to lead the animals down a kind of natural rock staircase. Finally, they drew rein upon a neck, where, lying between two great boulders, themselves utterly invisible from below, they could command the broken, winding, rocky track for some little distance, either way.

“He cannot be here yet,” said Gideon Roux as he scanned the road, which, like a snake, wound along the valley beneath. “Hans Vermaak will see to that. Only, I hope Katrina will not let them have too much to drink. Hans is quite fool enough to get drunk and jolly, and insist on the Englishman stopping the night Hans is the devil to drink, and then he becomes jolly. That is where he is such a fool.”

They hid the horses well down over the other side of the ridge, lest the approach of the other animals should cause them to neigh, then returned to their positions under the rocks. The road was about three hundred yards beneath, and on the other side of it was the river bed, now dry. This circumstance, too, came into the strategy of the murderous pair.

“See now, Mani,” (Hermanus abbreviated), said Gideon Roux. “If we shoot as we always shoot, both will drop into the river bed. And to-night,” looking upward at a black cloud which was thickly and gradually spreading, “the river will come down. I will take the Englishman, and you take the Hottentot.”

“*Ja*, but I am not so sure with these damned Mausers,” growled Hermanus Delport, looking up and down his weapon. “I might miss—then where would we be? We had better have kept to our old Martinis. We understand them.”

“*Nee, nee*. It comes to the same thing, I tell you, and if you miss you can go on shooting until you *raak*. I know *I* shan’t miss. *Maagtig, kerel*! What are you doing? Put away that pipe!”

But Hermanus protested he was not going to do without his smoke for all the adjectival English in Africa or in England either, and it took at least ten minutes of his confederate’s time and talk to persuade him that not only the spark but the smoke of a pipe was visible for any distance in the clear, yet half-gloomy atmosphere then prevailing. For the leaden lour of the heavens pointed to the coming of a storm.

In effect the surroundings were very much in harmony with the dark deed of blood which these two miscreants were here to perpetrate. The wild and rugged recesses of the Wildschutsbergen, sparsely inhabited and but seldom travelled, spread around in grim, forbidding desolation. Great krantzes towered skyward, rearing up from the apex of smooth boulder-strewn grass slopes, and here and there a lofty coffee-canister shaped cone, turret-headed, and belted round with the same smooth cliff-face, stood like a giant sentinel. Below, the valleys, deep and rugged, seamed with dongas, and that through which the track lay, skirting the now dry bed of the Sneeuw River. No sign of life was upon this abode of

desolation; no grazing flock, or stray *klompje* of horses, not even a bird, springing chirruping from the grass; and away yonder the further crags stood against a background of inky cloud, which, gradually working nearer, amid low mutterings of thunder, was bringing the storm which should act as accomplice in hiding the slain victims of the two ambushed murderers.

“That is right,” chuckled Gideon Roux, rubbing his hands. “The river will come down to-night like the devil. By this time to-morrow the Englishman and his Hottentot will be nearly at the sea. It is hundreds of miles off, but a flooded river travels as quick as a train.”

“What if they are stranded half-way?” said the other, with an evil sneer.

“Then the jackals will eat them. Either way it matters nothing.”

Darker and darker it grew. The storm cloud began to throw out loose masses of flying scud, through which the moon now and again shone out in fitful gleam. Still, to these two their prey came not in sight.

“I like not this,” growled Hermanus. “This is no light to shoot by. We may miss one or both, and to miss one is as bad as to miss both. Besides, the river may not take them down after all. We two may be hanged for to-night’s work, Gideon.”

“Hanged? Oh, yes! See now, Mani, why I would have it done with Mausers. Their bullet makes a small hole, our Martini bullet makes a large hole. And there is not a Mauser or a Lee-Metford in the Wildschutsberg. Afterwards our guns are examined, and they are the old Martinis. Our bullet does not fit the hole. Now, do you not see, you *eselkop*?”

“*Ja*, I see. But—*stil, man*. Here they come.”

A clink of the hoof of a shod horse coming down the track was borne faintly upward. The two assassins crouched in their ambush, a tigerish glare in their eyes. Their pieces were levelled.

“Ready, Hermanus,” whispered Gideon Roux. “When they come six paces the other side of yon white stone, then shoot.”

Chapter Eight.

Tragical—And Aletta.

Hans Vermaak had and had not carried out his instructions; which is to say that in so far as he had he had done so by halves.

By nature he was a genial soul was Hans Vermaak, by inclination a jovial one. He would not wantonly have hurt a fly or an Englishman, let alone so companionable a one as Colvin Kershaw; but then the terrible point to which racial hatred was worked up had engendered a feverish thirst for conspiring that was almost Celtic, in the stolid and pre-eminently practical Boer. The discovery of the concealed arms would be a serious thing, a very serious thing, but of its seriousness, great as that was, they took an exaggerated view. Inherently the Boer is a great respecter of the law and of the person of its representative or representatives, and most of these were sufficiently unsophisticated to look upon their undoubtedly treasonable proceeding as a hanging matter if brought to the notice of the authorities. Hence none felt any qualm as to the strong measures to be adopted towards the hostile sharer of the secret.

In vino Veritas! When we say that none felt a qualm we should have exempted Hans Vermaak—in his cups. The misgiving expressed by Gideon Roux as to the potential liberality of his spouse in the matter of the grog was not unfounded. There was enough in the bottle to make three Dutchmen—two would not partake—very lively, and the liveliest of all was Hans Vermaak. He became, moreover, enormously fraternal towards Colvin, who was deftly drawing him out, and finally did exactly as Gideon Roux had predicted, insisted upon his remaining the night, for he, Hans, was Gideon’s brother-in-law, and therefore one of the family. He forgot the patriot cause, and only remembered it to declare that this was too good an Englishman to be shot, and so forth, which declaration under ordinary circumstances might mean nothing, but read by the light of subsequent events and the speaker’s manner, Colvin took to mean rather a great deal.

The latter made several futile attempts at getting away, and at length succeeded. He himself, although he had borne his share, was in no wise affected by the liquor he had been taking—for the matter of that he could have drunk the lot of them under the table over and over again—and throughout the talk, which became more and more boisterous and unguarded, had kept an ear open and an eye keenly alive to every sign. But by the time he did break loose, and Gert was standing before the door with the horses saddled up, he realised that the more prudential side of his resolution had failed and that an infinitesimal portion of his homeward journey would be accomplished by daylight.

He had bidden good-bye all-round—not failing to observe during the process the awful look of scare upon the face of his hostess as she just touched his hand with a limp, moist paw. He had paced his horse about a hundred yards from the door, not sorry to see the last of the frowsy, dirty place, when he heard his name called. Turning in the saddle, he beheld the genial Hans hurrying towards him.

“Which way do you go home by?” said the Dutchman, somewhat flurriedly.

“Oh, the usual way, Hans.”

“*So*? You are going home, then.”

“Oh yes.”

“But you must not. Klip Poort is bad to go through at night *Ja*, it is bad, very bad. Go some other road. There is the road to Stephanus De la Rey’s, for instance. Go by it.”

“But it is about twice the distance,” objected Colvin, who began to read considerable meaning into the other’s anxiety regarding his movements.

“That matters nothing. Look, you are a good sort of Englishman and I like you. Klip Poort is bad to go through at night, very bad.”

“Very well, Hans, I’ll take your advice. So long.”

Klip Poort, the point referred to, was a narrow, rugged defile overhung with large rocks, about five miles on his homeward way. As well as the road passing through, it likewise gave passage to the Sneeuw River, which, when full to any great extent, flooded the roadway to some depth. It might very well be to this form of danger that the Boer's hidden warning applied, and yet some unaccountable instinct warned Colvin that it was not.

"Gert."

"Baas?"

"Did you hear what Hans Vermaak was saying just now?"

"Part of it, sir."

"Why do you think he wanted us not to go back by way of Klip Poort?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Gert, you are an ass."

"Perhaps he thought the river might be 'down,' sir. The clouds are very thick and black up in the *bergen*."

"Yes."

An indescribable feeling of helpless apprehensiveness came over Colvin, and indeed it is a creepy thing the consciousness that at any step during the next half-dozen miles or so you are a target for a concealed enemy whose marksmanship is unerring. For this was about what he had reduced the situation to in his own mind, and within the same heartily anathematised the foolish curiosity which had moved him to go up and explore the hiding-place of the concealed arms. That Gideon Roux and his confederate were aware that he shared their secret he now believed. They must have waited to watch him, and have seen him come out of the cave; and with this idea the full force of Vermaak's warning came home

to him.

But was that warning genuine? Was it not destined rather to induce him to take the other way? It was impossible to determine. Sorely perplexed, he rode on, thinking the matter over, and that deeply. The sky overhead grew darker and darker with the spread of a great cloud—the earth with the fall of evening. There was a moon, but it was obscured. By the time the rocks which marked the entrance to the poort came into view it was already night.

Two ways branched here—one his ordinary way home, the other that which Hans Vermaak had urged him to take. Some twenty feet down, at the bottom of a precipitous slope, was the river bed, dry save for a shallow, stagnant reach here and there. Which way should he take? Now was the time to decide.

“Get on, Aasvogel, you fool! Ah, would you, then?”

This to his horse, accompanied by a sharp rowelling with each heel. For the animal had stopped short with a suddenness calculated to unseat and certainly irritate the rider, and was backing and shying like the panic-stricken idiot it was; the cause of all this fluster being a white stone standing almost vertically up from the roadside, in the gloom looking for all the world like the traditional ghost.

“Whigge—whirr!” Something hummed through the air, and that so near he could feel the draught. Two jets of flame had darted forth from the hillside above, simultaneously with a dry, double crack. Two more followed, but had it been a hundred Colvin was utterly powerless to investigate, for his horse, which had already sprung forward beneath the sharp dig of the spurs, now took to wild and frantic flight, and for some moments was completely out of hand. By the time he got it in hand again he had been carried a good mile from the scene of this startling though not wholly unexpected occurrence.

Two things came into Colvin’s mind, as eventually he reined in his panting, snorting steed. One of the bullets, at any rate, had missed him very narrowly, but by just the distance the animal had backed when

shying from the ghostly object which had scared it; and but for the fact of his being a first-rate rider the suddenness of the bolt would have unseated him, and he would now be lying in the road at the mercy of his would-be assassins. But—where was Gert?

He looked around. The clouds had parted a little and the moon was visible through a rift thus formed; indeed it was the sudden flash of the moonlight upon the white stone that had so terrified the horse at first. The light revealed the mountain slopes rising up around, but of his servant there was no sign. He listened intently. No sound, save the creaking of the saddle, caused by the violently heaving flanks of his panting steed, and now and again a mutter of distant thunder away up in the mountains. Where was Gert?

Dismounting, he led the animal a little way off the road, and sat down under a large boulder to think out the situation. The warning of Hans Vermaak again came into his mind. It looked genuine as viewed by subsequent lights, but whether it was so or not, it was useless, for the murderers had altered their original plan, clearly resolving to provide against the contingency of his choosing the other of the two roads, by shooting him before he should come to the point where these parted. Well, they had not shot him, but it had been a narrow shave—very.

But if they had not shot him had they shot Gert? It looked uncommonly like it. Only the four shots had been fired—of that he felt certain—but since his horse had taken matters into its own hands, or, rather, legs, he had obtained neither sight nor sound of Gert. Seated there in the darkness, he was conscious of a very considerable feeling of indignation begotten of a dual reason—that he had had a mean advantage taken of him, and that his property, in the person of Gert Bondelzwart, had been interfered with.

What was to be done next? Should he go back? To do so would be to commit an act of fatal rashness, for it would be to expose himself once more to the fire of his concealed cowardly foes, who would not be likely to let slip a second opportunity. True, he had his revolver, but not for a moment would they be likely to come near enough to give him any chance of using it. No—to go back would be simply throwing away his

life. Had it been a white man and a comrade, he would unhesitatingly have done so. But Gert was a Griqua, and, though not exactly a savage, had all the cunning and resource and endurance of generations of savage ancestry. If he were alive, why then, amid the rocks and the darkness, he would soon elude his enemies; if he were dead, Colvin did not see any sense in throwing away his own life merely to ascertain that fact.

The moon had gone in, and a misty scud-wrack spreading itself overhead was creeping around the dim crags on high. There was a smell of rain in the air, and a fitful puff of wind came singing down the valley, laden with an icy breath. Colvin shivered, and as he looked anxiously skyward a large drop or two of rain plashed down on his face. There would be a deluge in a moment, and he had nothing to meet it with save the clothes in which he stood up.

Suddenly the horse, which had been standing with its head down still panting after its race and scare, pricked up its ears and snorted, then began backing away. Colvin had just time to seize the bridle-rein, or it would have been off in wild stampede. And now every vein in his body quivered with excitement. His revolver was in his hand. Let them come. The chances now were something like equal.

But it is not a pleasant thing to know that you are being stalked in the dark by a persistent and murderous foe; and as for some minutes no further sign occurred the excitement became dashed with something like apprehension, then succeeded a feeling of relief. The horse had been scared by one of the ordinary sights of the veldt—a sneaking jackal—perhaps a meerkat—in short, anything moving will startle a horse in the dark, let alone one so thoroughly “in the dispositions” for panic as this one now was. But just then a renewed snort, accompanied by a plunge and a violent tugging at the bridle-rein, set all Colvin’s pulses bounding again; and though he endeavoured to do so silently, so as not to betray his exact whereabouts, the hammer of his pistol, as he drew it up, gave forth a sharp click upon the stillness.

Out of the darkness came a voice—a beseeching voice—saying in Boer Dutch:

“Nay, Baas, don’t shoot. My well-loved Baas, don’t shoot.”

“Gert, you fool, come here.”

“Yes, it is Gert, Baas,” answered the voice in a tone of intense delight and relief. “*Maagtig*! I thought it was those *schelm* Boers. I thought you were shot. I thought I was shot. I thought we were all shot.”

“Well, we are not. But where is Pansy?”

“She was shot, Baas. Ah, the poor mare! She just sank down in the road with her legs under her. I had hardly time to roll off when she was up again, gave a stagger, and toppled over into the river bed. I crouched down in the *sluit* by the roadside and lay perfectly still—still as a hare—until the moon went in again. Then I crept away. *Ja*, it was a fearful time. I thought I could feel the bullets through me every minute. *Maagtig*! but he is a *schelm* Boer is Gideon Roux.”

“Gideon Roux? Why do you think it was Gideon Roux, Gert?”

“It was, Baas. He and Hermanus Delport. I would swear to it,” rejoined the Griqua excitedly. “They looked murder when they were talking to me. There was murder in their faces, *Ja*, it is those two.”

Colvin cursed to himself, and vowed revenge. He was fond of his horses, and these two rascals had shot one of his best. At the same time he owned to himself ruefully that the chance of carrying out such vengeance was remote. At present he was far more an object for their vengeance than they for his.

“Come now, Gert, we must get along. Lay hold of my stirrup-leather and trot alongside.”

They got into the road again, but with the moon behind the cloud and the rain that was beginning to fall it became very dark. What if the vindictive Dutchmen, guessing they had failed, were to take a short cut behind the ridge and *voerlij* them further down? The thought was unpleasant, to put it mildly.

Now there was a whirl and a roar in the air, and, in an icy blast, the rain swooped down in torrents. Colvin, destitute of macintosh or wrap of any kind, was soaked through and through in about two minutes, and shivered exceedingly. Fortunately the deluge was behind him, or, coming down obliquely as it did, Aasvogel could hardly have made headway against it. Now and then a vivid flash of lightning gleamed forth, showing the sheer of the great crags overhead and the glistening slopes studded with wet stones.

“Hurry up, Gert. Put your best foot forward, man. We have to race the river this shot. The Ratels Hoek drift will be running twelve feet deep before we get there if we don’t look smart.”

And the Griqua, puffing and perspiring, did put his best foot forward.

Stephanus De la Rey, having just finished his supper, had come out on to the stoep to look at the weather. The deluge of the last hour had subsided, but the clouds, black as ink and unbroken, gave promise of a repetition of the same.

“Aha!” he said, gleefully to himself. “The drought is at an end. The river is already coming down well, and the dams must be overflowing. I shall pump a lot of water on to the lucerne beds to-morrow. But— What is that?”

The clink of shod horse hoofs came upon the wind through the swirl and roar of the fast-swelling river. He stood listening intently. The sound ceased, then arose again, now on this side of the drift. The next moment a very soaked and dripping horseman emerged into the light of the windows, and beside him trotted a pedestrian, no less soaked and dripping, but very much blown.

“Why, Colvin, where are you from? *Maagtig, kerel*! but you are wet,” he cried. Then raising his voice: “Windvogel, Swaartbooi. Turn out, you *schepsels*, and take the Baas’ horse.”

“Wet? I’m nearly dead with cold, Stephanus. So bring along a

soepje, old chap, and let's get to a fire and dry myself."

"Dry yourself? It's dry clothes you have to get into. Come this way. My *volk* will see to your horse. Here now, what can we get you into? My things are too wide for you, Cornelis' and Jan's are too small. You will have to get into some of mine."

And having dragged out of a drawer a complete refit for his guest, whom he had marched straight into his own room, the genial Dutchman went out and reappeared in a moment with a decanter of excellent "dop" and glasses.

"That's grand!" ejaculated Colvin, fortifying himself with a liberal *soepje* during the changing process. But not yet was he going to impart his adventures to his host. The latter had a great laugh over his attempts to carry off the fit of clothes that were both too long and too wide.

"Well, no matter," he said. "You are dry, at any rate, and by this time warm. So come along in and have some supper."

Colvin followed his host into the dining-room. The evening meal was just over, but already a place had been cleared and laid for him. As he shook hands with Mrs De la Rey, he noticed a girl—one he did not recollect ever having seen before. She was just receiving a dish from a Hottentot servant, and arranging it on the table at the place laid for him. Then, turning, she came up to him, with outstretched hand, and a bright smile of cordial welcome on her face.

"Oh, I had forgotten," said Stephanus. "You two have not met before. Colvin, this is my eldest girl—Aletta."

Chapter Nine.

"Only a Boer Girl."

A vision of the portraits flashed through Colvin's mind—the portraits at which he had so often looked, with but faint interest, representing as

they did a heavy-looking awkward girl, with hunched shoulders, whom he had set down in his own mind as a mere squat, ugly replica of Condaas. One of the portraits itself stared him in the face even now, over and beyond the shoulder of its original. And this was the original! He saw before him a tall and graceful girl, straight as a dart. Her head, slightly thrown back, as she greeted him with frank and self-possessed composure, was beautifully poised, and crowned with a bounteous coil of silky brown hair. She had lustrous hazel eyes, which could light up in a wonderful way when animated, and a fresh and delicate colour. He noticed, too, that the hand which he took in his was long and soft and tapering—in short, she looked thoroughbred from head to heel, and yet, judged by the most ordinary canons of beauty, he recognised that Aletta De la Rey was not even pretty.

Her features were lacking. They were not regular, and the mouth was somewhat too large. But it was redeemed by white and even teeth, and a way of rippling into a sudden, whole-hearted, and very musical laugh; indeed, the whole expression of her face would light up in a way that rendered it subtly but most unequivocally taking and attractive.

Now, as she greeted Colvin Kershaw for the first time a gleam of just that sudden mirth shot from her eyes. He, reading it aright, became alive to the fact that he did not show to his best advantage, rigged out in a suit of her father’s clothes, which was both too long and too wide for him, and, for once in a way, he owned, within his inner self, to a consciousness of feeling ever so slightly disconcerted. But he said quietly:

“Be merciful, Miss De la Rey. At any rate, I am dry and warm after my soaking, for which I feel devoutly grateful.”

The colour rushed into Aletta’s face as a very wave, but the laugh did not go out of her eyes; on the contrary, it intensified in its struggle not to break forth.

“What a thought-reader you are, Mr Kershaw!” she answered. “But, don’t—please don’t think me very rude, but—I’ve—I’ve heard so much about you that—I seem to know you well already—”

And then the laugh would no longer be kept down. It broke forth in a merry, hearty, silvery peal.

“Aletta!” cried her mother, horror-stricken. “How can you be so rude? What will Mr Kershaw think of you? And when are you going to begin and pour out his coffee for him?”

But, whatever Colvin thought or did not think, there was something so entirely infectious in that laugh that he was joining in it himself with a whole-heartedness which left nothing to be desired; and there was the strange spectacle of two people who had just met for the first time, laughing—as they afterwards put it to each other—like a pair of idiots, one at the other, and that other joining heartily in the joke against himself.

“It’s—it’s all right, Miss De la Rey,” said the latter, when sufficiently recovered to be able to speak coherently. “I am glad to hear you say you seem to know me so well already, because in that case you wilt know that I like nothing better than to be treated as one of the family.”

It was a tactful speech, and the girl looked thoroughly capable of appreciating it. So, too, was her mother, who remarked:

“It’s so good of you to say so, Mr Kershaw. Really, I don’t know what has come over Aletta. They don’t seem to have improved at all in Cape Town.”

Colvin, to himself, opined that they rather had; indeed, exhaustively so, remembering the weird impression of her set up within his mind by the portraits taken before she left for that capital. He knew, however, that the tone in which this reproach was conveyed took the sting out of the words, which, indeed, it clean belied.

“I didn’t know that your eldest daughter was even expected back, Mrs De la Rey,” he said.

“No? Aletta came back rather suddenly, and she has come back with all sorts of notions she had better have left behind. Of course, all our people down there belong to the Bond, and we support the Bond

ourselves. Yet politics and war-talk over and over again are not fit subjects for girls."

"Now, mother, you are far too old-fashioned. I am going to brush you quite up to date," answered Aletta brightly, but in a sort of caressing tone. "And you must not start Mr Kershaw with a bad opinion of me, like that. It isn't fair."

Colvin owned to himself that that would be difficult, inasmuch as he had started with too good a one on sight and his own responsibility. He had been observing her narrowly while he sat there thoroughly enjoying an excellent supper, and already had not failed to notice that she had a soft and perfectly refined voice and pretty ways. Unlike the others, her English was without accent, save for the little tricks of speech by which you may pick out a born Cape Colonist in any crowd, such as clipping the final "r," or ever so slight a hardening of the vowel at the beginning of the word, and others; tricks of speech which are not unpleasing, and are, moreover, as fully prevalent among children born in the Colony, of emigrated English parents and without a drop of Dutch blood in them.

"But where are the other girls, Mrs De la Rey?" he asked.

"Away. They went to stay with their uncle, Piet Venter, for a few days just before we knew Aletta was coming back. They will be home to-morrow, or as soon as he can bring them."

"Who is that talking over there?" croaked a feminine voice from a far corner, in Dutch—a voice that sounded both irritable and antique. "It seems like that of an Englishman. Nay—I don't know what this good land of ours is coming to. The tongue our fathers spoke with before us was good enough for me in my young days. Now everybody must be chattering in English—a tongue only fit for baboons."

"It is Tant' Plessis," said Mrs De la Rey in English and an undertone, "a sort of distant cousin of Stephanus'; I had forgotten she was in the room. She doesn't say a word for a whole day, sometimes."

Colvin, who had now finished his meal, went over to the speaker,

who was seated in a huge armchair in a dark corner. She was a typical old-time Boer *vrouw*, large-faced, heavy, and shapeless. She had small eyes, and her thin hair, which, however, was still almost black, was plastered down flat upon her head.

"*Daag, Tanta*," (Good-day, Aunt) he said, extending his hand. The old woman stared at him for a moment in a sort of semi-distrustful, semi-resentful way, then touched it with a flabby paw.

"*Daag, Neef*," (Good-day, nephew) she replied, then subsided, leaving the other to carry on the conversation—which he did, descanting mainly upon the fine rain which was still falling. She cut him short ruthlessly by calling out:

"Gertruida, who is he?"

Mrs De la Rey, thus invoked, came over to explain.

"Ah, yes. An Englishman! I could have seen that by the way he talks. He does not talk well."

Colvin, glancing round sedately, caught the flash of mirth which had begun to light up Aletta's face. He thought there was some fun coming directly.

"Who is he? What is his name?" she went on.

"It's Mr Kershaw, Tanta," explained Mrs De la Rey. "He often comes here."

"I asked what his name was," shrilled the old woman, bringing the end of her stick down hard upon the floor. "Is it Abram Kershaw, or Izaak Kershaw, or what is it?"

"No, Tanta. It's Colvin—Colvin Kershaw," replied that worthy himself, conscious of something between a gurgle and a sob in the direction of Aletta.

"Calvin. Oh, yes. Calvin—Calvinus, that is. You have a good name,

nephew. *Ja*, I have often heard the *predikant* talk of Calvinus—and preach about him too. Johan was his first name. *Ja*, he was a good man was Calvinus. He killed a great many Roman Catholics—burnt them all. I have often heard Mynheer say so."

The gurgling in Aletta's direction was now becoming convulsive. Colvin himself was inconveniently infected.

"Perhaps you are of his family, nephew," went on Tant' Plessis. "His grandson, perhaps? You must be of his family if you have his name. Well, follow in his footsteps—though to be sure there could not be such a good and great man as Calvinus. He burnt ever so many Roman Catholics. I've heard Mynheer say so; and if he does not know, who does?"

This was too much. Aletta fairly broke down, and, striving to flee from the room in blind precipitation, was brought up in the doorway by the stalwart and substantial proportions of her father, who was entering, and against whom she collided violently.

"So—so! What fun is on now?" cried Stephanus, at once infected by her mirth. "Aletta, you are a very wicked little girl. You are always laughing. Only wicked little girls always laugh, and at their elders too, I believe. What is it, Tanta? You have been amusing the child?"

This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance.

"*Nee—nee*! I have not been amusing anybody," replied the old lady very testily. "I do not know what girls are coming to in these days—jabbering nothing but English—a tongue only fit for baboons—and laughing at their elders."

"Softly, softly, Tanta. There is an Englishman here!" expostulated Stephanus, with a wink at Colvin.

"*Ja*, I know there is," was the still more testy reply. "But he is not like other Englishmen. His name is Calvin. He is of the family of that good man Calvinus, who burnt ever so many Roman Catholics. He did. Ask Mynheer if he did not. I have heard him say so ever so many times, both

in church and out. And he ought to know. I have been telling this Englishman I hoped he would ever remember his grandfather's example."

"Let the joke stand, Stephanus," said Colvin in an undertone. "It's about the very best I've heard for such a long time."

But the next utterance put forward by this weird old party was destined to prove somewhat less amusing—to the object thereof, at any rate.

"When is this Englishman going to marry Wenlock's sister?" she blared out, during an interval of profound silence, and talking sublimely past the object of the remark. "When is it to be, Gertruida?"

Poor Mrs De la Rey grew red with confusion.

"What are you saying, Tanta?" she stammered.

"What am I saying? Why, he is engaged to her. Several people have told me. Of course he is. She is the only English girl here, and he is the only Englishman. So of course they are engaged. That settles it."

"But, Tanta, I assure you I am not engaged to anybody," struck in Colvin. Coming on the top of his own meditations only that morning the remark jarred on him. Somehow, being made as it was this evening, it more than doubly jarred on him, why, he could not have told then, but he knew afterwards.

"Not engaged to her?" repeated this antique terror. "Then you ought to be. All young men ought to be married as soon as possible; it is a duty they owe to themselves and the community, and you are rather an old young man. *Nee*, I do not believe you. Your grandfather, the great and good Calvinus, would not have said what was not true; and I have heard this from many people, so it must be true."

"Well, it is not true, Tanta, however many people say it," said Colvin, with emphasis, and an unpleasant consciousness of feeling ever so slightly foolish. Aletta, he could see, was in the wildest throes of

suppressed mirth, and Stephanus had to flee the room and go and stand out in the pouring rain and laugh till he cried. “I tell you it is absolutely true that I am not engaged to anybody, and am not in the least likely to be.”

“Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, nephew,” retorted the old woman, whacking the floor with her stick. “What do you suppose the good God gave you health and strength for—”

“No, this is getting too thick,” said Colvin in an undertone.

“Good-night, Tanta. I want to see Stephanus upon some very important business before he goes to bed. Good-night”; and he made for the door.

The old woman subsided, nodded a little, and then made up her mind to go to bed. When she had done so Colvin returned, accompanied by Stephanus. Aletta’s bright face lit up at sight of him, and with the consciousness that she could now laugh unrestrained.

“Upon my word, Miss De la Rey,” he said, “your respected relative is something of a terror. First, she wants to make me three or four hundred years old by assigning me for grandfather some historic old bore who flourished in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, I forget which. Then she is eager to rush me into a haphazard matrimonial contract. No, really it is laying it on just a little too thick.”

“Oh, it was awfully funny. But, do you know, Mr Kershaw, we had heard just the same thing? *We* didn’t tell her, you know, but we had heard it,” said Aletta, her face brimming over with mischief.

“Well, you heard what has no foundation in fact, what is entirely untrue,” he answered, with some vague stirring over the emphasis wherewith he did answer, remembering the psychological moment of two or three nights ago.

“You met the Patriot here not long since, did you not, Mr Kershaw?” said Aletta, changing the subject with perfect ease.

“Which Patriot? There are so many patriots now,” he replied.

“Why, *the* Patriot. The one from Pretoria, of course.”

“Andries Botma? Oh yes, I met him. We had some very interesting talk together. I had long wanted to see him.”

“But—but—you are not of us,” said the girl, looking up quickly from her work-basket.

“This little girl is a red-hot patriot, Colvin,” said Stephanus, resting a large hand lightly upon the silky brown coil. “But, to be serious, I hope this will all quiet down and find its level.”

“Of course; are we not all jolly good friends together, Stephanus? We don’t want to be at each other’s throats at the bidding of other people.”

This remark brought Aletta up.

“But you said you had long wanted to meet the Patriot, Mr Kershaw. Why did you want to see him, then?”

“Because he is something unique—a really honest agitator. He means what he says and believes every word of it most thoroughly. He is full of *verve* and fire—in a word, a strong man. His is an immensely striking personality.”

“Well done, well done,” cried Aletta, clapping her hands enthusiastically. “I shall make a convert of you yet. Oh yes, I shall.”

It became bedtime. As she gave him his candle Colvin once more could not help being struck with the refined grace of Aletta’s every movement—the soft, clear, thoroughbred tone of her voice. She seemed somehow to have been cast in a different mould from her sisters, to whom he had always pictured her as inferior both in looks and presence. It fairly puzzled him. The tones of her voice seemed to linger long after he had retired. He had had a long, tiring, exciting day—had undergone a very narrow escape for his life—which circumstance, by the way, he had not yet mentioned to his host, being desirous to sleep on it first, and

having enjoined strict silence upon his retainer—yet, now that he should have dropped into a sound, recuperative slumber, he could not. And the sole reason that he could not—as he must perforce admit to himself in the darkness and privacy of his chamber—was the recollection of this girl whom he had met but the first time that night—here, on a remote Dutch farm in the Wildschutsbergen. And she was “only a Boer girl!”

Chapter Ten.

“If—.”

“Well, child, and what do you think of ‘our only Englishman’?” said Mrs De la Rey, as they were putting away the “early coffee” things the following morning.

“I like him, mother,” replied Aletta. “I oughtn’t to because I have heard so much about him. That is sure to start one with a prejudice against anybody. Still, I think I shall. Oh, wasn’t Tant’ Plessis killing about ‘the only Englishman’ and ‘the only English girl’? By the way, was there anything in it?”

“Don’t ask me. *I* don’t know,” laughed her mother. “Only he seemed a little too anxious to deny it. One can never tell. May Wenlock is a very pretty girl.”

“Is she? I never saw her. I remember Frank Wenlock—a good sort of boy, but something of a lout. Now, this one is ever so different.”

“*Oh, mijn Vaterland*!” grunted a voice from the armchair. “There they are, jabbering English again—a tongue only fit for baboons.”

Mother and daughter looked round quickly, exchanged a meaning smile, and went on with their subject. They were accustomed to the old woman’s growls, and took no more notice of them than if she had been a discontented child.

“Let’s drive over and see the Wenlocks one day, mother,” said Aletta.

“I am curious to see the only English girl here. Besides, I shall be able to see in a moment whether there is really any fire beneath Tant’ Plessis’ smoke. Yes—that will be great fun.”

“What sort of ideas have you brought back with you from Cape Town, child?” cried Mrs De la Rey, apparently shocked though really intensely amused.

“That’s all right, old mother. I have become ‘advanced’—in fact, down there everybody took me for an English girl. And I have learnt to ride a bicycle. No, really, I wish I had one here. Only imagine Tanta’s face if I went skimming along the road there down to the gate and back on two wheels. Heavens, I believe it would kill her. She’d get a fit,” And again that silvery peal rang out long and clear.

“Aletta! Don’t make such a noise, child. Why, you have quite startled Mr Kershaw—look, away down there at the bottom of the garden. He is looking up this way, quite startled.”

“Is he? Where? Oh, I see,” following her mother’s glance through the window. “I think I’ll go and talk to him. He is going to be fun, I believe. You know, I like the English—those of the better sort—although I am a thorough patriot. This one is of the better sort—you can tell directly you see him, and you can hear it directly he opens his mouth. Oh *yes*, I’ve seen lots of them. Yes, I shall go and talk to him.”

Away she went, singing to herself. Her mother could see her through the window, stopping here and there to pick a flower or train up a drooping bough. Colvin did not seem aware of her approach. His head was bent down, and he seemed to be filling a pipe.

“Gertruida!”

Mrs De la Rey turned with a start.

“What is it, Tanta?”

“Where has the girl gone?”

“Who? Aletta?”

“Who? Aletta? What other girl has just gone out, I would like to know?” snapped Tant’ Plessis, bringing down her stick hard upon the floor. “Where has she gone?”

“Gone? Only to look at the garden after the rain,” answered poor Mrs De la Rey, somewhat guiltily.

“Now you are lying, Gertruida,” rapped out the old woman. “Ah, if I could only give you the *strop* again as I used to do when you were a child!” shaking her stick viciously. “You, a mother of a grown-up family, to lie like that. Really you are a case to bring before Mynheer and the Kerkraad (Church Council). You know perfectly well that that girl has gone out to flirt with the Englishman.”

“She has not, Tant’ Plessis. You have no right to say such things,” retorted Mrs De la Rey, stung to momentary wrath. “It is you who are saying what is not true about my child.”

“*Stil, stil*! So that is the result of all the *strop* I used to give you, Gertruida—to call your elders liars! You think I know no English. I do, although I would sooner die than speak the accursed tongue. I heard Aletta say she was going out to flirt with the Englishman.”

“She didn’t say ‘flirt,’ Tanta. She said ‘talk.’”

“Well, well! What is the difference, I would like to know? To go out like that—to go up to a man and talk with him all alone in a garden! So that is the result of sending her to learn English ways. English ways, indeed! No wonder the English were made, like the heathen of old, to fall before the rifles of the Patriots. They were. I have heard Mynheer say so, and if he doesn’t know, who does?”

“I don’t care what Mynheer says—or thinks, Tanta. I shall bring up my children in my own way,” flashed out Mrs De la Rey, losing patience.

“In the devil’s own way you mean, Gertruida,” said the other, waxing very portentous and solemn. “Look at my own children—five girls and

seven boys. My girls got plenty of *strop*”—(“Surely they did!” interpolated the listener to herself)—“and now that they are married they give theirs plenty too. For what says the Prophet Solomon in the Holy Book: ‘Spare the *strop* and you spoil the girl.’ The Prophet did say that, for I have heard Mynheer read it out in church.” The speaker herself could scarcely read. “Look at my girls. *They* learnt no English ways.”

In imagination Mrs De la Rey did so look, and beheld five women who were exact counterparts of their proud parent, albeit younger presentments, and each owning a large brood as heavy as herself. But she had had enough of this lecture, and began to cast about for a pretext to depart.

Aletta the while was tripping down the garden path, pausing, as we have said, as though to tend the flowers had been her sole object in coming out, and as she walked she sang:

“Spreek, Bronkersspruit,
Met eerbied uit;
Noem Potchefstrom by naam.
Pretoria en Langsnek pas,
Ingogo en Majuba vas,
Waar ons Verlosser met ons was,
Vermeld die al te saam.
Vermeld die al te saam.”

Colvin Kershaw pricked up his ears, but did not raise his head. For that which she was singing was a snatch of the Transvaal “Volkslied,” the Republican National Anthem. She was singing it *at* him, of course. This was really getting funny. She was quite close to him now.

“Ons vrye vlag
Geef nou onstag,
Die vierkleur waal in eer,
En wapper oer die Republiek;
Geen mag, geen lis, geen politiek
Van Kaffer, Brit, of Jingo-kliek,

Haal ooit die vlag weer neer.
Haal ooit die vlag weer neer!”

(Note 2.)

“Good morning, Mr Kershaw. You are up early. Englishmen are not fond of early rising as a rule.”

“Good morning, Miss De la Rey. You seem in a vastly patriotic mood this morning. Can a poor Englishman by any chance do anything that comes within measurable distance of being right?”

Aletta laughed, but not quite in the same whole-hearted way she usually did. There was something in the look of this man, standing there, easy, good-humoured, smiling, which seemed to strike her. She had been favourably impressed with him the evening before, when he had not shown externally to the best advantage, and, whatever cheap ethicists may propound to the contrary, externals and impressions go very much hand in hand. Now he was clad in his own clothes, not in scratch garments many sizes too wide for him. As she had just been telling her mother, she had seen at a glance that he was thoroughbred; now he looked more so than ever.

“Oh yes, he can—sometimes,” she said. “You know, I like the English of a certain sort, though I detest those of another.”

“Well, why do you bear down upon me singing an aggressive war-song—at me? *At* me, of course.”

“Was I?”

“You know you were. You were rubbing in Bronker’s Spruit, and Ingogo, and Majuba, and all that.”

“It’s rather chilly after the rain,” she said, looking around with a shiver. “But it is going to be a lovely day.”

Her irrelevant prediction was true enough. Not a cloud remained in the sky, which was deepening more and more to its vivid daylight blue, as

the sun, just rising over a great ironstone krantz which crested the range beyond the river, flooded the wide valley, dissipating the faint mist engendered by the night's moisture, and causing the raindrops still lingering on the Karroo bushes and scattered mimosa to scintillate like the purest diamonds. Birds twittered among the willows by the dam, and in the quince hedges, and away over the wide veldt, the cock koorhaans answered each other in their shrill, barking crow, as though rejoicing in the glowing splendour of the newly-born day.

"Yes, I think it is," he answered. "But, to come back to what we were saying. I don't think that 'Volkslied' is much of a song, you know. For instance, 'Van Kaffer, Brit, of Jingo-kliek' is a pretty good sample of doggerel. Then, again, the whole thing is a little too pietistic for ordinary use. The tune is a fine one, but the words—well, they are a trifle poor."

"Are they? Oh yes—and what about 'God Save the Queen'? Isn't that just as pietistic? And 'Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks'—how is that for doggerel, eh?" And, firing up with her subject, Aletta's face became quite animated, and the colour rushed over it in such wise as to render it very attractive—at least, so thought the onlooker, and secretly rejoiced in the situation, enjoying it hugely.

"H'm, well, perhaps. But, doesn't it strike you, Miss De la Rey, that you are wasting your cartridges by blazing them into me? Why, I am more than half of your way of thinking already. Ask your father if I am not."

The girl's face changed entirely, taking on a wondrously pleased expression. The defiant one had utterly vanished. Colvin began fumbling for a match wherewith to relight his pipe, which had gone out. In reality he was thinking what there was about this girl which appealed to him so strongly. She was not even pretty. Yet, standing there, tall and graceful and fresh, in the early morning; a very soul of mind looking out of her eyes with the enthusiasm born of a cherished subject, she was more—she was marvellously attractive. The strange, lingering feeling which her presence had left upon him the night before was intensified here in the prosaic morning hour. What was it?

“There are patriots, however,” he went on, “who are not always shining angels of light. Listen now, and I’ll tell you what happened to me yesterday in that connection. Would you like to hear?”

“Of course I would.”

Then he told her—told her everything, from the discovery of the concealed arms to the suspicious non appearance of the man he had gone to see; of Hans Vermaak’s mysterious warning, and the subsequent ample justification thereof—the narrow escape he and his servant had had for their lives when fired upon murderously in the darkness by ambushed assailants—up to the time of his arriving at Ratels Hoek, when she had first seen him. Told her the whole story—her—this girl whom twelve hours ago he had never seen—this girl only just out of her teens. Told her, when as yet he had not told her father, a strong man of mature age, and one of his most intimate friends. Why did he do it? He hardly knew himself, unless it were that something in her personality appealed to him as marking her out not merely from the rest of her sex, but from the general ruck.

She listened attentively, absorbedly; her eyes fixed upon his face.

“Yes, that was bad,” she said. “But then, you know, Mr Kershaw, as you English say—there are black sheep in every flock, and the people back there in the Wildschutsberg are a low class of Boer, very little removed from *bijwoners* (squatter labourers). But”—as if she had said too much and was trying to cover it—“do you not think they may have been only wanting to frighten you; to play a joke on you?”

“It was a joke that cost me an uncommonly good mare,” he answered. “The poor brute was plugged through and rolled into the river. I dare say she is half-way down to the sea by this time—as I and Gert would have been but for, I suppose, Providence.”

She was looking grave enough now, and for a few moments made no reply.

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

He fancied a look of relief came into her face. She must be intensely imbued with the cause of her countrymen, with racial partisanship, he decided.

“Nothing? But if you think they tried to murder you?”

“Oh, I don’t think much of that. I’m not going to bother any more about it. Why should I?”

“But you English are always such a—well, vindictive race. It is one of your favourite boasts that you never let anybody get the better of you—that you are always even with them—I think that is the phrase,” she said, and there was a strange look upon her face which rather puzzled him.

“Are we? Well, here’s an exception then. Life is too short to bother oneself about trifles merely for the sake of ‘being even with’ somebody. Likely one of these days Gideon Roux will be the first to be sorry he shot at me. He needn’t have done it. The cave affair and the rifles didn’t concern me. I shouldn’t have given it away. But he won’t come down with the value of the mare, because I believe the poor devil is none too flush at any time. So what does it matter?”

That strange look upon Aletta’s face deepened. He did not quite know how to read it.

“Have you told father about this?” she said.

“Not yet. I had meant to. I don’t think I shall at all now. It doesn’t seem worth while.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

“I don’t know.”

Again they stood looking at each other in silence, as though reading each other. He was thinking of how he had seen her last night—bright, sparkling, girlish—full of humour and merriment; yet even then he had

judged her temperament to have another side. Now his judgment was borne out. She could show herself serious, grave, judicious—in short, full of character when a matter of moment was under discussion. She for her part was thinking that of all the men she had met, and she had met many—for Stephanus De la Rey was connected with some of the best old Dutch families at the Cape, and in the society of the capital, Dutch or English, Aletta had not merely had the *entrée*, but had been in request—she had never come into contact with one who was quite like this. He was right outside her ordinary experience.

A sound of approaching hoof-strokes aroused them—on Aletta's part with something of a start. A bridle path threaded the garden here, affording a considerable short cut up from the river drift, and the horseman now advancing along this had come out through the quince hedge almost upon them. In him they recognised Adrian De la Rey.

"*Daag*, Aletta. I have only just heard you were home again," he said in Dutch, as he sprang from his horse and shook hands with her. But Colvin did not fail to notice that the young Boer's greeting of himself was markedly cold, not to say grim.

"So ho!" said he to himself. "That is the way the cat jumps? I see." Then aloud, "What sort of rifle have you there, Adrian?" For the latter was clad and armed as though for the chase, and had a bandolier full of cartridges slung round him.

"One of the new kind," was the crisp reply. "A Mauser. *Ja*, you can kill a man at thousands of yards with this."

"So you could, if you could only see him," was the perfectly good-humoured reply.

"I shall see him plainly enough, at whatever distance. *Ja*, at whatever distance," repeated the young Boer with meaning; and, looking as black as thunder, he turned his back upon the other in rather a pointed manner, and began to converse with his cousin.

"Yet," said Colvin to himself, "yet we have always been the best of

friends. But that would prove a very awkward customer if— Yes," he repeated, always to himself. "If—"

Note 1.

"Speak, Bronkersspruit,
With pride speak out;
Call Potchefstrom by name.
Pretoria and Langnek's Pass,
Ingogo and Majuba,
Where our Deliverer was with us,
Proclaim them all together."

Note 2.

"Our freedom's flag Give now its praise, 'Four colours' hold in renown; It waves above the Republic. No force, intrigue, no politics Of Kafir, Briton, Jingo clique, Shall e'er that flag again haul down."

Chapter Eleven.

Love—and some Sport.

“You are in no hurry to go on, are you, Colvin?” said Stephanus De la Rey, while they were at breakfast. “Because, if not, we might take guns and go down to the *hoek*. It’s swarming with duiker and blekbok.”

“Haven’t got my gun along, Stephanus, and Aasvogel won’t stand fire.” The speaker deemed he had grim reason to know that, and exchanged a glance with Aletta, who had looked up quickly, at the allusion.

“Oh, that is soon got over. You can have your pick of four horses that will, and you can either take my shot-gun or one of the rifles. There will be four of us—you and I and Cornelis and Adrian—and we can drive out that *hoek* thoroughly.”

“I don’t care to hunt to-day, Oom Stephanus,” said Adrian. “I must get back. I have many things to do at home.”

Stephanus looked narrowly at his nephew, whose manner struck him as strange. He had replied in Dutch, whereas the conversation hitherto had been in English, but that might be due to his new-born and exuberant patriotism.

“Of course, then, you must see to them, nephew,” he said. “The reason why so many of us don’t get on is, that we are too fond of sitting on the stoep and smoking our pipes.” He himself and his son had been at work in the “lands” and at the goatkraals ever since sunrise. At the same time he was rather surprised at the refusal of his nephew, who was a keen sportsman, and would have had a chance of testing his new rifle, which had already been inspected and its points critically discussed.

But Adrian had an object in his refusal, and the name of that object was Aletta. Hardly had the other three men got out of sight than he tried to persuade the girl to take a turn in the garden with him. Ordinarily she

would have needed no persuasion, but to-day a sort of instinct rendered the idea distasteful to her. But he waxed eloquent upon their common topic—The Cause—and she yielded.

He told her about the delegate from Pretoria—“the Patriot,” as he reverentially termed him, and how that Olympian Jupiter had talked with him—had it been the President himself he could hardly have felt more proud. He told her how the seed had been sown on well-watered and well-prepared ground, and she listened with real interest, for they had an ideal in common, these two young people, and were both burning with a lofty enthusiasm. Besides, the girl was really very fond of Adrian, who was a fine, manly fellow. Now she predicted great things for him. He would rise to be one of the most prominent men in the new Dutch South Africa. There was no limit to the dazzling honours she beheld in store for him.

Yes, the conspiracy was nearly complete. There was not a Dutchman within a radius of fifty miles, he told her, who was not ready to rise, who would not muster at the appointed time and place, rifle in hand, to throw off the English yoke. Those cursed English! He trusted that their future rulers would not allow one single Englishman to remain in the country—no, not one. He hated them all.

This brought a meaning smile to Aletta’s face. She remembered Adrian’s manner when he had first come upon her—and the Englishman—but an hour or two before.

“But, Adrian,” she said, “why are you so bitter against the English now? You used not to be. Of course we must get the land back from them, but we need not drive them all out. Some of the better ones might remain.”

“There are no ‘better ones,’” he replied, vehemently.

“I would not say that. Our English neighbours round here, what few there are, seem nice enough. There is Mrs Wenlock, for instance, and Frank—I haven’t seen the daughter yet. And then there is that Mr Kershaw—he seems a particularly pleasant sort of man.”

At this the resentful scowl on Adrian's face deepened. His strong hand opened and shut once or twice as though gripping at somebody's throat.

"So you seemed to think when I came upon you this morning," he answered in a sort of growl. Aletta started, and gazed at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Why, Adrian, I never saw the man until last evening," she said, gently, but conscious that the colour was flowing over her face in waves. For the blunt retort had, as it were, in a flash opened her mind to herself, and what she saw therein had frightened her.

"So? Then you have turned your time to very quick use," he answered. Then, seeing her start away from him with a cold, yet hurt, look, his tone changed entirely. "Forgive me, Aletta, darling. I am jealous, I suppose, and, of course, a fool. But I love you. I always have since we were children together. And I have been longing and longing for you to come back, and have been counting the weeks to it. Ask Andrina if I have not. Then when you do come back, and I see you for the first time, it is with this Englishman. Forgive me if I have said anything to offend you, Aletta, and say you will marry me. I love you so."

His tone was deep and soft and pleading, and the listener, stealing a look at his face, could not but feel much moved. He was so intensely in earnest. And he was a really fine-looking young fellow was this young Dutchman, a lover of whom any girl might feel the reverse of ashamed. As a matter of fact this one did so feel, and her voice was very soft as she answered:

"Oh, Adrian, why did you ask me? I don't see how I can."

It was a pretty lame answer, and she felt it to be. He, for his part, proceeded to improve the occasion and to urge his cause again and again with all the arguments he could find. She, for hers, was dangerously tempted to temporise, but by some merciful instinct rejected that refuge for the weak. She answered him to the same effect as before, but this time more clearly, more decidedly.

Then he began to press her for reasons. Why did she persist in refusing him? He was well off, and could make her thoroughly comfortable. He defied anyone to say a word against his character or life. He was sure his uncle would approve, and so on. Then, waxing bitter, he hinted that since she had been away at Cape Town she had forgotten her own people. Only the English were good enough now.

Adrian had better have let that side alone. It spoiled the good effect he was already producing in that it was first of all somewhat childish—in the second place unjust.

“That is not true, Adrian,” she answered gravely, but without anger, “and you ought not to say it. I am of my own people as much as ever. I have seen English people, too, whom I like and admire. Those of good blood are second to no race in the world—for good blood is good blood all the world over. But you ought not to say some of the things you have been saying. You wound me and—insult me.”

“So? I wound you and insult you? Forgive me, Aletta. I would not do that for all the world. But look! As you say, you have only known this Englishman since last evening. That is good. But the man who comes between you and me—Englishman or who ever he is—had better take care, great care, for it will mean life or death to him or to me. The time is coming when every man’s rifle will be his law—the avenger of his own wrongs.”

The tone was quiet now. There was that in it which was so earnest, so free from vehemence as to redeem it from mere bounce or melodramatics. Aletta, listening, was secretly impressed, and secretly more than respected him.

“You would not do murder, surely, Adrian?” she said, the narrative she had heard only that morning rising luridly before her mind.

“No, not murder, only justice. The time is coming when we can call upon those who have wronged us to face us, man to man. That is not murder.”

“N-no. But does it not strike you, Adrian, that you may be doing your best to kill all the liking and regard I have always felt for you? And are you not taking a great deal too much upon yourself?” Then, with a considerable flash of spirit, “Who gave you any right to take possession of me in this cool and calm manner? What right have you to tell me whom I am not to be friendly with—yes, and even more, if I choose that it shall be so? I think you are taking a great deal too much upon yourself, and I tell you so. But there, do not let us quarrel,” she added, with sudden softening. “And I think it is time we returned to the house.”

“As you will, Aletta. But I could not help saying that I did, for I mean it—every word of it. Of course we will not quarrel. How could I quarrel with you?”

The tone was sad and grave, but there was a dignity about it that appealed to Aletta. She did not fail to notice, either, that the other had not come off badly under somewhat difficult and delicate circumstances.

The while those upon slaughter intent were pursuing their way. Colvin Kershaw was a very keen sportsman, and reckoned that life was never so thoroughly well worth living as at moments like this—when mounted on a good shooting-horse, an excellent gun in his hand, the whole day before him, and, spreading around, as fine a bit of veldt for providing a mixed bag as one could wish to range over—just rolling enough to be picturesque—the Karroo bush and the mimosa, which grew in solitary ragged clumps or lined along the river banks, affording plenty of cover for birds or the smaller kind of buck. The sun flamed down from a blue and cloudless vault, but without much power, for it was about midwinter, and the atmosphere of the high veldt was clear and exhilarating to the last degree.

Two Kafir boys had been sent round to the further side of the “camp,” with instructions to lure thither and keep occupied such vicious male ostriches as would otherwise have interfered with, and, so far as their jurisdiction extended, entirely prevented sport; and the three horsemen were riding abreast, fifty yards or so apart, at a slow foot’s pace. Behind them walked Gert, armed with a formidable thorn *tack* in case any of the

aggressive bipeds should assail them in preference to being fooled by the diversion aforesaid. But just before they took up their positions, Cornelis being out of earshot, Stephanus remarked:

“I wonder what is the matter with Adrian, Colvin? I have never known him not want to hunt before. He was looking very strange, too.”

“He was,” replied the other, who had his own ideas upon that head.

“So? you noticed it, then? Well, my notion is this,” sinking his voice. “Adrian is *slim*. I believe he remained at home only to have a quiet talk with Aletta.”

“Yes?”

“I think so. They were always devoted to each other as children and then as they grew up together. I thought it good for her to go away and see something of the world and of people, so I sent her to some relatives of mine to Cape Town.”

“She has done them credit I don’t mind telling you, Stephanus, that even the little I’ve seen of your eldest daughter justifies me in saying she would show to advantage anywhere—*yes*, to the greatest advantage—in London or anywhere you like.”

“So?” said Stephanus, hugely delighted. “You think so, eh?”

“Think so? I’m sure of it,” replied Colvin, whimsically thinking with what whole-heartedness he was now eulogising one who that time yesterday had existed in his mind as a plain, heavy-looking and absolutely uninteresting girl. So libellous can be the photographer’s art.

“I am delighted to hear you say so, Colvin. You are from England and have seen a great deal of the world and ought to know. But I believe you are right. Yes, I am sure you are right. Well, now, my idea is that Adrian has remained behind to try his luck with Aletta.”

“By Jove! Has he?” Then changing the quick tone of vivid interest into which he had been momentarily betrayed, he went on tranquilly:

“And do you think he will succeed?”

“I cannot say. Aletta has seen a great many people, a great many men down at the Cape. She may not care to marry a farmer. But she might do worse than take Adrian. I have a great opinion of him. He is a fine fellow and no fool. But she must please herself.”

“Yes, but—are they not—er—rather nearly related?”

“I had thought of that side of it, too. It is a disadvantage. Look out! There is a koorhaan running just on your left. He will be up in a second.”

Hardly were the words out than the bird rose, shrilling forth his loud, alarmed cackle. Colvin dropped the bridle—his gun was at his shoulder. Crack! and down came the noisy little bustard, shot fair and square through the head. Two more rose, but out of range, and the air for the next minute or two was noisy with their shoutings.

Colvin dismounted to pick up the bird, and as he did so up got another. It was a long shot, but down came this bird also.

“Get there quick, man! He’s running,” cried Stephanus.

The warning was not unneeded. The bird seemed only winged and had the grass been a little thicker would have escaped. As it was, it entailed upon its destroyer a considerable chase before he eventually knocked it out with a stone, and then only as it was about to disappear within an impenetrable patch of prickly pear.

“Well, Stephanus, I believe I’m going to score off you both to-day,” said Colvin, as he tied the birds on to the D of his saddle with a bit of *riempje*. “Nothing like a shot-gun in this sort of veldt.”

Boers, as a rule, seldom care for bird-shooting, looking upon it as sport for children and Englishmen. Birds in their opinion are hardly worth eating, guinea-fowl excepted. When these are required for table purposes they obtain them by the simple process of creeping stealthily up to their roost on a moonlight night, and raking the dark mass of sleeping birds—visible against the sky on the bare or scanty-leaved boughs—with

a couple of charges of heavy shot Stephanus laughed good-humouredly, and said they would find buck directly. Then they would see who had the better weapon.

They had got into another enclosure, where the ground was more open. Colvin had already bagged another koorhaan and a brace of partridges, and so far was not ill-satisfied. Suddenly Cornelis was seen to dismount. A buck was running across the open some three hundred yards away. Bang! A great splash of dust nearly hid the animal for a moment. A near thing, but yet not quite near enough. On it went, going like the wind, now behind a clump of bushes now out again. Cornelis had another cartridge in, and was kneeling down. A wire fence stretched across the line of the fleeing animal, which would have to slacken speed in order to get through this. Watching his moment, Cornelis let go. The "klop" made by the bullet as it rushed through the poor little beast—through ribs and heart—was audible to them there at upwards of four hundred yards. It never moved afterwards.

"Oh, fine shot!" cried Colvin, with a grim afterthought to himself, viewing it by the light of the failure of the Bloemfontein Conference.

"It's a duiker ram, Pa," sang out the young Dutchman. Then he shouted to the Kafirs to bring it along, and the three moved onward. Soon Colvin got his chance. A blekbok, started by the tread of Stephanus' horse, raced right across him at about forty-five yards, broadside on. Up went the gun, a second's aim, and the pretty little animal turned a most beautiful somersault, and lay kicking convulsively, struck well forward in the head.

"Well done, well done! *Maagtig kerel*! but you can do something with shot!" cried Stephanus, approvingly.

Presently the metallic grating cackle of guinea-fowl was borne to their ears. They were near the banks of the Sneeuw River, where the mimosa cover and prickly pear *klompjes* were a favourite haunt of those splendid game birds. By dint of manoeuvring Colvin got right in among them, their attention being diverted by the other horseman. Up rose quite a number. Bang, bang! right and left, down they came. More rise. Bang,

bang! One miss, one more bird down. Then they get up, more and more of them, by twos and threes, and by the time there are no more of them, and Colvin has picked up eight birds and is beginning to search for three more that have run, he is conscious that life can hold no improvement on the sheer ecstasy of that moment.

And then, when they return to the homestead in the roseate afterglow of the pearly evening—and the spoils are spread out:

“Five bucks, and eighteen birds,” cries Stephanus, counting the bag. “Not so bad for a mixed shoot—and only one bird gun among us. Aletta, this is an Englishman who can shoot.”

Colvin is conscious of enjoying this small triumph, as the girl’s bright face is turned towards him approvingly, and she utters a laughing, half-bantering congratulation.

“Where is Adrian?” he says, looking around.

“Adrian? Oh, he went long ago—soon after you did.”

Keenly watching her face, while not appearing to, he does not fail to notice the tinge of colour which comes into it as she answers. So Adrian has been trying his luck then; but, has he succeeded? How shall he find out? But why should he find out? What on earth can it matter to him?

Yet throughout the evening the one question he is continually asking himself, and trying to deduce an answer to, is—

Has he succeeded?

Chapter Twelve.

“The Only English Girl.”

May Wenlock was in a temper.

She had got up in one, and throughout the morning her mother and brother had had the full benefit of it. Why she was in it she could not have told, at least with any degree of definitiveness. She was sick of home, she declared; sick of the farm, sick of the very sight of everything to do with it; sick of the eternal veldt. The mountains in the background were depressing, the wide-spreading Karroo plains more depressing still, although, since the rain, they had taken on a beautiful carpeting of flower-spangled green. She wanted to go away—to Port Elizabeth, or Johannesburg; in both of which towns she had relatives; anywhere, it didn't matter—anywhere for a change. Life was too deadly monotonous for anything.

Well, life on a farm in the far Karroo is not precisely a state of existence bristling with excitement, especially for the ornamental sex, debarred both by conventionality and inclination from the pleasures of the chase. But May was not really so hardly used as she chose to imagine. She was frequently away from home visiting, but of late, during almost the last year, she had not cared to go—had even refused invitations—wherein her brother saw another exemplification of feminine unreasonableness and caprice. Her mother, a woman and more worldly wise, was not so sure on that head.

"What's the row, anyhow?" said Frank, bluntly. "What do you want to scoot away for, and leave mother and me to entertain each other? Girls are always so beastly selfish."

"Girls selfish? Men, you mean," she flashed back. "Men are the most selfish creatures in existence. I hate them—hate them all."

"Why, only the other day you were saying that you had come round to the idea that it was much jollier in the country, and that you hated towns," went on Frank. "You've said it over and over again, and now—"

"Oh, go away, Frank, can't you, and leave her alone," said his mother. "Why do you take such a delight in teasing her when you see she's out of sorts?"

"Out of sorts, eh? That's what women always say when they're in a

beastly bad temper. Oh, well, thank goodness I've no time for that sort of thing." And cramming his pipe he went out.

Frank was right, if somewhat inconsiderate. May was in a bad temper—a very bad temper indeed. Hardly had he gone than she flung on her white *kapje*, the same we first saw her in, and which became her so well, and went out too, but not after him. She went round among her fowl-houses, then strolled along the quince hedges to see if any of the hens had been laying out and in irregular places for the benefit of the egg-loving *muishond*, or similar vermin, but her mind some how was not in it. She gazed out over the surrounding veldt. A little cloud of dust away in the distance caused her to start and her eyes to dilate. But it passed away and was gone. It heralded the approach of nobody. The distant flying cackle of a cock koorhaan alarmed had the same effect, but no sign of life, far or near, save the slow movement of black ostriches grazing, and the occasional triple boom as they lifted up their voices. The sun, flaming down in the cloudless forenoon, caused the great expanse of plains to shimmer and glow with mirage-like effect, giving to each distant table-topped mountain an appearance of being suspended in mid-air.

Her eyes filled as she stood thus gazing, and two shining tears rolled down.

"Oh, I must get away from here," she said to herself. "All this is weighing upon my nerves. I hate men—selfish, cruel, heartless wretches!"

She caught her voice, and was conscious that the pulsations of her heart had undergone an acceleration. Away in the distance a large dust-cloud was advancing, and with it the white tilt of a Cape cart.

"Only some tiresome Dutch people," she said to herself, with a weary sigh. "I hope to goodness they won't come here, that's all."

But her wish was doomed to non-fulfilment, for very soon the cart was seen to turn off the road that should have taken it by and to strike the branch track leading direct to the house. A flutter of feminine garments

within it betokened the nature of the visit.

“May, where are you? May?” shouted Frank, in stentorian tones. “Oh, there you are. Here’s a whole crowd coming down into the drift. Looks like the De la Reys. They’ll be here in a minute.”

“I wish they’d be somewhere else in a minute, then,” muttered May to herself with a frown that quite transformed the pretty, winning face within the ample white *kapje*.

Frank’s surmise proved correct. The occupants of the cart were the three De la Rey girls and their brother Jan. As they drove up Mrs Wenlock came out in a flutter of excitement and welcome.

“How good of you to come over!” she said. “I am so glad to see you. We don’t get many visitors just now. Why, Aletta, I should hardly have known you. My, but you must have been away quite a long time. I suppose you have been having grand times down at the Cape. And how tall you have grown! Well, I always say it does a girl good to send her about among folks and to see a little of the world. Let’s see, I don’t think you and my May have ever met. She was not with us when we first came up.”

May, who had already been exchanging greetings with the other girls, now turned to this one.

“No, we haven’t,” she said. “How do you do, Miss De la Rey?” And as the two clasped hands each was mentally reading the other.

“What a figure!” thought May to herself. “How easily and with what unconscious grace she moves! I wish I had it instead of being fat and dumpy”—which she wasn’t—“and beautifully dressed, yet quite plainly. Well, she isn’t pretty, that’s one thing. Oh no, she isn’t in the least pretty.”

“So this is ‘the only English girl,’” Aletta was thinking. “She is pretty. Yes, mother was right, she is very, very pretty. Those blue eyes—like Table Bay when the sun shines on it at noon—I wish I had them. And the gold of her hair, and her beautiful colouring. I do believe old Tant’ Plessis

must be right. Frank, too, has improved since I saw him. He has grown quite good-looking."

The said Frank, having shouted ineffectually for one of the boys, presumably away on some other business, was helping Jan to outspan.

"Well, Jan," said Mrs Wenlock as they all went inside, "you have been a long time bringing your sister over to see us."

"Andrina and I have only just got back ourselves, Mrs Wenlock," struck in Condaas. "Aletta has had a lot to do at home. And we have had old Tant' Plessis there and ever so many people."

"Ever so many people. Yes, I think you have had some people you would have been better without, if report speaks true," replied Mrs Wenlock, shaking a finger at the speaker with a good-humoured laugh. "There are those who come a long way to breed sedition and discontent and differences among folks who are quite happy and contented. We quite thought you had deserted us nowadays because we were English."

Mrs Wenlock, you see, was one of those good souls who pride themselves on speaking their minds—in this case an utterly tactless operation. A momentary frost lay upon the whole party. But the situation was relieved by the readiness of Aletta.

"Why, Mrs Wenlock, you are forgetting that there is some English blood in us," she said.

"To be sure I was, child. And your father, although there is no English in him, he is a man for whom I have the greatest regard. He is the last man to listen to agitators and sedition-mongers—of that I am quite sure. How is he, by the way, and your mother?" They reassured her as to the perfect state of health and well-being enjoyed by both parents, which had the effect of leading the conversation away from a very delicate subject. May, the while, had been out of the room to see about getting tea ready, and now returned in time to hear the following:—

"Why don't you bring your gun over, Frank?" Jan was saying. "Man,

there is a fine lot of guinea-fowl down along the river—if Colvin has left any, that is. *Maagtig*, but he is fond of shooting birds. One *klompje* down on the *draai* by the white rock had nearly sixty birds in it, and now there are nine. Colvin has shot all the rest. Guinea-fowl are not easy to get at, you know. There are other *klompjes*, but he will do the same with them, so you had better be quick or there will be none left."

"He must have been shooting a lot at your place, Jan."

"He has. Rather. He comes over nearly every other day to have a shoot. Why, we shall soon have hardly anything left if he goes on at that rate. But the season will soon be over now. Not that we care much about season or no season if we want a buck to eat."

"Tut-tut, Jan! What's that you're saying? And your father Field-cornet, too!" struck in Mrs Wenlock.

May, who was presiding at the tea-tray, hearing this apparently harmless dialogue, felt it to be just about all she could do to restrain the ugly frown which threatened to cloud her face. "He comes over nearly every other day," Jan had said, yet he had not been near them for about three weeks, or close upon it—not, indeed, since that evening he and Frank had returned from Schalkburg together. He had never been away from them so long as that since he had been settled on his own farm, nor anything like it. What *did* it mean? What was the attraction? The sport? Well, the sport wasn't bad at Spring Holt. No—a darker thought gripped her mind and heart, making her miserable. The time corresponded, within a day or two, to that of Aletta's return. Well, what then? Surely she was tormenting herself unnecessarily. Surely she could hold her own against a Dutch girl—an ugly Dutch girl—she added spitefully to herself. But just then, as she was discharging her duties of deputy hostess mechanically while thus thinking, the voice of the "ugly Dutch girl" broke in upon her broodings, with a remark addressed to herself.

"You have been in the Transvaal lately, I hear, Miss Wenlock?"

"Not quite lately; not for a year. I have some relations in Johannesburg, and was stopping with them."

“Ah! I have some there too. I may be going up there soon, but have never been. It is a very wonderful place, is it not?”

“Oh, yes. Miles ahead of any other in South Africa. It hasn’t got the Sleepy Hollow sort of look all these other musty old places have. English capital and energy have put it in the forefront.”

This was no sort of remark to make under the circumstances, and herein was another instance of May’s lack of breeding which would now and again crop up. It may have been that she was stung by a new discovery which had been brought home to her with the first utterance. This “ugly Dutch girl” had a beautiful voice, soft, well modulated, thoroughly refined.

It was a time when people were wont to rave at and wrangle with each other over the rights and wrongs of the political situation then nearly at its most acute stage, on far less challenge than May’s tone and words implied. This Dutch girl, however, did nothing of the kind. She went on talking pleasantly as though no such remark had been made—asking questions about the place under discussion, and seeming to take a vivid interest in the answers. Poor May felt very small, very inferior. She was honest enough to own to herself that she had transgressed against the laws of good breeding, and to admire the other’s self-possession and ready tact, though, as constituting another attraction, she loved not the possessor of these qualities any the more.

Then Frank and Jan went out to smoke a pipe or two together, and talk shop, and about sport, and the latest rumours from the Transvaal—though this guardedly. The girls, left behind, were chatting, and looking at things, notably some English fashion papers which May had got out. Then they, too, took a stroll out to look at May’s fowl-houses, and finally all met at dinner.

There was no lack of conversation. Aletta was telling them about her experiences at the capital—where none of her hearers, save Frank, had ever been—moved thereto by many questions from Mrs Wenlock, and all the good times she had been having—balls, and bicycle picnics, and Government House receptions, and dances on board one or other of the

warships at Simonstown. May, listening with vivid interest, almost forgot her ill-humour, only failing where she was reminded of it by envy. That was the sort of life her own soul hankered after, instead of being stuck away on a dismal up-country farm. That was life—this stagnation. Yet could she at that moment have been offered her choice, whether she would be there or here, she would have elected to remain where she was.

“I thought Cape Town a beastly place,” declared Frank. “Nothing on earth to do there, and they wanted me to wear a bell-topper hat on Sunday.”

Aletta broke into one of her whole-hearted laughs.

“That’s the best definition I’ve ever heard,” she said. “No, really, I shall have to tell it to some of them next time I am down there again—if ever I am.”

“It’s true, all the same,” persisted Frank, looking remarkably pleased with himself and the consciousness of having said a good thing. But his mother told him he was talking nonsense, and proceeded with her cross-examination of Aletta. Had she seen the Governor, and was he like his portraits? and so on.

Oh, yes, she had seen him pretty often. Spoken to him? He had once or twice, in a kindly conventional way, spoken to her, but she was certain he would not know her from Eve if he were to see her again. There were so many people he had to talk to in the same way at officially social functions. But the point in this qualification was lost upon her questioner, whose honest middle-class soul swelled with a congenial respect for one who had actually talked with the Governor.

“Hallo! by George, there’s someone coming!” exclaimed Frank, as the raucous coughs of the one decrepit cur whose acquaintance we have already made, together with a sound of hoofs, gave notice of the fact. “Wonder who it is?”

May looked up quickly, a whole world of eager expectancy, of

forestalled disappointment in her glance. And as she did so she met the eyes of Aletta.

Chapter Thirteen.

Two Verdicts and some Rancour.

“Hallo, Colvin!” cried Frank, going out on the stoep. “Why, man, we had begun to think you were dead.”

“So?” said Colvin Kershaw, who was busy loosening the girths preparatory to off-saddling. “Whose cart is that, Frank? Looks like Stephanus’.”

“It is.”

“Is he here then?”

“No; only the girls.”

“Which of them?”

“All three.”

“Oh—. No, don’t have him put in the camp,” as a Hottentot came up to take the horse. “Just knee-halter him, and let him run. He can pick up enough round the house.”

As he entered, and greeted the girls, a subtle instinct told him that two of them were watching each other and him. May’s reception of him was somewhat brusque and rather too studiously off-handed. He read her face like the page of a book. She, keenly observant, noticed that he greeted the other three with the easy friendliness of people who know each other well, but without the faintest difference of tone or inflection in talking to each and all of them.

“Why, Mr Kershaw, we were thinking you were dead,” said Mrs Wenlock, in her cordial, breezy way. “It is a long time since we saw you

last."

"So Frank was saying, Mrs Wenlock. But I am not. Death has not given me a call yet."

None there knew how very near truth their jesting words came—save one. One knew it, and with her Colvin, for the life of him, could not help exchanging a look. It was an exchange, and, swiftly as it flashed between them in its fulness of meaning, it did not go unobserved—by one.

"Hallo, Colvin, you've got your rifle along this time," cried Frank, through the open window, who was examining the piece. "Why, I thought you never carried anything but a shot-gun down here."

"I don't generally. But I might be going up into the Wildschutsberg," and again he brought his eyes round to those of Aletta. "Now and then you get a long shot at a reebok up there."

"Why, this is the same old gun you had up in Matabeleland," went on Frank, sighting the weapon and pointing and recovering it. "Nothing like these Lee-Metfords with the Martini block. By George, Miss De la Rey, how he used to make the niggers skip in the Matopos with this same pea-shooter!"

"Yes?" said Aletta, brightly, with simulated interest, but with a dire chill at her heart. What if this weapon should come to be pointed at others than dark-skinned barbarians, and that soon? Truth to tell for some occult reason the patriotic enthusiasm had cooled a little of late.

"Adrian had one of the new guns round at our place the other day," said Jan. "A Mauser. He said it would shoot three miles. It is wonderful. I can hardly believe it."

"Well, try a shot or two out of that, Jan," said Colvin. "Only leave a few cartridges, in case I should come in for a good chance, riding along."

Jan did—making some excellent practice, at ant-heaps scattered at varying distances over the veldt. Then his sisters declared that he had

better see about inspanning, for it was time they were getting home.

“I shall have to be moving soon myself,” said Colvin. “I want to be in Schalkburg to-night.”

“In Schalkburg?” echoed Mrs Wenlock. “Why, you are in a hurry—and we haven’t seen you for such a time.”

“Yes; it’s a pity. But I have to do some business there first thing in the morning, so it’s as well to get there over-night.”

“I thought you said you might be going up to the Wildschutsberg,” said Aletta, with a spice of mischief. “Isn’t that rather a long way round?”

“It is rather. Only in the opposite direction. But I won’t go that way.”

And then, the cart being inspanned, they exchanged farewells. The handclasp between Colvin and Aletta was not one fraction more prolonged than that which he exchanged with the other two girls—if anything shorter. May, watching, could not but admit this, but did not know whether to feel relieved or not.

“So that is ‘the only English girl’!” said Aletta to herself as they drove off. “Old Tant’ Plessis was both right and wrong. They are not engaged, but still there is a sort of something between them, and that something is all, or nearly all, on her side. She would not make him happy, either—or be happy with him. She is pretty, very pretty, but common. She is gusty-tempered, has no self-command, and would be horribly jealous. No. She could never make him happy.”

Those whom she had left, however, were at that very moment formulating their opinions upon her, but aloud.

“What a nice girl Aletta has grown into!” Mrs Wenlock was saying. “She used to be shy and awkward, and nothing to look at, before she went away, and now she’s so bright, and smart, and stylish, and almost pretty. It’s wonderful what her stay at Cape Town has done for her.”

“I don’t think she’s pretty at all,” said May decisively. “I call her ugly.”

“No, I’ll be hanged if she’s ugly,” said Frank.

“No, indeed,” agreed his mother; “look what pretty hair she has, and pretty hands, and then her manner is so delightful. And there is such a stylish look about her, too! Don’t you agree with me, Mr Kershaw?”

“Yes; I do,” was the reply, made as evenly as though the subject under discussion had been Andrina or Condaas, or any other girl in the district.

“Well, I think she’s a horrid girl,” persisted May. “Style, indeed? What you call style, I call ‘side.’ She puts on a kind of condescending, talk-down-to-you sort of manner. These Dutch girls,” with withering emphasis on the national adjective, “are that way. They go away from home for a little and come back as stuck-up as they can be. That one is too grand for anything—in her own estimation. A horrid, stuck-up thing.”

Colvin, listening, winced. The idea expressed, the very wording of its expression, grated upon him horribly, apart from the identity of the subject thereof. In such wise would May from time to time lapse, and become, as Aletta had put it to herself, “common.”

He made no comment upon her vehement and ill-natured dictum, knowing perfectly well that it was uttered quite as much as a challenge to himself as to relieve the utterer’s feelings; and he was far too old and experienced to be drawn by any such transparent device. But as they re-entered the sitting-room the jarring effect of the words was intensified, bringing back in vivid contrast the last time he was there; that evening when he had been so near turning the most momentous corner which could meet him within the career of life. He had not turned it. A warning hand had, so to speak, been held up. This girl—he could see her as she was then, in her sweet alluring beauty, soft-voiced, appealing. He could see her now, hard-eyed, vindictive, and expressing herself in a manner that savoured of the wash-tub. What a near thing it had been—how narrow his escape!

He would have been tied fast, bound hand and foot. Even now there was a certain length of loose coil around him, which would need some

care and judgment entirely to cast off. Still there was no hard-and-fast bond, and looking backward over the events of the past three weeks or so, he felt lost in thankfulness because of the trivial, fortuitous incident which had availed to stay his tongue when it had so nearly spoken.

“You are not particularly lively, after all this time, Colvin.”

He started, and put down the paper he had pretended to read, while the above reflections were coursing through his brain. They were alone together in the room, he and May. Frank, divested of his coat and waistcoat, could be seen in the distance doing odd jobs, and Mrs Wenlock had withdrawn for an afternoon nap. Her visitors, she declared, although dear girls, had tired her.

“No, I’m afraid I’m not,” he said. “I believe I’m tired. Well, let’s talk.”

Something in the words brought back that last evening they were thus alone together. The recollection softened her, but only for a moment.

“I can imagine it seems dull now that your Dutch friends are gone,” she began, in a crisp, gunpowdery way which was more than a declaration of war. It was in fact the firing of the first shell.

“Oh, bother it, May, why will you harp on that insane prejudice of nationality?” he expostulated, but quite good-humouredly, purposely ignoring her real drift. “A good sort is a good sort, no matter what his or her nationality. And I think you’ll allow that old Stephanus and his crowd come under that heading.”

“So you seem to think,” was the acid reply. “You have been there a good deal of late, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I like them very much, and the shoot is choice.” And then he went on to tell her about the bags he had made, and old Tant’ Plessis and her absurd perversities, and the ridiculous muddle the old woman had made between his name and that of the sixteenth-century Reformer. His object was to keep her attention away from personalities. But that object she saw through.

“You were not so fond of them three or four weeks ago,” she said, half turned away from him, and beginning to speak quickly, while the sea-blue eyes filled. “That is just the time that girl has been back. Goodness! I never thought to see you—*you*—running after an ugly Dutch girl.”

Every word grated upon Colvin’s mind—grated intensely, so much so indeed as to leave no room for anger, only disgust and disillusionment. At that moment, too, there flashed vividly through his mind a vision of the speaker, as contrasted with this “ugly Dutch girl” here in this very room but a few minutes ago, and the contrast was all in favour of the latter—yes, a hundred times over in her favour, he told himself. And now this one was going to make a scene; so much was evident. She was crudely, unsophisticatedly jealous, and had no self-control whatever.

Heavens! what an escape he had had!

“See here, May,” he said. “That sort of remark is not to my liking at all. It is—well, exceedingly unpleasant, and really I don’t care about listening to all this. I am responsible to nobody for my actions, remember, and there is not one living soul who has the slightest right or title to call me to account for anything I do or don’t do. And I am a little too old to begin to obey orders now. So if you will kindly give up abusing people I like, and with whom I happen to be very friendly, I shall be grateful. I don’t like to hear it, and it doesn’t come well from you.”

But the girl made no answer. She had dropped her face into her hands, and was silently sobbing. He, watching her, was softened directly. His first impulse was to take her in his arms and strive to comfort her. He still had a very weak place for her, although the scales had fallen from his eyes, owing to two causes. But an instinct of prudence and a great deal of cynicism born of experience rose up to restrain him. He had gone through this sort of thing before. He had seen women utterly miserable and heart-broken seemingly, on his account, as they said, meaning it, too, at the time; but six months or a year thence had found them laughing in his face, if not playing the same game with somebody else; but he himself had not taken them seriously, wherefore it didn’t matter. Yet it was all part of an education, and of what use was an education save to be applied?

“Don’t cry like that, little one,” he said gently. “Why should we say hard things to each other, you and I? We never used to.”

The gentle tone melted her at once. She dropped her hands. All the hardness had gone out of her face, and the sea-blue eyes were limpid and tender and winning.

“No, we used not. I have become very bad-tempered—very quarrelsome. But—oh, Colvin, I am so tired of life—of life here. It gets upon my nerves, I think. And I have hardly any friends, and you—you the greatest of them all, hardly seem to care for me—for us—now. I—we—never see you in these days, and—I feel it somehow.”

Colvin’s heart smote him. He need not have stayed away so long and so markedly, but there was a reason, and he had acted with the best intentions. Wherein he had blundered, as people invariably do when they suffer their actions to be guided by such tissue-paper motives, instead of by the hard and safe rule of judiciousness, expediency, and knowledge of human nature.

“Poor little girl! You must not run away with all those ideas,” he said. “And, you are flattering me. Well, I will come over again soon, and have a talk, but I must go now. There, will that do?”

He was talking to her quite gently, quite soothingly, just as he used to do, and the effect was wonderful. All the dejection, the sullenness, disappeared from her face, dispelled by a bright, almost happy smile.

“Good-bye, then,” she said. “I don’t think I’ll come and see you start this time. Good-bye, dear.”

Her eyes shone soft and dewy in the upturned face. Her lips were raised invitingly. It was not in mortal man to refuse them, however stern rectitude under the circumstances might dictate such a course. This one did not refuse them.

“Good-bye, my darling!” she breathed into his ear, in a voice so barely audible as to be almost inarticulate. And as he left her and went

out to find his horse and see about saddling up, it was with a vague misgiving that the loose coil, to which he had made allusion in his own mind, had, within the last few moments, very perceptibly tightened.

We made use just above of the expression “under the circumstances.” The “circumstances” were, that by that time this cautious, and cynical and experienced man of the world was deeply, devotedly, and entirely in love with Aletta De la Rey.

Chapter Fourteen.

Jelf—Civil Commissioner.

Nicholas Andrew Jelf was Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate for the town and division of Schalkburg.

In person he was a tall, middle-aged, rather good-looking man, with dark hair, and a grizzled, well-trimmed moustache, and whose general appearance fostered an idea which constituted one of his favourite weaknesses—that he resembled a retired military man. When mistaken for such openly, he positively beamed; and more than one shrewd rogue got the benefit of the doubt, or obtained material mitigation of the penalty due to his misdeeds, by appealing, with well-feigned ignorance, to the occupant of the Bench as “Colonel.” By disposition he was easy-going and good-natured enough, and bore the reputation among his brother Civil servants of being something of a duffer.

By these the magistracy of Schalkburg was regarded as anything but a plum. It was very remote, the district large, and peopled almost entirely by Dutch farmers. The town itself was a great many miles from the nearest railway station; moreover, it was a dull little hole, with the limited ideas and pettifogging interests common to up-country townships. It boasted a large Dutch Reformed church—an unsightly, whitewashed parallelogram with staring, weather-beaten windows—item about a dozen stores, a branch of the Standard Bank, and two “hotels,” designed to afford board and lodging, of a kind, to such of the storekeepers’ clerks or bank clerks—to whom means, or inclination or opportunity, denied the

advantages and felicities of the connubial state, for a stranger was an exceeding rarity. Half of its houses were untenanted, save for a few days on the occasion of the quarterly *Nachtmaal* (The Lord's Supper) when the township would be filled with a great multitude of Boers and their families from far and near, those who did not own or hire houses, camping with their waggons on the town commonage. But it boasted no natural beauty to speak of, just dumped down, as it were, on a wide, flat plain. Some few of the houses had an *erf* or two of garden ground attached, which in the spring constituted by contrast a pleasing spot of green amid the prevailing red dust, but for the rest the impression conveyed was that of a sun-baked, wind-swept, utterly depressing sort of place.

Nicholas Andrew Jelf was seated at his office table amid a pile of papers, and his countenance wore a very worried expression indeed. The post had just been delivered, and the contents of the bag had consisted of a greater crop than usual of Government circulars, eke requests for returns, as it seemed, upon every subject under heaven. Moreover, the newspapers, through which he had glanced hurriedly, were mainly remarkable for the number and conspicuousness of their scare headlines. Sensation was the order of the day, and out of the chances of a rupture with the two Republics the canny editor managed to suck no small advantage. But poor Mr Jelf could lay to himself no such consolation. His thoughts were for his already large and still increasing family, and the ruinous hole it would make in the by no means extravagant pay of a Civil servant were he obliged to send it away to a safer locality, as he greatly feared he ought to lose no time in doing.

He turned to his correspondence. The Government desired to be informed of this—or the member for Slaapdorp had moved for a return of that—or Civil Commissioners were requested to obtain the opinion of the leading farmers of their divisions as to how far rinderpest microbes were likely to affect donkeys, given certain conditions of temperature and climate... and nearly a dozen more of like practical utility. Mr Jelf threw down the papers with a grunt of disgust and swore mildly to himself.

"They seem to think a Civil Commissioner must be a whole damned walking 'Encyclopaedia Britannica,'" he growled. "What's this? More of the same stuff, I suppose."

But, as he read, his attention became more riveted and his face anxious and graver. For the official communication, marked “Confidential,” was one urgently requesting information as to the tone and disposition of the Dutch farmers in his division as bearing upon the present state of affairs, and desiring a full and circumstantial report at the very earliest opportunity. The effect of this was to deepen the worried look upon his face and to cause him to swear a little more. Just then a tap came at the door, and his clerk entered.

“Anything by the post that wants seeing to, sir?”

“Anything? I should think so. Just look at all this, Morkel,” pointing to the heap of stuff upon the table.

Morkel did look at it—looked somewhat blue, moreover. He was fond of sport and had intended to ask for a day or two’s leave to join a buck hunt on one of the farms, and was fully capable of grasping the amount of work all that confounded correspondence was going to entail. He was a well-set-up, good-looking young fellow of five and twenty, very proud of his fair proportions and waxed moustache and somewhat dandified attire; for there were three or four passable-looking girls in Schalkburg, and the Civil Commissioner’s clerk was Somebody in the place.

“One would think, at such a time as this, Government would have plenty to do without off-loading all these insane circulars upon us,” went on his chief, irritably. “It isn’t as if the things they want to know were of any practical use—they might as well move for a return of the number of buttons on every prisoner’s breeches over at the gaol as some of the things they do ask, but we’ve got to humour them. By the way, though, there’s one thing they want to know that has a practical side, and that ought to be looked after by a special department manufactured for this emergency. *We* have quite enough to do without going on the stump, so to say. Look at this.”

He handed the letter marked “Confidential” to his subordinate. The latter read it through carefully, and as he did so he saw light. He thought he was going to get his shoot after all, and a good deal more of it than he

had at first hoped for.

“The thing is so unreasonable,” went on Mr Jelf. “Every mortal fad sprung on the House by some tin-pot country member, some retired canteen-keeper and proportionately consequential, is off-loaded on the Civil Commissioner. The Civil Commissioner is requested to do this, and the Civil Commissioner is desired to supply information upon that—as if we hadn’t quite enough to do with our financial and judicial duties. Why the deuce can’t Government have its own Secret Service department as Oom Paul is supposed to have?”

Morkel listened sympathetically, as he always did when his chief indulged in a grumble. The two were on very good terms. Jelf had a liking for his subordinate, who officially was smart and well up to his work, and socially was the only man in the place with whom he could associate on even terms, except the District Surgeon, who was a trifle too fond of his glass, and inclined to be dictatorial. Morkel, for his part, reciprocated the liking. His chief was easy-going, and good-natured in the matter of leave officially, and socially took a sort of paternal and friendly interest in him. These two Civil servants, therefore, got on admirably together.

“Well, the thing has got to be done,” went on Jelf, “and the only way to find out Dutch feeling is to go around among the Dutch. I haven’t the time to do it, and if I had it wouldn’t help, because they’d all shut up like oysters before me. But with you it would be different, Morkel. They’d look upon you as one of themselves.” He little thought how hard he was stamping on the corns of his subordinate; the fact being that, although born of Dutch parentage on either side, Morkel’s weakness was to imagine himself thoroughly and intensely English. “You would have to affect Boer sympathies, though, and we know that under the present Ministry that doesn’t damage a Civil servant at headquarters, eh? What do you think of the idea?”

“It’s a first-rate one, sir. I might go around as if on a sort of wandering shoot.”

“Yes. Take your gun with you. That’ll give colour to the affair. You can have my trap and horses, only spare the springs all you can in going

through some of those bad drifts. You'd better take a week of it. Harvey can do a lot of your work for you. He's almost too good a man for a chief constable. You'd better get as far up into the Wildschutsberg part as you can; they say the Boers up that way are the worst—especially since that firebrand, Andries Botma, has been his rounds. Look up Kershaw too; they say the fellow is three parts Boer in his sympathies. You might be able to get something out of him."

A knock at the door and the Court constable, being bidden to enter, announced that Mynheer Stephanus De la Rey wanted to see the Civil Commissioner.

"The very man," exclaimed the latter. "You must get to his farm, Morkel. You're sure to hear something there. Show him in, Hendrik."

Stephanus entered, and as he did so Morkel went out, laden with the circulars that needed attention.

Left alone with the magistrate, Stephanus looked a trifle ill-at-ease. His frank geniality seemed to have left him as he replied to that official's inquiries after his family and concerns wherewith the Boer is wont to preface any and every interview if on anything like friendly terms with his interlocutor. Then he came to the point. He wished to resign his field-cornetcy.

Jelf looked annoyed, and felt it too. What was the reason, he asked. A reliable, influential man like Stephanus was just the man for the office. He would be hard to replace. Would he not reconsider his decision?

But Stephanus was firm; the fact being that since he had become converted to the "patriot" cause he was too honest to continue holding a post under the British Government, honorary as such might be. He did not, however, desire to say as much to the Government representative before him.

But the latter saw through his constraint, and went straight to the root of the thing. He was irritated at the obstinacy, as he called it, of this Boer, and the latter, to his amazement and indignation, found himself being

roundly lectured. The Civil Commissioner had heard reports of disaffection among some of the farmers—notably those in the Wildschutsberg district, but he had never expected to find among the disloyal a man so universally respected as the one before him, and much more to the same effect Stephanus, however, kept both his temper and his dignity.

If that was the way the representative of the Government regarded him, he replied, all the more reason why he should adhere to his original resolve, and resign the field-cornetcy in favour of somebody who would be more acceptable. Would Mynheer kindly receive his formal resignation?

Yes, Mynheer would, in that case. But the farewell greeting between the two was stiff and unfriendly.

Left alone, Jelf felt rather small. He had failed in judiciousness, in tact, and he knew it. He had rubbed his interviewer the wrong way, just at a time when it was essential to keep such a man well disposed and friendly. At any rate, here was one item for his report. If Stephanus De la Rey was disaffected, why, then, the whole of the Wildschutsberg district must be a hotbed of seething sedition.

Thus he expressed matters to his subordinate, as, Stephanus having departed, he called Morkel in to talk over their plan.

“He has all but come round, sir,” said the latter. “I talked him over a good deal, and his is one of the places I’m to go to. He won’t give way about the field-cornetcy, though.”

“Oh, well, we must find somebody else, I suppose. They are all rebels at heart, I believe, and he’s as great a rebel as any. Yes? Come in.”

Again the Court constable entered.

“Mynheer Grobbelaar wishes to see you, sir.”

“Grobbelaar? Is it Jan Grobbelaar?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Show him in. This is getting warm, Morkel. Another damned Field-cornet. I suppose *he* wants to resign now.”

Swaart Jan entered, his projecting buck-teeth more prominent than ever in an oily grin, as he shook hands with the two officials. Jelf’s manner was short, and he wasted no time in preliminaries.

“Well, Mynheer Grobbelaar, and what can I do for you?”

“Nay, Mynheer, thank you. I have not called on business; just to make a little friendly visit.”

“Oh, not on business?” said the magistrate, greatly relieved in his own mind, yet wishing his visitor at the devil, bothering in like that during office hours. But he changed his mind when the Boer explained that he had been shooting a few springbuck lately, and he had brought in a little matter of a saddle and a couple of haunches, which Mrs Jelf might find good for roasting. It was from a young buck, and would eat well—he went on, in his shambling, diffident way.

Jelf thawed at once, and thanked his visitor. Here was another opportunity of getting at the state of Dutch feeling; and by way of preliminary he told the other about Stephanus’ resignation, adding, with a laugh:

“I thought you had come to resign too, Mynheer Grobbelaar.”

But the little man deprecated the possibility of any such idea having entered his head. It was a pity Stephanus had resigned, though. In answer to other questions—yes, there was some foolish talk among the Boers around him, but it was only talk, and they were young men. The Patriot? Oh, yes, he had visited some of them, but only on a flying visit. Held meetings? Oh, no—and here Swaart Jan’s hands went up in pious horror. What did Mynheer think of him, and those around him, to imagine that he, or they, would countenance such a thing for a single moment?

Jelf felt intensely relieved. Here was loyalty at last, anyhow—another item for his report. And he and his visitor parted with the most cordial of farewells; and Field-cornet Jan Marthinus Grobbelaar, *alias* Swaart Jan, went out grinning till his tusks nearly came below the level of his chin, as he thought of the cases of Mauser rifles snugly stored in a safe recess within his house, and the ammunition, a quantity sufficient to blow up half the mountain, which was stowed away in a cleft of an adjacent krantz, conveyed and deposited thither by authority of no permit given under the hand of Nicholas Andrew Jelf, Resident Magistrate.

Here was loyalty at last, anyhow! as that astute official had put it to himself.

Chapter Fifteen.

Solution.

How had it all come about? What was there in this girl that had seized and held his mind—his every thought—ever since he had first set eyes on her, all unexpectedly, that evening when he had come in, wet and dripping, having barely escaped with his life? Colvin Kershaw, putting the question to himself twenty times a day, could find no definite answer to it.

No definite answer—no. Therein lay all the charm surrounding Aletta. It was so indefinite. From the moment he had first beheld her the charm had taken hold upon him. He had been unconsciously stirred by her presence, her personality. Yet it was no case of love at first sight. A strange, potent weaving of the spell had been on him then, and, gradual in its development, had enchained him and now held him fast.

Day after day in his solitary dwelling he had recognised it, and analysed it, and striven with its influence, yet had never attempted to throw it off—had never shrunk instinctively from the weaving of its coils around him. It was not born of solitude, as perhaps that other coil, from which he would heartily fain be now entirely and conscientiously free, had been. No matter under what circumstances, or in what crowd they had met, he realised that the result would have been the same; that the spell would still have been woven just the same.

He thought upon the conditions of life, and how such are apt to focus themselves into a very small groove—the groove in which one happens, for the time being, to run. Might it not be that the circumscribed area into which life had resolved itself with him of late had affected his judgment, and led him to take a magnified, a vital view of that which, looked at from the outside world, would have struck him as a passing fancy, and untenable save as such? Judgment, reason, heart, alike cried out to the contrary, and cried aloud.

He might leave this remote habitation on the High Veldt, this region outwardly so unattractive to the casual passer-through with a mind absorbed by the state of the share market in Johannesburg or London, but so enriveting to those who make it their home. He might return to the world he knew so well; might do so to-morrow, without inconvenience or loss. What then? He would merely be measuring the length of his chain, or, if he succeeded in breaking it, would be relinquishing the pearl of great price which he had found here in a far corner of the earth when least expecting any such marvellous discovery, any such unspeakable blessing to be obtained by mortal man.

For so he had come to regard it. Yes, the symptoms this time were there. Nothing was wanting to them now. He had been under the delusion that that which they had represented was, for him, a thing of the past, and in his solitary life and unconscious craving for sympathy and companionship—yes, and even for love, had almost acted upon that idea. But for a timely diversion he would so have acted. Now he could hardly formulate to himself a sufficiency of gratitude to Heaven, or circumstances, or whatever it might be, that he had not.

The narrowness of his escape he realised with a mental shudder. What if this strange new experience, opening as it did such an irradiating vista of possibilities, had come upon him a day too late, had discovered him bound—bound, too, by a chain he well knew there would be no loosening once its links enfolded him? His usual luck had stood him in good stead once more, and the thought suggested another. Would that luck continue?

Would it? It should. He would soon put it to the test. He went over in his mind the whole period of his acquaintanceship with Aletta. It was short enough in actual fact—only a matter of weeks, yet viewed by the aspect of the change it had wrought it seemed a lifetime. He recalled how he had first beheld her, and indeed many a time since, bright, laughing, infecting everyone, however unconsciously, with the warmth of her sunny light-heartedness. No outcome was this either of a shallow unthinking temperament. She could be serious enough on occasions, as he had more than once observed during their many talks together, that, too, with a quick sympathy which pointed to a rich depth of mind. He reviewed her

relationship towards her own people, which, as an intimate friend of the house, he had enjoyed every opportunity of observing, and here again he found no flaw. It was clear that the whole family came little short of worshipping her, and through this ordeal too she had come utterly unspoiled. The idea brought back the recollection of the sort of good-humoured, faintly contemptuous indulgence with which he had listened to the singing of her praises by one or other of its members, what time her personality represented to him simply the original of those unprepossessing portraits which adorned the sitting-room; and he acknowledged that the laugh now was completely turned against himself.

Then his thoughts took a new vein, and he seemed to hear the comments of those among whom he had sometime moved— “Colvin Kershaw? Oh yes. Married some farm girl out in Africa and turned Boer, didn’t he?” and more to the same effect, uttered in a languid, semi-pitying tone by this or that unit of a society whose shibboleth was the mystical word “smart,” a society he had been in but not of. Well, so be it. Let them drawl out their banal inanities. In this case he hoped they would do so with reason.

Hoped? For he was not sure, far from it; and herein lay one of the “symptoms,” Not that he would have loved Aletta one iota the less had he been sure. He was not one of those to whom the joy of possession is measured by the excitement and uncertainty of pursuit; and there are some of whom this holds good, however difficult it may be to persuade, at any rate the ornamental sex, that such can possibly be the case. On the contrary, he would feel grateful to one who should spare him the throes and doubts calculated to upset even an ordinarily well-balanced mind under the circumstances, and proportionately appreciative. But whatever of diffidence or anxiety might take hold upon his own mind, Colvin Kershaw was not the man to display it in the presence of its first cause. The cringing, adoring, beseeching suitor of not so very old-fashioned fiction struck him as somewhat contemptible, and as of necessity so appearing to the object of his addresses, no matter how much she might really care for him at heart. He must run his chance to win or lose, and if he lost, take it standing. There was none of the *ad misericordiam*, wildly pleading element about him.

“*Pas op, Baas*! The bird!”

The words, emanating from his henchman, Gert Bondelzwart, brought him down to earth again; for the occupation in which he had been engaged during the above reverie was the prosaic one of attending to his daily business, which in this case consisted in going round the ostrich camps and inspecting such nests as he knew of, or discovering indications of prospective ones. To a certain extent mechanical and routine, it was not incompatible with reflection upon other matters. Now he turned to behold a huge cock ostrich bearing down upon him with hostility and aggressiveness writ large all over its truculent personality.

“Here, Gert. Give me the *tack*!” he said. “That old brute is properly *kwaai*.”

Now the cock ostrich resembles the aggressive and nagging human female, in that the respective weakness of either protects it, though differing, in that in the first instance the said weakness may be read as “value” and, in the second, proportionately the reverse. For a creature of its size and power for mischief there is no living thing more easy to kill or disable than an ostrich, wherein again comes another diametrical difference. A quick, powerful down-stroke or two with the sharp-pointed toe may badly injure a man or even kill him, if surprised in the open by the ferocious biped, tenfold more combative and formidable during the nesting season. And this one, which now came for its lawful owner, looked formidable indeed, towering up to its great height, the feathers round the base of its neck bristling at right angles, and flicking its jet-black wings viciously. It was a grand bird, whose pink shins and beak, and flaming, savage eye proclaimed it in full season, as it charged forward, hissing like an infuriated snake.

Colvin grasped the long, tough mimosa bough not a moment too soon. Standing firm yet lightly, so as to be able to spring aside if necessary, he met the onrush in the only way to meet it. The sharp pricking of the clusters of spiky thorns met the savage bird full in the head and neck, but chiefly the head, forcing it to shut its eyes. For a moment it danced in powerless and blinded pain, then backed, staggering wildly. Forward again it hurled itself, emitting an appalling hiss, again to meet

that inexorable cluster of thorny spikes. In blind rage it shot out a terrible kick, which its human opponent deftly avoided, the while holding his thorn *tack* high enough to avoid having it struck from his hand—a precaution many a tyro in the ways of the gentle ostrich has been known to forget, to his cost. Again it charged, once more only to find itself forced to shut its eyes and stagger back giddily. Then it came to the conclusion that it had had enough.

“I think he will leave us alone, so long, Gert,” said Colvin, panting somewhat from the exertion and excitement, for even the thorn-tack means of defence requires some skill and physical effort to wield with effect against a full-grown and thoroughly savage male ostrich.

“*Ja*, Baas. He is real *schelm*,” returned Gert, who had been standing behind his master throughout the tussle. “But he has had enough.”

It seemed so. The defeated monster, baulked and cowed, sullenly withdrew, and, shambling off, promptly encountered a weaker rival in the shape of one of his own kind, which he incontinently went for, and consoled himself for his own rout by rushing his fleeing inferior all over the camp, and then, gaining the wire fence, went down on his haunches, and wobbled his silly head and fluttered his silly wings in futile challenge to another cock-bird on the further side of that obstruction, whose attention had been attracted by the row, and who was coming down to see what it was all about.

“Now to look at that jackal-trap, Gert. Ah, here it is—and, sure enough, here’s Mr Jack.”

There came into view an iron trap, which, when set, had been level with the ground, deftly covered with loose earth, and baited with half a hare. It was placed in the thick of a bush so as to be inaccessible to ostriches, to protect whom it was there, and as they came up, a jackal, securely caught by the forelegs, struggled wildly to get free, snarling in fear and pain, and displaying all its white teeth.

“Poor little brute,” said Colvin. “Here, Gert, give it a whack on the head with your kerrie and send it to sleep. *Toen*! look sharp.

“That’s the worst of these infernal traps,” he went on, as a well-directed blow terminated the destructive little marauder’s hopes and fears. “But it has got to be, or we shouldn’t have an egg left.”

“*Ja*, Baas. That is quite true,” assented the Griqua, to whose innermost mind, reflected through those of generations of barbarian ancestry, the idea of feeling pity for a trapped animal, and vermin at that, represented something akin to sheer imbecility.

“Gert,” said Colvin, as they got outside the ostrich camps, “get up one of the shooting-horses—Punch will do—and saddle him up. I am going over to Ratels Hoek.”

“Punch, sir? Not Aasvogel?”

“*Jou eselkop*! Did I not say a shooting-horse? Aasvogel would run to the devil before if he heard a shot. He’d run further now since the joke up yonder with Gideon Roux.”

“*Ja*, sir. That is true”; and the Griqua went away chuckling. He had been poking sly fun at his master, in that Aasvogel was by far the showiest horse in the place. Gert had been putting two and two together. For about once a week that his master had gone over to Ratels Hoek formerly, now he went thither at least twice or three times. Of course it could only be with one object, and with that object no Boer would have thought of riding any other than his showiest horse. Wherefore Gert had suggested Aasvogel.

Likewise, no Boer would have thought of riding forth on such an errand without getting himself up with much care and all the resources at his disposal. Colvin, needless perhaps to say, did nothing of the kind. He got into a clean and serviceable shooting-suit, and with his favourite shot-gun, a sufficiency of cartridges, and a few trifling necessaries in a saddle-bag, he was ready.

Just then his housekeeper, Katrina, Gert’s wife, met him in the door with a note. It had just been brought, she said. Baas Wenlock’s boy was waiting for an answer.

He opened the note. It was in May's handwriting, wanting to know if he would come over and spend Sunday with them. What should he reply? This was Friday; yet, one way or the other, he was under no doubt whatever that in forty-eight hours he would not be precisely inclined to put in the day at Spring Holt—no—no matter how things went. Yet to refuse would seem unfriendly, and, viewed from one aspect, somewhat brutal. So he left the matter open, pleading hurry in his reply.

Then as he passed out of his door a chill feeling came over him. How would he re-enter it—elate, happy, or—only to calculate how soon he could make arrangements for leaving it altogether, for shutting down this volume of the book of his life? And with a sense of darkling superstition upon him the delivery of that message as he passed the threshold seemed to sound a note of ill augury.

He was destined to meet with another such. When nearly half-way on his ride he came in sight of another horseman cantering along the flat at some distance off, travelling towards him. A few minutes more and he made out Adrian De la Rey.

It was rather a nuisance, he decided. He did not want to meet Adrian just then. Adrian was too addicted to making himself disagreeable in these days. Formerly they had been very friendly, but now, since Adrian had come upon them that morning in the garden, his manner had changed. It had displayed towards Colvin, upon such occasions as they had met, a brusqueness akin to rudeness.

"*Daag*! Adrian!" cried the latter, reining in.

"*Daag*!" answered the young Boer gruffly, without reining in, and continuing his way.

"You want a lesson in manners, my young friend," said Colvin to himself, feeling excusably nettled. "Well, well!" he added. "The poor devil's jealous, and of course hates me like poison. I suppose I should do the same."

Thus lightly did he pass it off. He would not have done so perhaps

could he at that moment have seen the other's face, have read the other's mind. A savage scowl clouded the former, black and deadly hatred seethed through the latter.

"Wait a bit, you *verdomde rooinek*!" snarled the Boer to himself. "Your days are told. They may be counted by weeks now, and not many of *them*. These accursed English—is it not enough that they rule our land and treat us like Kafirs, without coming between us and those we love? Their time of reckoning will be here directly—and of this one too. He little knows—he little knows, that he will be dead in a few weeks. No-no!"

He said truly. The object of this murderous though not altogether unjustifiable hatred was holding on his way through the sweet golden sunshine, little thinking of the dread ordeal of blood and horror through which he, and some of those with whom his fate was bound up, were soon—and very soon—to pass.

Chapter Sixteen.

"Of Great Price."

That visit to the Wenlocks had been productive of result in more directions than one; still, why should it have affected Aletta De la Rey of all people? Yet affect her it did, inasmuch as, after it, she became more happy and light-hearted than ever.

Little had she thought at the time of carelessly suggesting the idea to her mother that such could possibly be the result. But weeks had gone by since the suggestion was made, and the lapse of weeks has sometimes a curious way of bringing about changes and developments by no means to be foreseen by those most concerned therein; which for present purposes may be taken to mean that she and Colvin Kershaw had by this time seen a great deal of each other. And this period Aletta, for her part, looked back upon with vivid and unalloyed pleasure.

He had been a great deal at Ratels Hoek during that time, so much so as to lay her open to considerable chaff at the hands of her sisters,

notably at those of Condaas, who declared that it was “a case,” in that he had never been known to favour them with anything like so much of his company before. Even old Tant’ Plessis had remarked upon it, appending by way of rider the query as to when he was going to marry Wenlock’s sister, “the only English girl” and so forth, which joke had become a standing one by then. But Aletta could afford to laugh at it now, in the most whole-souled manner, which development was among the results of that memorable visit.

All their talks together—now grave, now semi-serious, now wholly gay—she delighted to dwell upon. This man was entirely outside her previous experience. Nothing he said ever jarred, even in the slightest degree. There was no question they discussed together to which he could not find a perfectly intelligible side, even if differing; no show of impatience or of humouring her; everything treated from a philosophical, well-thought-out point of view. Or, if the topic were of lighter import, the exact point where the humour came in would somehow strike them simultaneously. There was a subtle vein of sympathy between them, and to dwell upon it thrilled her with a blissful and exquisite delight.

Other considerations apart, it was intensely flattering, the more so as she realised that the attitude was genuine. She had met with plenty of attention during her absence from home, but her head had not been in the least turned thereby. But of all the attention she had met, none had been so grateful, so satisfying, and indeed so sweet as this. Sometimes, in fact, she would wonder if she were not over-estimating its burden, but the momentary misgiving would be quenched. Tone, glance, everything told her that such was not the case.

Yet what could he see in her, to take so much pleasure in talking with her, he who had seen so much of the world what time she herself was running about in short frocks, not so very long able to talk distinctly? How could he give so much consideration to her crude ideas—acquired and fostered, she supposed, during a not very long sojourn in a fifth-rate capital—he who had seen all the mighty capitals of both worlds, and knew some of them intimately? Personally, too, where did the attraction lie? She was not even pretty, like her sister Andrina, or May Wenlock. Yet, comparing herself with the latter, a smile spread over her face,

rippling out into a low, whole-hearted laugh, all alone as she was.

Now the above reflections constituted just about as full and complete a tribute as Aletta De la Rey could have given to any man. She had no poorer an opinion of herself than had other girls of her quality and circumstance. She was aware—normally, that is—that what she lacked in attractiveness in one direction was counterbalanced by different advantages in another. Yet now she found herself magnifying her defects, and almost entirely losing sight of their compensations. Of a truth here too were “symptoms.”

Thus meditating, not quite for the first time, Aletta strolled along through the willows by the river bed—much more bed than “river” now, although a faint trickle had kept some of the deeper reaches fairly supplied. She was given to an occasional solitary stroll. It was good for the individual to retire sometimes into private life, was her explanation. But the other girls put—or pretended to put—a different construction upon it. They declared mischievously that there was something on between her and somebody in Cape Town, and she wanted to go and have a good think about him. She, for her part, only laughed, and let them think so if they wanted to. But they humoured her and her inclinations all the same, for, as we said elsewhere, Aletta occupied a sort of metaphorical pedestal within her own family circle.

It was a lovely morning—blue and golden and cloudless. A mirage-like shimmer arose from the veldt, and the sunlight slanted upon the facets of near rock-walls engirdling turret-shaped cone, or flat-topped mount, as though sweeping over patches of gems. A “kok-a-viek,” the yellow African thrush, was calling to his mate in his melodious triple hoot among the willows hard by, and the sounds of workaday life—mellowed by distance—the lowing of cattle, and the shout of native voices, were borne to the girl’s ears as she stood there, revelling, though half unconsciously, in the glow of her youth and vitality, in the sheer joy and delight of living.

Suddenly an old koorhaan concealed somewhere among the thorns on the opposite river bank opened his head, and emitted his long, strident crowing. Another answered further off, then another, and presently the

whole veldt was alive with the shrill barkings of the clamourous little bustards. Then the first offender rose with an uproarious suddenness that startled Aletta, and put up about ten more, which could be seen winging their way, far and near, adding their alarmed cacklings to his.

Something had scared the bird—something or somebody. Who could it be? Aletta's face flushed. Was it Adrian back again? He had been there that morning and had ridden off, very moody and sullen. Had he thought better of it and returned? Was it Adrian—or— And then the flush which had spread over her cheeks and throat deepened, and her eyes shone with a glad light, for there was a hoof-stroke or two hard by—on this side, not on the opposite bank where she had expected the new-comer, whoever it might be, first to show, and then the identity of the latter was exactly as she could have wished.

"I am in luck's way this morning," said Colvin, dismounting. "Are you indulging in a solitary meditation, Miss De la Rey?"

She answered in the affirmative. The while he had taken in at a glance the whole picture: the tall, graceful figure against the background of trees, the lighting up of the hazel eyes, the flush of colour which rendered the face, framed within an ample white "kapje," wonderfully soft and winning, as its owner stood, with her head thrown ever so slightly back, there before him. Something or other—perhaps it was the "kapje" she was wearing—recalled to his mind a somewhat similar meeting in which May Wenlock constituted the other party to the transaction; but, if so, it was only to think what a long time ago that seemed, and what a change had come into and over his life since.

Then, as her glance fell upon his horse, and some birds dangling from the saddle:

"Why, you have been shooting already. Tell me, do you even go to bed with a cartridge-belt on? How many birds have you got?"

"Brace of partridges and two koorhaan. One is a *vaal* koorhaan, and a fine one too. It took an astonishingly long shot to bring him down. I could have brought along a blekbok, but thought I'd let him go."

“Why?”

“Oh, I didn’t want the bother of loading him up—and the rest of it. He got up right under Punch’s feet just after I turned into the gate of the third camp. It was impossible to have missed him, for Punch is as steady as a rock. So he stood, or rather ran, reprieved. No. I couldn’t be bothered with him to-day.”

“Why—to-day?”

But with the words she dropped her eyes. Was it before something in his glance? Immediately, however, she raised them again and met his fully, bravely.

“Listen, Aletta. I have something to tell you, and it strikes me first as a splendid augury that I should have found you like this all alone. It is of no use beating about the bush, but—give me your hand, dear, then perhaps I shall be able to tell you better.”

Without removing her eyes from his, she put forth her hand. Augury Number 2, he thought, as the long, soft tapering fingers slipped into his. She, for her part, thought how firm, and tender, and speaking was that gaze which she met; and it was of a piece with the manner. No exuberant over-confidence which would have jarred, none of the self-effacing, stuttering diffidence, which would have sapped ever so little, even if but momentarily, the high estimation in which she held this man. Could she herself be as self-possessed?

“I love you, darling,” he said. “I have come over this morning on purpose to tell you so. We have not known each other very long, but I have learnt to love you as I never thought it possible to love. Have you not seen it?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. But the hand that was within his seemed to close around it with a perceptible pressure.

“Listen now, Aletta”; and there was a softened tenderness about the mere sounding of her name that sent a thrill of delight through her whole

being. “I am rather a weather-worn hulk, I fear some people might say, for you in your sweet, bright youth to condemn yourself to go through life with. Yet, if you could bring yourself to face that ordeal, I believe we should make each other very happy. Tell me, now, do you think you can bring yourself to face it—to love an old fogey like me?”

Her eyes answered him. They had never left his, and now the love-light that beamed from them was not to be mistaken.

“Yes, Colvin,” she said softly. “I think I can. But—don’t call yourself names.” And with the words she was gathered to him while they exchanged their first kiss. “Can I love you?” she murmured unsteadily, yielding in his embrace. “Can I love you, did you say? Can I help it? My darling one, you are made to be loved,” she uttered, in a very abandonment of passionate tenderness. “But I—why should you love me—you who have seen so much of the world? I am so inexperienced, so ignorant. I am not even decent-looking. How can I ever make you happy?”

“Ignorant? Inexperienced? My Aletta, you would more than hold your own anywhere—perhaps will some day,” he added, as though to himself. “Not even decent-looking!” he echoed banteringly, and, holding her from him at arm’s length, he affected to scan her up and down. “No. No presence, no grace, supremely awkward—hands like the sails of a fishing-smack.”

“There, that will do,” laughed the girl, giving him a playful tap with one of the libelled hands, a hand which would have served as a model in a sculpture of Iseult of Brittany. “You are only *beginning* to sum up my imperfections, and I am frightened already. No, really; I feel hardly inclined for a joke even. I am far, far too happy.”

“Kwaa-kwak-kwak! Kwaa-kwak-kwak!”

Both started, then laughed. The old koorhaan, first disturbed across the river bed, was returning, as though some instinct notified him that the fell destroyer was harmless to-day. Right overhead he came, an easy

twenty-five yards' shot. Instinctively Colvin reached for the gun, which he had rested against an adjoining bush; but as quickly he recovered himself.

"We'll grant the old squawker an amnesty to-day," he said with a laugh. "I don't think I could have missed that shot either."

"Kwaa-kwak-kwak! Kwaa-kwak-kwak!" yelled the bird, as, hovering for a moment, it dropped down among the thorns on the very spot whence it had been first roused. Then they talked on, those two, happy in the happiness which cannot often come in a lifetime—happy in the golden sunshine and the glowing summer of their lives—happy amid the rejoicing surroundings of Nature, in their vastness and peace and calm. Yet, away there to the North—what? The gathering cloud, black as night, sweeping down, steadily, surely—whirled along on the spreading demon-wings of war—the cloud which, bursting into lurid thunders, should overwhelm all with its blasting breath in a vortex of hideous hate and red slaughter, and woe and destitution. No; for the contemplation of this they had no mind.

Suddenly Aletta gave a start, uttering a little cry of consternation.

"There's the dinner-bell, and you haven't even off-saddled. How late we shall be!"

"We shall, rather. But what does it matter? Good Lord, though, how the last hour has flown?"

Was it a suspicion born of the fact that these two shared a momentous secret that made them think Stephanus exchanged more than one significant glance with his wife while they sat at dinner? He began to talk about his nephew Adrian. The latter never came near them now. He had changed entirely, and seemed to have run patriotism mad. Moreover, he had taken to associating with certain Boers of a particularly low and disreputable type, such as Hermanus Delport, Gideon Roux, and others.

The while Condaas and Andrina were kicking each other under the

table, and Aletta was feeling supremely uncomfortable. Then the worthy Stephanus, suddenly becoming aware that he was romping gaily over mined ground, abruptly changed the subject.

But thereafter was surprise in store for him, when Colvin took him aside and imparted the events of the morning. Stephanus was delighted, and an additional fact, not at present to be divulged, which the other imparted to him, did not lessen his satisfaction.

"*Maagtig*! Colvin. You are a *slim kerel*," he cried, shaking his son-in-law-elect warmly by the hand. "Why, you have kept it dark between you. Well, I don't know anybody I would rather give my little girl to. Besides, she is almost English in her ways. But, say; it seems a strange thing that you, with ample means to live where you like, should prefer to bury yourself in an out-of-the-way place like this. Of course, for us who are born to it, why it's different. We couldn't get on anywhere else."

"Oh, I like the life, Stephanus. Since I have known Aletta, I have liked it more. By the way, I am under no sort of a cloud at home, if that is what you are thinking about. I could go and set up in London to-morrow if I wanted."

"I was not thinking otherwise, *ou' maat*," said Stephanus heartily. "Let us go in and tell the wife."

Mrs De la Rey gave both of them a good-humoured scolding. She ought to have been told first, not Stephanus. Girls belonged first of all to their mother. She, too, was delighted. But the cream of the joke came when they broke the news to old Tant' Plessis.

"Colvin going to marry Aletta?" cried the latter sharply. "What nonsense are you telling me, Gertruida? Why, Colvin is going to marry Wenlock's sister. She is the only English girl here, and he is the only Englishman, so of course he is going to marry her. I have heard Mynheer —no, I mean everybody—say so."

"But it isn't true, Tanta, I tell you," explained Mrs De la Rey. "It is Aletta—our Aletta."

“Aletta?” ejaculated the old woman, upon whom it began to dawn. “Aletta! *Oh, mijn Vaterland*! Why, he is nearly old enough to be her father!”

“That’s a nasty one!” whispered Colvin to Stephanus, who was nearly losing his life in his superhuman efforts to repress a great roar. It was too much for Andrina and Condaas, who at the other end of the room were pretending to work. They precipitately fled, and, in a moment, splutters and squeals, muffled by a closed door, became faintly audible to those who remained. Aletta had made herself scarce long before.

“Nearly old enough to be her father, and an Englishman!” repeated Tant’ Plessis, wagging her head. “An Englishman! *Oh, goeije*! Was not one of her father’s people good enough for her? There, Gertruida. See what comes of sending her among the English to learn their ways. She comes home, and wants to marry an Englishman.”

The air, half of horror, half of resignation, wherewith the old woman uttered these words was irresistibly comic.

“Well, Tanta, he isn’t a bad sort of an Englishman, as Englishmen go,” cut in Stephanus, winking the while at his wife. “Besides, remember whom he is descended from, and shake hands and congratulate him,” shoving Colvin forward as he spoke.

“*Ja*, that is true,” replied Tant’ Plessis, somewhat mollified. “After all, his grandfather was the great and good Calvinus. Well, nephew, follow in his footsteps, and you will be happy. But—Aletta! *Oh, mijn lieve Heer*! who would have thought it—Aletta!”

Chapter One.

Book II—The Refugee Train.

The last refugee train was drawn up at the down-country departure platform at Park Station, Johannesburg.

The scene upon the platform was one of indescribable hubbub and confusion. Passengers, representing all ages and sexes, vociferated in various tongues, and tumbled over piles of luggage, and swore, or snapped or whimpered according to sex or age. Some, belated, thanks to a final call at the refreshment bar, charged furiously through the clamourous crowd by main force, panic-stricken lest they should lose their seats. Seats? They were lucky to get any accommodation at all. Carriages and compartments, cattle vans and open trucks alike, were literally crammed. The enforced republicanism of the hour and the situation crowded all classes together indiscriminately; and the man of wealth and luxurious living was jostled and shouldered by the roughest mine hand, who in habits and ideas rose little, if at all, above the level of the savage. The densely packed compartments afforded scenes and sounds of wild weird Babel, being resonant with the squalling of children and the altercations of hustled and excited women, and in the open trucks men elbowed and cursed and fought for mere standing room. The while, jeering Zarps, (Note 1), posted about the platform by twos and threes, stood enjoying the fun. They felt no call to keep the peace on this occasion, to interfere in quarrels between the enemies of their land. Let these accursed Uitlanders settle their own differences. They would have plenty of time to do it in before they got clear of the country, decided the guardians of law and order with a certain grim satisfaction.

The train, which was of vast length, began to move slowly out of the station, and as it did so somebody, with more patriotism than sense of humour, conceived the idea of striking up “Rule, Britannia.” It took, and the chorus rolled forth lustily from the fleeing crowd, mighty in volume, but varied—exceedingly—as to time and tune, causing the Zarps, who understood English, to break into boisterous and derisive laughter, and to call out after the singers that, whatever Britannia ruled, it was not the Transvaal, and if she thought otherwise she had better hurry up her *rooi-baatjes* (Redcoats) and try. Which comment, after all, was not without pertinence.

Upon others, however, the effect of the parting challenge was different. A group of armed burghers had been standing at the end of the platform, surveying, with glances of hatred and contempt, the swirling

confusion of the crowd of refugees. Now, as they grasped the burden of the song, several were seen to slap cartridges into their rifles, with many a threatening scowl in the direction of the train. The latter, very fortunately, had got sufficiently under way, for already several rifles were pointed at the receding trucks full of packed fugitives. The burghers were in an ugly mood, and racial feeling had reached its highest point of tension. Something of a massacre might easily at that moment have resulted from the display of rash and ill-timed defiance. The result of a volley poured into those closely crowded trucks would have been too ghastly for anything.

Few indeed were the Uitlanders who remained upon the platform as the train disappeared, and such as did wore a grave and anxious expression of countenance; and well they might, for the hour of retreat was past, and they had deliberately and of their own free will elected to stay in the Republic and face the horrors and risks of war, and that at the mercy of the enemies of their countrymen. Such being the case, it may be imagined that the seeing-off contingent attendant upon the departure of the last train was not large.

Conspicuous among it were two persons—a man and a girl. They were not together. They were not, apparently, acquainted, and they were unmistakably English. Yet they were looking at each other—and had been for some time—now furtively, now openly, now in a would-be casual fashion that deceived neither.

The man’s attention was drawn to the girl because she was very pretty. The girl’s attention might have been drawn to the man, because he represented the masculine equivalent of that form of attractiveness in her. He was of a good height, well set up, with clean-cut features and brown eyes, clear and searching, lighting up a healthy sun-browned face; a good-looking man beyond the ordinary, and one likely to attract the attention of the other sex.

But the expression of countenance worn by this member of the other sex seemed to convey more than the idea of a mere casual attraction, for it passed through varying phases. Now a puzzled frown knitted the brows, now the velvety-blue eyes dilated in a gaze of fixed scrutiny, then

brightened into a gleam as of one who has solved a perplexing riddle, and has solved it to her complete satisfaction. Then she came right up to the other, putting forth her hand, as she said demurely:

“Well, this is a surprise! Why, whenever did you come up here?”

But the stranger responded with something of a stark. The expression of his face conveyed astonishment, plain and undiluted.

“Pardon me,” he said, slightly raising his hat. “I think there must be—er—some mistake.”

It was the girl’s turn to exhibit amazement. Then her face flushed, hardening into a set look of sullen indignation.

“Some mistake?” she echoed. Then witheringly, “Yes, I think there must be. Pardon *me*, Mr Kershaw. I am very dense. I ought to have seen that you did not wish to know your friends in another country and under different circumstances.”

“Yes, that is my name. But—er—really it is very remiss of me—but—Where did we meet?”

May Wenlock stared, as well she might.

“What part are you trying to act now?” she blazed forth indignantly. Then softening: “But only tell me, Colvin. Is it perhaps that you have reasons for not wanting them to know who you are?” with a quick anxious side glance around, as though fearful of being overheard.

“Pardon me again,” was the reply. “But my name is not Colvin.”

“Not Colvin?” was all poor May could gasp in her bewilderment. “Certainly not I was christened Kenneth.”

“But—you said your name was Kershaw?”

“So it is. Kenneth Kershaw. Now you mention it, though, I have a relative named Colvin: er—a first cousin.”

“First cousin? Why, you might be his twin brother,” burst forth May impulsively. “Why, the voice—even your way of talking— No, I never saw such a wonderful likeness in my life.” And then, catching a curious expression in the other’s eyes, she suddenly remembered the position, and flushed hotly, realising how completely she must have given herself away. The man, looking at her, was thinking to himself, “What a pretty girl! What a devilish pretty girl! Lucky Colvin, wherever he may be! Lucky as usual.” But aloud he said:

“Is that so? I believe we used to be considered rather alike, but we haven’t seen each other for quite a number of years. Have you seen him lately, Miss—er—Miss—”

“Wenlock,” supplemented May.

“Miss Wenlock—thanks. Now we know each other, and I cannot sufficiently appreciate the good fortune that drew me here this morning to see that trainload of fools off.”

Even then May could hardly believe her senses. The look, the voice, the easy and perfectly unembarrassed manner, every inflection of tone even, was simply Colvin reproduced. Could it really be himself, trying how completely he could take her in? Yet something told her it could not be. He was not addicted to practical jokes—indeed, rather disliked them.

“Why do you call it a trainload of fools, Mr Kershaw?” she said; “I am more inclined to think that is the word for some of us who are left behind.”

“Oh, they are. For instance, it is strange how sparsely distributed is a sense of humour and of the eternal fitness of things! As if race feeling is not at sufficiently high pressure already, those idiots must needs flourish the red rag in the Dutchmen’s faces. The patriotic song may be all right in its proper place, but it doesn’t come well from a crowd engaged in running away as fast as its legs—or, in this case its wheels—can carry it. For two pins those fellows over there,” designating the group of sullen, scowling burghers, “would have blazed into the whole mob.”

The group referred to comprised one unit to whom the speaker was

clearly an object of very great interest indeed; not on account of the words just uttered, for they had been spoken in by no means a loud tone, and the distance was great enough to render them quite inaudible. This man had been among the first to level his rifle at the receding train, and the contemptuous hatred stamped upon the countenances of the group had in no instance been shown more plainly and uncompromisingly than upon that of this one. But from the moment he had caught sight of these two conversing at the other end of the platform, that sinister expression had perceptibly deepened. At the same time he had drawn back into the centre of his fellow-burghers, as though desirous of remaining unobserved, while continuing to watch, and that narrowly, the object of his rancour. The latter, serenely unconscious of being a disturbing factor in the equanimity of anybody, went on:

“I suppose you and my—er—cousin are pretty friendly—eh, Miss Wenlock?”

“Oh yes. We lived next door to each other down in the Colony, and so of course we saw a good deal of each other.” And then she coloured again, remembering how readily and naturally she had addressed this man by his supposed Christian name. What must he be thinking of her?

“I see,” he answered, tranquilly. “And so you took me for him. That isn’t so very strange either.”

Strange! Great Heavens! Even yet May was hardly quite sure the whole thing was not a make-believe. Strange? Why, even this man’s way of accepting the situation, passing over all detail, taking everything for granted, was Colvin’s way.

“Now that we have made each other’s acquaintance in this very unexpected manner, Miss Wenlock, perhaps you will allow me to see you, at any rate, a part of your way home. You might tell me a little about my relative. Where are you staying, by the way?”

“Just this side Doornfontein. Yes. I shall be delighted, if I am not taking you out of your way.”

“Who are you, *kerel*, and have you a permit to remain here?” interrupted, in Dutch, the peremptory voice of a Zarp.

Now “kerel”—meaning in this context “fellow”—is a pretty familiar, not to say impudent, form of address as proceeding from a common policeman. The tone, too, was open to objection on the same ground. But May, glancing at her new friend, noticed that he seemed in no wise ruffled thereby. He merely glanced at his interlocutor as though the latter had asked him for the time.

“I have applied for a permit and am awaiting it,” he answered, in the same language. “So, my good friend, don’t bother, but go and drink my health with your mates.”

The Zarp’s hand closed readily upon the image and superscription of Oom Paul, and Kenneth Kershaw and his companion passed out of the station.

“Oh, you are so like Col—er—your cousin,” was May’s comment on the above transaction. “That is exactly how he would have treated matters under the circumstances. Now, Frank would have wanted to go for the man at once, and then what a row there would have been! And I hate rows.”

“So do I. But—who’s Frank?”

“My brother. He is perfectly rabid ever since this trouble has begun. He says he never can look at a Dutchman now without wanting to fight him.”

“So? Well, now is his opportunity. Is he up here?”

“Oh no. Down in the Colony. I am staying up here with some relatives. I wanted to go back, but they wouldn’t let me. They have interest with the Government at Pretoria, and say that it is safer, if anything, here than down in the Colony.”

As they walked along, taking the road which runs parallel with the railway line in the direction of Doornfontein, something of the state of

affairs was apparent in the utter stagnation that prevailed. A deserted look was upon everything. The tram service had ceased, and there was not a vehicle to be seen down the long vista of road. Houses shut up and abandoned, their blinds down, and in many cases with broken windows, spoke eloquently of the prevailing desolation, and save for a subdued-looking native or two the street was deserted; while, dominating all, the fort on Hospital Hill frowned down flat and threatening, ready to let loose its thunders of ruin and of death.

Turning a corner suddenly, a troop of armed burghers debouched into the road—hard, weather-beaten, bearded men, wearing wide hats and bandoliers full of cartridges and with rifle on thigh. They were riding in no particular order, and most of them were smoking pipes.

Many a head was turned, and shaggy brows were knit in sullen hatred, at the sight of the tall Englishman and his very attractive companion, as they rode by. For a moment their leader seemed disposed to halt and call the pedestrians to account, then appeared to think better of it. But that speculation was rife as to their identity was only too clear.

May Wenlock chatted brightly to her new acquaintance as they walked. She was naturally of a communicative disposition, and it was not long before she had put him into possession of the main facts and circumstances and surroundings of her life. Without the least consciousness of the fact on her part, without seemingly vivid interest on his, he had yet manoeuvred the conversation so that it was confined mainly to the time during which she had known Colvin, on the subject of whom, before she had uttered a dozen sentences, she had, to the practised eye and ear of her companion, completely given herself away. Where was Colvin now? Why, at home, she supposed, on his own place, close to theirs. No wonder she had been so startled at the extraordinary likeness. Anyhow, the mistake was very excusable. Was it not?

“It was a very fortunate mistake for me,” Kenneth replied. “I hope we may meet again,” he went on, for by this time they were at her own door. He could even read what was passing in her mind—how she was treading down an impulse to ask him in, remembering that, after all, their introduction had been startlingly unconventional.

“Yes, indeed, I hope we may,” she answered. “At any rate, you know where I’m staying. Good-bye. Thanks so much for bringing me back.”

Kenneth Kershaw turned away, and as he strolled along his thoughts were busy.

“By Jove, that *is* a pretty little girl,” he was saying to himself. “Not quite up to the mark in other ways perhaps, but pretty enough even to make up for that,” with a recollection of the bright smile, and the look in the sea-blue eyes, which had accompanied the farewell handclasp. “And Colvin? She let go a lot about him. Likely to turn up here, is he? Reputed to stand in too much with the Boers! Suspicion of entanglement with a Boer girl— She shut up like an oyster when she came to that part, though. Well, well. This day’s work may turn out not bad. Colvin on this side, the two peas likeness between us, that dear little girl in there whom I can simply twist round my finger, and turn to any account, *and* the war! Strange if my luck doesn’t take a sudden turn in the right direction. Colvin, the only obstacle, worth reckoning on, that is. Obstacles have to be removed sometimes. Yes, his luck has run too long. Hurrah for the war?”

Note 1. From the letters Z.A.R.P. (Zuid Afrikaansche Republieke Politie—South African Republic’s Police). The joke has passed into a recognised popular term.

Chapter Two.

A Transvaal Official.

Petrus Johannes Stephanus Gerhardus Du Plessis, commonly known to his kinsfolk and acquaintance and to the crowd at large as Piet Plessis, was a high official in not the least important department of the Transvaal Civil Service.

Born in the Free State, and educated—well educated—in Holland, he combined the *slim* qualities of the Boer with the shrewd, technical,

worldly-wisdom of the Hollander. He was now of middle age and somewhat portly of person, and withal a jolly, genial Dutchman, whose ringing laugh and jovial manner conveyed the idea of open-hearted frankness to the last degree. Those who ran away with that impression had their education in character-studying to complete. For all his apparent open-heartedness, Piet Plessis was never known by word or wink to “give away” anything. And he could have given away some “things” of a very strange and startling nature had he so chosen.

Did a transport rider bringing up loads of Government goods from the Swaziland border succumb to the indiscretion of peeping into certain of the cases, and subsequently babble thereon in his cups, it was not strange that he should be murdered by his own Kafirs on the return journey, because that sort of thing does happen sometimes, though not often. Was the dead body of a mysterious foreigner found one morning in the Grand Stand on the racecourse at Johannesburg, the hand grasping a revolver pointed at the heart, through which was a neatly drilled bullet-hole, with no burn of powder about the clothing? This was not strange, for does not everybody know that the hand of a dead person will sometimes grasp an object tightly for hours after death—though not often? And doctors will sometimes disagree, though not often? Did a prominent member of the Upper Raad, who owned a chattering wife, make an over-protracted sojourn in the Cape Peninsula for the benefit of the lady’s health? That too was not strange, for it happens sometimes. And if Piet Plessis’ private office had very thick walls and double doors—padded—this was not strange either, for is not the climate of the Transvaal fairly bleak during quite half the year? On many an incident, strange, suspicious, or startling—or all three, had his acquaintance striven to pump Piet Plessis—in club, or bar, or society drawing-room; but they might as well have expected to dig sovereigns out of the billiard cues in the one or real ten-year-old out of the “special Scotch” bottles in the other, or the precise ages of any three ladies of a middle time of life in the third. Tact and readiness of resource are highly important official ingredients. Piet Plessis possessed both to a consummate degree, which may have had to do with the fact that he was now a very important official indeed.

Piet Plessis and Stephanus De la Rey were second cousins. It is significant of the wide ramifications through which relationship extends among the Dutch inhabitants of South Africa, that the high Transvaal official and the well-to-do Cape Colony Boer should be so near akin. They had hardly seen each other for some years, but intercourse between them had been renewed in the shape of a cordial invitation to Aletta to come up and spend some time in the Transvaal.

The girl was delighted. Her patriotic enthusiasm, though somewhat sobered down of late, yielding to more personal and individual considerations, was not dead by any means. To visit Pretoria under the auspices of one who knew all the secrets of the Government, opened out before her unbounded possibilities in the way of a vivid daily interest at that critical period. She pictured herself in the confidence of her kinsman, and he was in the confidence of the President. What would she not hear! —what would she not know! But, as a preliminary, she little knew her kinsman aforesaid.

But Piet while keeping his own secrets and those of the President to himself, gave her a welcome that left nothing to be desired. So, too, did his wife, a quiet woman, half-way through the thirties, rather good-looking, but retiring and domesticated—not at all the sort of wife for a public man, declared his acquaintance; wherein they were wrong, for Mrs Plessis made all the better hostess, in that she cared nothing for state affairs, desiring only to be left to look after her household in peace and quietness. Piet, himself, moreover had good reason to prefer her that way, inasmuch as he could seek the repose of his domestic circle without being harried by all sorts of questions he had no intention of answering.

He received the news of Aletta's engagement with a burst of genial laughter, evoked less by reason of the fact itself than by the particulars thereof.

"So, Aletta?" he said. "An Englishman! And that is the culmination of all your exuberant patriotism, is it? An Englishman? Well, it might be worse. You might have got taken by one of those *rooi-baatje* officers—so many of you girls down at the Cape seem to go mad on them. Bah, they are too often an impecunious lot, all debts and gold stripe"—(the reader

must bear in mind that racial animus was at its highest tension, and that the speaker was a Transvaal official). “You should see them a few years later, as I have seen them, with very little half-pay and very large family, living cheap at some wretched Belgian town. Still—an Englishman!”

“But there are Englishmen and Englishmen, Cousin Piet,” returned Aletta, laughing as one could afford to do who was supremely conscious that the laugh was all on her own side. “Wait till you see this one. He is not in the least like the rest.”

“Oh no. Of course not. How could he be, if your choice has fallen upon him? Well, well. We thought we could have done much better for you up here, but you have taken the bit between your teeth so there’s an end of it. Is he coming up here, then?”

“Yes, in a day or two. He came with me as far as Bloemfontein—wouldn’t come all the way yet—thought I had better have a little while alone with you and Anna, so that we might get sort of acquainted. You see, we hardly know each other yet.”

“Why, I feel that we rather do already, Aletta,” replied her kinsman heartily, for he was charmed with her taking manner and general appearance. He had expected her to prove presentable, if a bit shy. But there was nothing of the latter about her. What an acquisition she would be to that unpretentious but pretty house of his just outside Pretoria!

And in it Aletta was destined to pass some very happy days. To begin with, the capital of the principal Dutch Republic stood to her as a kind of Mecca, viewed in the light of her former lofty ideals; to others, of course, it was just a pretty, leafy little town, nestling between its surrounding hills. Brother officials of Piet’s would often come to the house—men who hitherto had been but names to her; genial, highly cultured gentlemen, differing pole-wide from the black-browed conspiring Guy Fawkes—such as the Colonial papers had delighted in painting them. Uitlanders too, with a grievance of course, would frequently show up: jolly, jovial, well-to-do looking, grievance and all; and at first it fairly puzzled her to note on what excellent terms they appeared to stand with their theoretical tyrants and oppressors. Sometimes, too, she got more

than a passing glimpse of the President himself. Here again she failed to identify the perfidious ogre she had so often seen portrayed, both in type and pencil, by the newspapers aforesaid. Nay, more, she was even heretical enough to wonder whether if that personality, with all its shrewd intelligence, had been on the English side, ample tribute would not have been paid even to the outward aspect of the man—so far only described to be held up to repulsion and ridicule—the strong face, the impassive reticence, wherein alone lay a world of diplomatic might—the long stern record of pioneer, *voortrekker*, leader of men; the opening up of wild uncivilised lands—bearing a man's part in wresting the wilderness from the inheritance of savagery to render it the heritage of posterity, and the unwavering fixity of purpose wherewith he had devoted every energy to preserving it for his own people and their children's children. If her sojourn in Cape Town had been a liberal education to Aletta, truly Pretoria constituted a worthy continuation of the same.

"Now look at that, Piet," she said, a day or two after her arrival, exhibiting an excellent portrait of her *fiancé*. "Didn't I tell you there were Englishmen *and* Englishmen. Now, this one is not like the rest. Is he?"

"No. I don't know that he is," replied Piet Plessis, scanning the likeness intently. But to himself he was saying, "*So*! I must have a few inquiries made. I have seen that worthy before. Oh yes, I have." But to her, "So he has been a neighbour of yours the last year or so, Aletta?"

"Yes. He was already settled down on his own place some time before I came home."

"Was he? Never went off it, I suppose?"

"No"—wonderingly. "He has been there since he came back from Rhodesia, he and Frank Wenlock together. At least, he was looking out for a farm at first, while he was staying with the Wenlocks. Then he got one and hasn't been off it since."

"Not?"

"No—except to go into Schalkburg now and then, or to come and

see us."

"Oh yes. To come and see you?" rejoined Piet, jocosely. "Hasn't been up here at all of late, eh?"

"He has been up here before, but not lately, not within the last year. I think longer, because he served through the Matabele rising. But he was up in Rhodesia some little while after that."

"Was he? Oh yes," said the diplomatic Piet, in a tone as though by now only politely interested in the subject. But the while he was, to all outward appearances, turning the photograph round and round listlessly, but in reality scrutinising it keenly, now obliquely from the top corner, now sideways. "How long did you say you had been engaged, Aletta?"

"Just over two months," answered the girl, her eyes brightening.

"*Ach*! he isn't listening to you at all, Aletta," struck in the partner of Piet's joys and sorrows, looking up from her book. "He has forgotten all about Mr Kershaw by this time, and is thinking over the last political move. What did you say his name was—Mr Kershaw's, I mean?"

"Colvin. It's a family surname turned into a Christian name. Oh, and such a joke, Anna! You should have heard Tant' Plessis on that very thing," And she proceeded to narrate how that perverse old relative had insisted on saddling upon her *fiancé* a historic Protestant Reformer of the sixteenth-century for grandfather. Piet fairly shouted with mirth.

"Old Tant' Katrina! *Ja*, she was a *kwaai vrouw*!" he cried. "I have good reason to remember her. When we were young ones, at Rondavel, the other side Heilbron, she would come and stop there for any time. She was always saying we didn't get enough *strop* and worrying the *Ou' Baas* to give us more. He only laughed at her—and one day she wanted to give us some herself. But we wouldn't take it. We snatched the *strop* from her and ran away. But we had to spend a week dodging her. She had got a broomstick then. She shied it at us one day, and hit my brother Sarel—the one that is in Bremersdorp now—over the leg. He couldn't walk straight for about six months after. Then she and the *Ou' Baas* had

words, and she cleared out *Ja*, she *was* a *kwaai vrouw*. And now she is with Stephanus! Well, well. But Aletta, what did she say to your being engaged to an Englishman?"

"Oh, she consoled herself that his grandfather was the great Calvinus," answered Aletta, breaking into a peal of laughter over the recollection. "Mynheer had said so: that was enough for her."

A few days after this Colvin arrived in person, and then it seemed to Aletta that she had nothing left to wish for. But he would not allow her to give him all her time exclusively. She had certain social calls upon it, and, in justice to her entertainers, these must not be set aside. Piet Plessis had been the first to notice this, and was capable of appreciating it, for he himself was astonished at the brightening effect the presence of Aletta had shed within his home.

"Did I not tell you," she would cry triumphantly, "that this Englishman was not like other Englishmen?"

And Piet would laughingly agree.

Colvin himself did not fail to note the pride and delight wherewith she would "produce" him—as he put it—to every fresh batch of people whose acquaintance he made. Once or twice he took her to task for it.

"You know, darling," he would say, with a lurking amusement in his eyes, "it is not 'up to date' to show feeling. You ought, for instance, to appear just languidly tolerant of my presence at all—rather as if I were of no account in the world's scheme except to fetch and carry."

"Oh, ought I?" she would answer. "Well, when I see you want me to, I will try and begin."

Those were happy days—for these two at any rate. For those outside the enchanted portal they were days of dark anxiety; yet on the surface little of this appeared. People came and went as usual. To judge from the ordinary manner of Piet Plessis, no one would have suspected the mind of that inscrutable official to be working and scheming to its

utmost capacity. He was a good deal away from home, returning late, or not at all, and then with a cheerful breezy apology for the calls upon his time entailed by a confoundedly serious political outlook. But he had at once made Colvin free of the house, and the latter was grateful for the quiet uninterrupted retreat thus afforded from the turmoil of excitement and wild talk outside; and not the least happy hours were those he spent in the cool, bosky garden, while Aletta sat at her work, and talked to him, and they grew to know each other more and more, and every day served but to deepen their mutual understanding, and love, and appreciation. So the days wore on, and then from the bright, halcyon blue, now constituting the lives of the twain, the bolt fell, and the name thereof was written in but three letters—lurid letters traced in blood—

War!

Yes, the storm had burst at last. The preliminary clouding over, the flashes and mutterings, distant but drawing nearer, had culminated in a great and terrible outburst, in the thunder roar of cannon along nearly a thousand miles of border. The historical “ultimatum” had been delivered. The land which but few years ago, comparatively speaking, had been inhabited, and that hot too thickly, by a population of primitive farmers, had thrown down the gauntlet in the face of the valour and wealth and boundless resource of the Empire on which the sun never sets. And the challenge had been met in the only possible way, and once more two Christian and civilised races were shedding each other’s blood like water, while countless swarms of dark-skinned and savage heathen stood by and looked on.

Chapter Three.

His Honour the President.

“We shall have to turn you into a prisoner of war, Colvin,” said Piet Plessis a week or so after the breaking out of hostilities. “And, as I feel sort of responsible for your safe custody, my orders to you as your custodian are to go over to the Grand, now, at once, and pack up your traps and bring them here. I’d have suggested it before, but everything was so *uit-makaar*, and I didn’t know whether you might not have been wanting to go down-country again.”

Whereby it is manifest that the inquiries we heard Piet promise to set afloat had turned out satisfactory, albeit their burden and the result he had characteristically kept to himself.

“No. I don’t feel that way inclined, Piet,” answered Colvin. “I am a sort of cosmopolitan rover, without ties—except such as are here,” he added significantly. “Besides, it’s more interesting watching the row from behind your lines than from behind those of the other side. By the way, we are quite alone, just the two of us. What show do you think your crowd has got?”

“What show?” said the other, after an instinctive glance on either side. “Look here, Colvin. You’re one of us now. If anybody who wasn’t had asked me that question I should have said: ‘It is all in the hands of Providence, and our cause is just.’ Now I say: ‘It is all within the potentialities of politics, and the potentialities of politics spell Uncertainty.’ What show? Every show. We shall see. But if you really are wanting to go down-country any time later, I dare say I could always get you through the lines.”

“Oh, we’ll think of that later. I might feel inclined to go and see some of the fighting—”

“What’s that? What might you feel inclined to do?” interrupted the voice of Aletta, who with Mrs Plessis had just come out on the back

stoep, where the above conversation was taking place. “Colvin, I am astonished at you! See some of the fighting indeed! Do you think I shall let you?”

She had locked her hands together round his arm, just resting her head against his shoulder, and stood facing the other two, with the prettiest air of possession. Piet Plessis spluttered:

“Ho, ho! Colvin! A sort of cosmopolitan rover without ties; isn’t that what you were saying just now? Without ties? Ho, ho, ho!” And the jolly Dutchman shouted himself into a big fit of coughing.

“He is one of us now, is he not, Piet?” went on the girl, a tender pride shining from her eyes. “Yet he talks about going to fight against us. Yes, you were saying that, Colvin. I heard you when we came out.”

“Little termagant!” he rejoined lovingly, drawing one of the hands which was linked round his arm into his. “I wasn’t talking about fighting against anybody. I said I might go and *see* some of the fighting. You may go and see a bull-fight, you know, but you needn’t necessarily be taking part in it. In fact, the performers on both sides would object, and that in the most practical manner, to your doing so. Now, I meant to go as a non-combatant. Sort of war-correspondent business.”

“Well, we are not going to let you do anything of the sort,” answered Aletta decisively. “Are we, Piet? Why don’t you make a prisoner of war of him, then he can’t do as he pleases?”

“‘He is one of us now,’” quoted Colvin, innocently. “I believe those were the words. How can ‘one of us’ be a prisoner of war?”

Piet laughed at this deft turning of the tables.

“Go away and get your traps, man,” he said, “then you’ll be all snug and fixed up here by lunch-time. Here’s the buggy,” as the sound of wheels came through from the front of the house. “I must get back to office. So long?”

Every day some fresh news from the seat of war came flowing in—beginning with the capture of the armoured train at Kraaipan, historical as the first overt act of hostility, the investment of Kimberley and Mafeking, the reverse at Elandslaagte, and the death of the British general, and, later on, the arrival of a good many British prisoners. And over and above authenticated news, of course wild rumour was busy, magnifying this or that skirmish into a Boer victory, diminishing losses, and playing general skittles with most of the facts of the particular event reported, as is invariably the case on either side of the contested field. But what struck Colvin Kershaw after the first week of excitement was the calm, matter-of-fact way in which it was received by the crowd at large. News which would have thrown Cape Town or Durban into a perfect delirium, was treated in Pretoria as so much matter of course, and only to be expected.

Day after day, he would watch the muster of burghers or the entraining of the guns, great and small, of the Staats Artillerie, and here again the sober, almost phlegmatic demeanour of the combatants was remarkable. Rough, weather-beaten, somewhat melancholy-looking men were these mounted burghers—many of them large and powerful of stature. They bestrode wiry, undersized nags—which bore besides their riders the frugal ration of biltong and biscuit, with which the Boer can get along for days. Slung round with well-filled bandolier, rifle on thigh, and mostly wearing weather-worn broad-brimmed hats—though some of the older ones were crowned with the white chimney-pot—they would muster in front of the Dutch Reformed church, and pace forth, singing perhaps a Dutch hymn or a snatch of the “Volkslied”—most of them smoking their pipes, tranquil, phlegmatic, as though they were all going home again. The hooraying and handshaking and handkerchief-waving and flag-wagging which would have accompanied a British combatant force under like circumstances, would be conspicuous by its absence.

While watching such a muster, a man, who was standing among the spectators, turned at her voice and, lifting his hat, shook hands with Aletta. He was a tall gentlemanly-looking man, with a fair beard and moustache worn after the Vandyke cut, and was a Hollander with a Portuguese name. He, too, had been a high Government official.

“I haven’t seen you for a long time, Dr Da Costa,” said Aletta. “I

thought you had gone to the front."

"No. I am going very soon, though." Then, following the direction of his glance, she introduced him to Colvin.

"What do you think of our main line of defence?" he went on, speaking English with hardly an accent. "Those men have the most perfect faith in themselves and their cause."

"Yes, they look business-like," replied Colvin, critically scanning the long string of mounted burghers as they filed past, most of them smoking their pipes, and chatting to each other in a placid undertone. "We had some of their kind in Matabeleland during the rising in '96, and they were right good men."

"Ah! So you were out in the Matabele rebellion?" said Da Costa, looking at the other with newly-awakened interest.

"Yes, had to be."

"I see. And are you, may I ask, likely to be out in this campaign?"

"Not in the least, unless as a spectator. Here I am not needed—there I was:—which makes all the difference."

"If you are, I hope we may meet in the field. I shall be pleased to show you all you may be wishing to see to the best advantage."

"Now, Dr Da Costa, you are not to encourage him," struck in Aletta. "Mr Kershaw is not going to be shot at at all. He is not needed, as he says, and—you are not to encourage him."

The other, who had heard of Piet Plessis' attractive kinswoman and her English *fiancé*, smiled good-naturedly. Then, to change the conversation, he went on:

"Did you make a long stay at Johannesburg, Mr Kershaw?"

"At Johannesburg?" echoed Colvin.

“Yes. Didn’t I see you in the Rand Club about a fortnight ago? And again on Pritchard Street. Someone told me it was a Mr Kershaw.”

“Someone told you all wrong then, doctor, for I came right through Johannesburg. I never even got out of the train there.”

“That’s odd,” said Da Costa, with a momentary twinkle in his eye, as though he didn’t believe a word of this statement. “It must have been only a likeness,” he added tactfully.

“But the name,” went on Aletta, opening her eyes. “It’s strange they should have got hold of the name.”

“Very, because, as I said, I didn’t so much as get out of the train, let alone take a stroll as far as Pritchard Street, let alone the Rand Club, which is farther,” said Colvin. “Well, we most of us have a ‘double’ somewhere.”

Which was precisely the remark made by the jovial Piet, when the occurrence was narrated to him on their return home. But for once his official instinct of reticence, even in trifling matters, was misplaced, had he but known it. Had he imparted the results of those enquiries he had caused to be made, what a deal of sorrow, and mistrust, and heart-wringing might have been thereafter saved!

“Is that man we met to-day going out with the ambulance department?” asked Colvin.

“Who, Da Costa? Ambulance department?” echoed Piet, wonderingly. “Oh, I see,” with a shout of laughter. “No fear. He’s not a medico. He’s a lawyer—running hard for a judgeship. But I say, Colvin, would you like to go up and see the President this afternoon? I think we could get at the old man to-day.”

“Just what I would like.”

“And, Colvin,” struck in Aletta, “you are not to look upon Oom Paul as an old bear, as most English do. Remember, I have a great admiration for him.”

Colvin promised to keep this fact in mind when forming his opinion, and in due course they arrived at the unpretentious-looking bungalow which was the private residence of one of the most famed personalities of modern times. As they went up between the stone lions which guarded, as it were, the entrance, they passed a German officer coming down the steps, a straight martial figure, with upward-pointing moustaches *à la* Kaiser Wilhelm, and wearing the uniform of the Staats Artillerie. He exchanged a salute with Piet, and the latter halted and took him aside for a minute's conversation.

"That's all right, Colvin," he said, rejoining him, while with a parting salute the German strode on. "He has just come out. Says the old man is in a pretty good-humour."

The President was seated in a substantial armchair as they were shown in. He was likewise smoking a substantial pipe. This looked homely. As Piet introduced Colvin, His Honour did not rise, but merely extended a massive hand, uttering a single monosyllabic word of greeting.

"*Daag*!"

"*Daag, Oom*," responded Colvin, as he shook the Presidential dexter, right heartily. His Honour, however, subsided into silence, during which Piet Plessis entertained him with a running comment on the lighter aspect of day-to-day events, ignoring *the* situation of the hour.

"Who is the Englishman?" said the old man at last, designating Colvin with a wave of his pipe-stem.

Piet explained that he was engaged to be married to a near kinswoman of his who was staying with him. The Presidential features displayed some faint show of interest.

"Your kinswoman!" he said. "Whose daughter is she?"

"Stephanus De la Reys, Mynheer. He lives in the Cape Colony."

“De la Rey! *Ja*, that is a good name, De la Rey,” replied the President, nodding approvingly. “But—an Englishman!” Then, turning to Colvin, he said, still speaking in Dutch.

“Can you talk our language?”

“*Ja, Oom*,” came the hearty response. During the conversational nothings fired off so volubly by Piet Plessis, he had been studying this wonderful old man before him, and in the strong massive face could read the extraordinary and iron will-power which had made its owner the prominent figure in history that he was. Something of Aletta’s thoughts came into his mind, and he too was wondering whether, had this born leader of men thrown in his gigantic influence on the British side, he would not have met with greater appreciation, nay would not his very defects be held to be rugged virtues? Being thus immersed, he failed to observe a grim tightening of the mouth, as he uttered that hearty and, as he thought, deferential reply.

“Have you been here before?” repeated his catechiser.

“*Ja, Oom*,” replied Colvin. And then there was no mistaking the change which came over His Honour’s countenance. He flushed, and a heavy frown darkened his brows, as removing his pipe from his mouth, he rolled out in deep, chest notes, like the bark of an angry mastiff.

“*Is nie jou Oom nie. Ik is die Presidént*!”

(“I am not your uncle. I am the President.”)

The tone went up on an ascending scale, ending loud and staccato. Colvin, for a moment dumfoundered, hastened to apologise, then with the utmost suavity of assurance proceeded to explain that he himself owned an uncle whom he deeply revered, and who bore a most extraordinary resemblance to “Mynheer Presidént.” Then, he deftly went on to inquire about His Honour’s earlier experiences in the old *Voortrekker* days, expressing boundless admiration for those wonderful pioneers, and as he was really well up in their history, the old man, quite mollified, was soon descanting with unusual volubility on the subject of his early doings.

Mean while coffee was brought in, and, as soon after as he could, astute Piet Plessis, seeing the conversation was taking a turn likely to excite His Honour, took the opportunity of terminating the visit.

“Look after him, Piet,” said the old man as he gave them his hand, and there was the nearest approach to a smile lurking about his mouth. “Look after him. He is an Englishman, but he is going to marry your cousin. See that he does not get into any mischief.”

“Say, Piet?” said Colvin when they were well out in the street again, “I believe I put my foot in it some.”

“Oh, rather!” answered the other, who could hardly speak for spluttering. “You’re not the only one, though, if the truth were known. You see it was all very well twenty years ago and all that to call him Oom Paul. But now the old man is rather sick of it. Only think, every dirty little Jew ‘winkler’ calling him ‘Oom.’ Besides, he’s a much bigger man now and likes to be treated with a certain amount of state.”

But not until he got safely home could Piet give full vent to his mirth, and then he literally laughed till he cried.

“You should have seen him, Anna,” he spluttered between his tears. “Oh, Aletta, you should have heard him. Telling the *Ou’ Baas*, so sweetly too, that he reminded him of an uncle of his whom he deeply revered. Oh, oh, you should have been there! I simply didn’t dare look up. I should have disgraced myself for ever if I had.”

“Well, it had its effect,” protested Colvin, who was laughing over the recollection almost as hard as Piet. “It smoothed his feathers at once.”

“Really? No, really did it?” cried Aletta, who for her part had gone off into rippling peals.

“Rather, it did,” confirmed Piet. “Oh, oh, oh! ‘*Is nie jou Oom nie. Ik is die Presidént*!’ Oh, oh, oh! I shall choke directly.”

And he very nearly did.

Chapter Four.

That other Kershaw.

Since that strange chance meeting on the platform at Park Station, life seemed much brighter for May Wenlock.

She had come up there in a fit of the dolefullest dumps, as she herself put it, and in fact those with whom she sojourned hardly recognised her for the blithe, light-hearted girl she had been the year before. They even tentatively rallied her, but she brusquely disclaimed any reason other than that she was utterly and entirely sick of the farm, that its eternal monotony got upon her nerves, and a very little more of it would have driven her crazy. Yet she might about as well have stayed where she was, for the erewhile great whirling gold town was now as a city of the dead. All who could do so had cleared out—tumbling over each other's heels in their eagerness to get away—as we have seen.

Of all the war-talk and excitement she was heartily sick. There was nothing to take her out of herself, no fun, no gaiety, no life; the streets, lines upon lines of abandoned houses and shuttered-up shops. It was as a city ravaged by pestilence from end to end.

James Dixon, her relative's husband, was a broker, and had been a contractor. He had been regarded of late with somewhat of a suspicious eye—by his own countrymen that is—and dark hints were not wanting to the effect that he stood in too well with the Government, as against British interests. In what particular way he did so was never formulated, but it was sufficient in those days to hint. Anyway he remained on, serene and untroubled, what time others had fled. This, of course, to the minds of the hinters, confirmed every suspicion.

May had never been particularly fond of these people, although she had got on with them well enough. But then there had been plenty of outside life and diversion. Now that she was thrown upon them almost entirely, she wondered how she could ever have found Mary Dixon other than the tiresome woman she was—without an idea outside her brood,

the four units composing which were always noisy and quarrelsome, never too clean, and generally and all-round ill behaved. She had come up to Johannesburg just before the crisis had reached a climax—and now, there she was and there she must stay.

Of course there was that beneath her *ennui* and restlessness which she did not impart to her relatives. In her hours of solitude—and these were too many for one of her age and temperament and abundant attractions—there always arose in her mind a vivid recollection of what she had felt on hearing of Colvin Kershaw's engagement. It was not so entirely unexpected, for her jealous misgivings had been gnawing into and corroding her mind for some time past. Yet, when it came, the shock had been hardly the less acute. He had treated her shamefully—she declared to herself—yes, wickedly, cruelly, abominably. Why had he made her care for him, only to—do as he had done? If only she could make him suffer for it—but—how could she? Wild, revengeful plans scorched through her brain—among them that of revealing everything to Aletta. Then the ugly Dutch girl could have the reversion of his kisses and soft words. But the only consideration that kept her from this was a conviction that such a course would not weigh with Aletta, would defeat its own object, and turn herself into a laughing stock. It certainly would if Aletta loved him as she herself had done—and how could Aletta do otherwise? thought poor May to herself with a sob, and a filling of the eyes like a rain shower breaking upon a stormy sunset. She hated him now, she told herself again and again. But—did she? That sob would often repeat itself to give the lie to the illusion.

She had not seen him since hearing the—to her—baleful news; but this, to do him justice, was not his fault. He had come over to Spring Holt to bid them good-bye before leaving for the Transvaal, but she had not appeared—pleading a headache which was not all pretence—the fact being that she dared not trust herself. But of late an intense longing had been upon her to behold him once more, and when her glance had lighted upon him at the railway station among the crowd, she forgot everything in the joy of the moment. And—it was not he after all.

Even then somehow her disappointment was less keen than she could have thought possible. Could it be that the other was so exactly his

counterpart that at times, even subsequent to their first acquaintance, she could hardly believe it was not Colvin himself, for some motive of his own, playing a part?

For their first acquaintance had grown and ripened. Kenneth Kershaw had lost no time in calling, in fact he had a slight acquaintance with Jim Dixon already, and as time went on his visits became more and more frequent till they were almost daily. Whereupon Jim Dixon began to rally his very attractive young kinswoman.

This, at first, annoyed the latter. He was not a refined man, and his jests were on his own level. More than once he fired them off on the object of them personally, and Kenneth had looked much as Colvin would have looked under the circumstances. Then May had affected to take them in good part, with an eye to information. Who was this Mr Kershaw, she asked, and what was he doing up there? But Jim Dixon's reply was vague. He had been there some two years, he believed, but he must have been longer in the country, because he could talk Dutch quite well. What was his business? Nobody knew. He was one of those customers who didn't give themselves away. Like a good many more up there he had got along sort of "scratch"; but it was said he had made a tidyish bit in the boom, end of last year. But he was a tip-top swell, any one could see that. "Nothing like capturing one of these English swells, May," concluded Jim, with a knowing wink. "Make hay while the sun shines." And we dare not swear that the aspirate in that fragrant foodstuff for the equine race was over distinctly sounded.

Kenneth, for his part, was genuinely attracted by the girl. Her relatives he at once set down in his own mind as unmitigated outsiders, but there was the making of something good about May herself. Times, too, were desperately dull. He hardly knew why he had elected to remain in the Transvaal, except on the principle of "sitting on the fence." It was by no means certain that Oom Paul would not remain cock of the walk, in which eventuality he thought he saw the road to some valuable pickings. And now this girl had come into his way to brighten it. And she did brighten it.

She was so natural, so transparent. He could turn her mind inside

out any moment he chose. He had very quickly, and with hardly a question, discovered the *raison d'être* of her partiality for himself, the pleasure she had seemed to take in being with him. She had talked about Colvin, then, when designedly, he had led the conversation to some other subject, she had always brought it back to Colvin, in a lingering wistful way that told its own tale over and over again. But this, too, had ceased, and she gradually talked less and less of Colvin, and seemed to listen with increased interest to Colvin's facsimile.

"There's where I score," said Kenneth to himself, "and I am going to work the circumstance for all it is worth."

This working of the circumstance was to be a means to an end, and that end was that he meant to marry May Wenlock.

Why did he? She was not quite of his class. He had seen her surroundings, as represented immediately, at any rate, and they had revolted him. Well, he could raise her above her surroundings, besides the very fact of her coming of the stock she did was not without its advantages. She would be all the more fitted to bear her part in the adventure he was planning: would have no superfine scruples or misgivings as to accepting the splendid—the really dazzling destiny he had mapped out for her—to share with him. She, in a measure, had supplied the key to the opening of that golden possibility of the future, had brought it within really tangible reach, therefore she should share it. And this possibility, this adventure, was worth staking all for—even life itself. It needed boldness, judgment, utter unscrupulousness, and he possessed all three. It was vast—it was magnificent.

And then the beauty of the girl appealed powerfully to his physical nature. Those sea-blue velvety eyes, those waves of hair in rippling heavy gold, those full red lips, the smooth skin, a mixture of sun-kiss and the healthy flush of blood underneath, the firm rounded figure—that should all be his, he would think when alone with his own reflections in a perfect whirl of passion, after one of those long interviews or walks with May that had now become so frequent, and to himself so amazingly sweet. Yet towards her he was ever careful to veil any indication of feeling. Colvin himself could hardly have been more utterly indifferent so

far as all outward manifestations were concerned.

One day, however, he slipped. They had been out together and May had been more than ordinarily sweet and winning. It was dusk, and he was bidding her farewell within her temporary home. They had the house to themselves, moreover, save for the native boy in the kitchen. The others were out somewhere. It seemed to him that in the face looking up into his the lips were raised temptingly. His blood was in a whirl. In a moment she was in his embrace, and he kissed them full and passionately.

He was hardly prepared for what followed. She wrenched herself from him with a sinuous strength for which he would scarcely have given her credit.

“Why did you do that?” she blazed forth, and he could see that her face grew white and quivering as she confronted him in the dusk. “Why did you? Heavens! are all men alike that they think a girl is only made to be their plaything? I hate them. Yes, I hate them all.”

The fierce bitterness of her tone was so incisive, so genuine, that most men under the circumstances would have felt extremely foolish, and looked correspondingly abject. Into Kenneth Kershaw’s very heart her words seemed to cut like so many whip lashes. By a mighty effort he restrained himself from pleading provocation, feeling, any mitigation whatever; which would have been the worst line he could possibly have taken. Instead he adopted a kind of quietly resigned tone, with just a touch of the dignified; apologetic, yet without a trace of abjectness—which was the best.

“May, dear, forgive me,” he said. “I was not thinking, I suppose. Have I offended you beyond recall? Well, I must pay the penalty; for of course you are going to tell me you never want to set eyes on me again.”

He knew how to play his cards. Even then his words seemed to open a dreadful blank before her mind’s eye. Not to set eyes on him again? He seemed to mean it, too. That air of sad self-composure with which he had spoken them disarmed her, and her anger melted.

“No, no, I don’t mean that,” she answered, slowly, in a dazed kind of manner. “But why did you do it? We were such friends before.”

“And are we not to be again?” is the reply that would have arisen to most men’s lips. But this one knew when to let well alone.

“Forget it, May,” he said. “Believe me, I never wanted to offend you. And don’t think hard things of me when I am away, will you? Good-bye.”

“No, no. But you had better go now. Good-bye.”

Her tone was flurried, with an admixture of distress. It was just the time not to answer. He went out, and as he walked away from the house, he felt not ill-satisfied with himself and his doings in spite of his very decided repulse. As touching this last some men might have felt rather small. Not so this one. A subtle, unerring instinct told him that he had come out with all the honours of war.

“It is only the first step,” he said to himself. “You were frightened at first, my darling, but the time will come, and that sooner than you think, when you shall kiss me back again, and that with all the sweet ardour and passion wherewith I shall kiss you.”

Then a very blank thought took hold upon his mind. What if all the sympathy he had created in her was reflex—if whatever feeling she had for him or would come to have was due solely to his complete likeness to that other? Why the mere sight of Colvin, a chance glimpse in some public place such as when they two had first met, might shatter his own carefully calculated chances. It was a horrid thought—that at any moment that unpalatable relative of his might appear and spoil everything.

Not everything, at any rate. The greater scheme, apart from the incidental one of love, would always remain untouched. Colvin, he had already discovered, was in Pretoria. So far he was within the toils, or at any rate within appreciable distance of so being.

“It will make the working out of it so much the easier,” he said to himself. “Great God alive! why should Colvin have all the good things of

earth? And the ungrateful dog isn't capable of appreciating them either. Well, well, thanks to this benevolent war, his luck is now on the turn, while mine— Oh, damn!"

The last aloud. A big powerful native, armed with a heavy stick, swinging along the sidewalk at a run, utterly regardless of the bye-law which rendered him liable to the gaoler's lash for being on the sidewalk at all, had cannoned right against him. Quick as thought, and yielding to the natural ire of the moment, Kenneth shot out his right fist, landing the native well on the ear with a force that sent him staggering. Recovering his balance, however, the fellow turned and attacked him savagely. At the same time, two others who seemed to spring out of nowhere—also armed with sticks—came at him from the other side, uttering a ferocious hiss through the closed teeth.

Save for a walking-stick Kenneth was unarmed. In the existing state of affairs the road was utterly lonely, and the odds against him were three to one, three wiry desperate savages, armed with clubs, which they well understood how to use. Instinctively once more he let out, and landed another, this time between wind and water, doubling him up in the road, a squirming kicking shape. The remaining pair sprang back a step or two with knobsticks raised, ready to rush him both at once, when—suddenly both took to their heels.

The cause of this welcome diversion took the form of a horseman. He was armed with rifle and revolver, and had a full bandolier of cartridges over his shoulder. As he stepped out to meet him, Kenneth could see he was young, and well-looking. His first words showed that he was a Dutchman.

"*Wie's jij*?" he asked, sharply, as his horse started, and backed from the approaching figure. Then peering down, and catching sight of the face, he cried, in would-be jovial tones:

"*Maagtig*, Colvin. You, is it? Ah, ah, I know where you have just come from. Ah, ah! You are *slim*!"

Chapter Five.

Something of a Plot.

Kenneth Kershaw narrowly scanned the face of this very opportune new arrival, and decided that he didn't know him from Adam. The other looked at him no less fixedly, and it was clear that he did not know him from Colvin.

Colvin, again? What the deuce was the game now? But he decided to play up to the *rôle*. He might get at something.

"So you know where I have just come from, eh, *ou' maat*?" he said. "Now where is that?"

"Ah! ah! Miss Wenlock is a pretty girl, isn't she?" rejoined the other meaningly. "*Ja*, Colvin, you are a *slim kerel*. Prettier girl than Aletta, isn't she?"

Aletta? That must be the Boer girl Colvin was supposed to be entangled with, decided Kenneth quickly. But what was her other name, and who the devil was this good-looking young Dutchman who talked English so well? Aletta's brother possibly. He just replied "H'm," which might have meant anything, and waited for the other to continue.

"What will Aletta say when she knows?" went on the Boer, and his bantering tone, through which the smouldering glow of malice underlying it could not entirely be kept from showing, gave Kenneth his cue.

"Say? Oh, but she need not know," he answered with just a touch of well-simulated alarm.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the other. "Need not know? I think, friend Colvin, I have got you on toast, as you English say, for I shall take very good care she does know. The fact is I have been watching you for some time—from the time you met Miss Wenlock at Park Station right up till now, and I fancy Aletta won't have very much more to say to you when she hears about it all."

“Oh, but look here,” went on Kenneth, still affecting alarm. “You’re not going to give the show away, old sportsman. Dash it all, it isn’t cricket!”

“Not, eh? You just wait and see,” jeered the other. “Aha, you seem a bit scared out of your high and mighty English ‘side’ now. You chose to come between me and Aletta. We grew up together, and I always looked upon her as mine! She would have been but for you. Curse you! I could shoot you now as you stand there,” growled the Dutchman, fingering the breech of his rifle. “But I won’t, because I want to see Aletta turn away from you in scorn, as she will, directly. That will be a far greater punishment for you—a far better revenge for me.”

“By Jove!” said Kenneth to himself. “There’s sultry weather sticking out for Colvin, anyhow.” This young Boer was evidently a discomfited rival—his own words let that be understood. Then, with lightning swiftness, two aspects of the situation flashed through his scheming brain. He could let the delusion which the other was under as to his identity continue, in which case Colvin would probably appeal to May herself to disprove his alleged visits. But then the two would be brought together again, and that was just what he did not want. Or he could frankly offer his aid to this Dutchman, who would certainly jump at any method, however unscrupulous, by which to discomfit his rival. Colvin would assuredly try reprisals, and in that case the probabilities were he would be shot by the Boers, which was just what he did want. It would end matters comfortably for all concerned. So he decided upon the latter plan.

“See here, my friend,” he said, coolly. “All this time you have been holding on hard to the wrong end of the stick. My name is not Colvin.”

“Not—not Colvin Kershaw?” ejaculated the Boer, open-mouthed.

“No. Devil a bit is it!”

“Now you are lying. There is only one Colvin Kershaw. There cannot be two!”

“Quite right. But I am not that one. There may be other Kershaws, though. Eh! Try again.”

“Are you his brother?” said the Boer, suspiciously.

“Well, I am—er—a relative of his. Nor are you the only person who has taken me for him. The fact is, we are as like as two peas. I don’t wonder you have been obligingly giving me all your plans. No, don’t be afraid. I have no wish to upset them. On the contrary, I am going to offer you my help towards carrying them out.”

It was time to make some such declaration. The Boer’s hand had been stealing towards his revolver holster, and his face was fell with a deadly meaning. It was almost dark, and the road lonely and deserted. Dead men tell no tales, and a dead Englishman found there in the morning would cause no concern whatever to the authorities.

“What help can you give me, and why should you wish to?” he said dubiously, his ingrained suspicion forbidding him to trust the other overmuch.

“It can bring about the very thing that would have happened had I been the real Colvin. For my motive—well, that is my business. I may or may not tell it you later, but somehow I think not.”

“Do you hate him, then?” said the Dutchman, still suspiciously.

“Not in the least. I am perfectly indifferent to him. But he stands in my way, and must get out of it. That is all.”

“He must get out of my way, too,” said the other, with a dark scowl.

“Quite so. And if I help you to get him out of your way, you will help me to get him out of mine?”

“Can I trust you?”

“Well, you’ve got to,” answered Kenneth cheerfully, for he saw that the other was nibbling around the bait. “Don’t be afraid, though. You

won’t regret it; and now, excuse me, but I’ll be hanged if I know exactly who you are.”

“My name is Adrian De la Rey,” replied the other. “And yours?”

“Kenneth Kershaw. And now we know each other, there’s no need to stand talking out here where we may be overheard, so come along to my diggings, and we’ll find something to drink, and have the show to ourselves for weaving a plan of campaign. Say though, it was a fortunate thing you happened up when you did. Those niggers were one too many for me.”

Kenneth’s quarters were not very much further on, and were situated in the abode of a Polish Jew who had retired to the back premises. At sound of the voices and horse hoofs, this worthy put out his head, then at sight of the armed and mounted burgher, scurried back like a frightened rabbit into its burrow.

“It’s all right, Svinsky,” called out Kenneth. “Roll up, man. Nobody’s going to eat you or commandeer you.”

Thus reassured, the child of Israel came forth, bowing and cringing.

“Goot evening, sairs. Let dot I shall take de Police chentleman’s ’orse. I haf a shtable und still some forage.”

“Right,” said Kenneth. “After that, Svinsky, we want the house to ourselves. See that we are not interrupted.”

“*Ja*, Mishter Kershaw. Dot shall be done.”

Having thus disposed of his Hebraic landlord, Kenneth led the way inside and lit up. Then he got out the materials for a rough-and-ready cold supper, and some excellent “square-face,” with the apology that it was only “war-fare,” the point of which joke was lost on the Dutchman. The latter, however, after a couple of glasses began to grow more genial and less suspicious.

“*Maagtig*!” he burst forth, eyeing his host. “I never thought one world

could contain two people so exactly alike. Here in the light, the likeness is even more wonderful."

"Take a good look at me, De la Rey, and make sure. Now, is there nothing, no mark or anything, that distinguishes me from my—er—relative?"

"*Ja*, now I do see something. You have a scar, a very slight one—still I see it—just in front of the parting of your hair. Colvin has not got that. But the colouring, the voice—everything. *Maagtig*! it is wonderful."

Over the meal they began to arrange their plans. Then they lit their pipes and talked on, far into the night, arranging details.

"You know the young lady, Adrian, and I don't," said Kenneth at last. "If she believes your statement, we needn't go any further. If she doesn't, or doesn't want to, we must give her the most convincing evidence of all—ocular evidence. There will be no going behind that, I fancy."

"*Ja*, that is a fine idea of yours, Kenneth"—under the influence of 'square-face' and a mutual plot these two had become quite fraternal. "A really fine idea. Aletta will never doubt the evidence of her own eye sight."

Just then, however, Aletta had something to think about on her own account, and a few days after the concocting of this delectable plot saw her seated in the back garden of Piet Plessis' house, engaged in a serious discussion with her *fiancé*. For the latter had made up his mind to proceed to the seat of war, and had just been announcing the fact.

Those long weeks spent at Pretoria had been very happy, very sweet. But the sheer restfulness of them had become a trifle enervating. News had kept coming in: news of the stirring events along the border. The flame had spread, and was still spreading. Kimberley was invested, so too was Mafeking, and Vryburg had fallen. Ladysmith was cut off from the outside world, and the burghers of the Republics had successfully carried their arms well into the Cape Colony. He could not sit still, through

it all. He must, at any rate, see something of what was going on, and to that end had obtained special permission to join Cronje's force as a non-combatant spectator.

Not easily had this been obtained though. It had taken all Piet Plessis' influence, backed up by that of Andries Botma, with whom Colvin had renewed acquaintance during his stay in the Transvaal. Further, he had to give the most solemn undertaking not to use his position in any way whatever for the benefit of his own countrymen.

"Don't you remember that first evening we met, Aletta?" he was saying. "You promised yourself to make a convert of me? Well, now I am interested in your side, I want to see how it fights."

"No, no, dearest I can't spare you," she replied, stroking the brown hand which lay in one of her long white ones, with the other. "Oh, and—what if I were to lose you?"

"Leave me alone to take care of that. Life is too well worth having just now," he rejoined. "And, as a non-combatant, the risk will be infinitesimal."

They were alone together. Piet and his wife were both out, and even if anybody called, here in this bosky garden retreat they would remain undisturbed.

Would they, though? Even then both started, and looked up, as the tread of heavy footsteps coming down the garden path arrested their attention.

"Oh, there you are, Aletta," said a man's voice. "The boy said he thought you were out here. How are you, Colvin?"

"Why, it is Adrian!" she cried, colouring somewhat as she remembered under what circumstances he had last seen her alone. She was surprised and delighted, too, to notice that he spoke with all his old cordiality of tone, and was shaking hands with Colvin quite as he used to do at Ratels Hoek. He had got over it, then? That was sensible and

manly of him, and, the interruption notwithstanding, she showed herself quite pleased at his visit.

He sat down and chatted away freely enough, telling them about himself and his moves, also the latest news from the Wildschutsberg and Ratels Hoek; how all the Boers in that neighbourhood had risen, and under the leadership of Swaart Jan Grobbelaar had marched into Schalkburg and having made a prisoner of Mr Jelf had seized the Court-house over which now waved the Free State flag, and had set up a Free State man as Landdrost. Oom Stephanus? Well no, he had not joined openly, but his sympathies were all with them. He preferred to sit quietly at home attending to his farm.

Her “patriotism” notwithstanding, Aletta could not but secretly rejoice at this intelligence: If things should go wrong for their side, her father at any rate would be safe. Then Adrian remarked carelessly:

“By the way, Colvin, is Miss Wenlock staying at Johannesburg long?”

“Didn’t even know she was there at all, Adrian.”

“Didn’t even know! Why, man, you were having quite a long talk with her at Park Station the other day. Take care you don’t make Aletta jealous,” he added, with a genial laugh.

“That’s very odd, considering I haven’t set eyes on her since I left the Wildschutsberg,” answered Colvin.

“I must have a double somewhere, for another Johnnie declared he saw me in Johannesburg too. You remember, Aletta? That man Da Costa? But is May Wenlock staying in Johannesburg?”

“Well, rather”—with a whimsical expression of countenance. “Now, look here, Colvin. I suppose you were not walking down Commissioner Street with her one day last week? She saw me, and bowed, but you didn’t see me. Well, you were better employed. But don’t make Aletta jealous.”

The tone was so good-humouredly chaffing that it was impossible to

take offence. Yet Colvin did not like it. As a matter of fact, he had been over at Johannesburg at the time just named. But he only replied:

“I’ve never been in Commissioner Street, or in any other street in Johannesburg with May Wenlock in my life, Adrian, nor did I know she was even there. You must have seen double, man.”

“Oh yes, I suppose I must,” answered Adrian in the same bantering tone, which, however, he contrived to make convey that he supposed nothing of the sort. And then they talked of other matters.

The thing was perfectly clear. Colvin had simply scouted the other’s statement as impossible. Yet why should Aletta somehow feel a vague misgiving, as though the air had turned chill and the sun were not shining quite so brightly? Dr Da Costa’s remark, too, came back to her. Perish the thought! It was unworthy of her, and an affront to Colvin. Yet somehow the tiny verjuice drop had been instilled. And as Adrian talked on, apparently in high good-humour, she thought that after all his visit had not been quite a success.

Did Adrian himself think so? We wonder.

Chapter Six.

In the Roar of the Battle.

It was beginning to get rather exciting. The big gun, just below, had roared forth its message, and the spectators on the kopje had their field-glasses glued to their eyes, as they watched the progress of the great projectile. Splash! there it was. A cloud of dust flew up from the red-brown veldt, away in the distance, but harmlessly. Then, hard by where it had fallen, a British gun barked, and, immediately, a huge mass of the earth’s surface, bitten into, leaped in mid-air on the further side of the river, falling back in great chunks—clods and stones—and gyrations of dust. Further along the line, another gun spoke, then another and another, as though passing the word along the vast length, until the farthest voices, miles away, sounded quite faintly. Then ever and again

would arise the crackling roll of rifle-fire.

The sun was now well up over the eastern horizon, sweeping his joyous morning rays in golden warmth over this warring drama of blood and of wounds and of death. Cleaving the great expanse of red-brown veldt the river bed, bush-fringed, with high muddy banks, yawned; and away further down, the clustering buildings of the little township, and the straight thread of the railway line tailing away on either side. Beyond the said banks, lines of trenches, where lay the Boer riflemen, grim and earnest, awaiting their turn, which would soon come.

Again the big gun below loosed off, with a tremendous reverberation. Those on the kopje, watching the missile, descried a certain amount of confusion where it struck, a scurrying or scattering behind its redoubt. Heads went up eagerly from behind the Boer earthworks to watch the result, but little or no remark escaped the lips of the stolid burghers. Then the English battery barked in return, and the vast thud of the lyddite shell striking one end of the earthwork, blowing up the same great cloud of dust and fragments, reached the spectators with something like the tremor of an earthquake. At the same time the latter could see that, where it had fallen, several forms were lying, while others bending over them were trying to draw them out of the dust and *débris*.

Colvin Kershaw's hand shook slightly as he lowered his glasses, and his face wore the look of one who has gazed upon a peculiarly horrifying sight. And well might it, for the projectile had done its work with fell and awful completeness, and the powerful lens afforded him a view of every detail, of writhings and agony and terrible mutilation.

"Guess you're not used to it, Kershaw," said a voice at his side. "Made me look sick, too, first time I saw it. You ever see a fight before?"

The speaker was an American war-correspondent "doing" the battle from within the Boer lines.

"Yes, I served in Matabeleland," answered Colvin. "But with niggers it's different. Then, you see, we hated the brutes so because they'd butchered a lot of women and children at the outbreak of the rebellion.

Even with them, though, you didn’t see such a wholesale bust-up as that. Faugh!”

“Well, there’s worse to come yet. Here, you take a draw at this”—tendering him a large field flask. Colvin accepted, and the nip of excellent Boer brandy just steadied his nerves, which had been momentarily shaken.

“You try a little, Commandant,” went on the owner of the flask.

But Commandant Andries Botma declined. He seldom touched stimulants, he said, and now, if he did so at the beginning of a fight, would it not be said that he required a dose of what the English call “Dutch courage”—with a whimsical look at Colvin, at whom he was poking sly fun?

The quondam emissary to the Colonial Boers, among whom we first made his acquaintance, was no mere frothy stump orator. The name by which he was deferentially known among these—“The Patriot”—he had subsequently done everything to justify. He was not the man to preach others into peril he dare not face himself, and when his crusade had culminated in an appeal to arms, he had always been among the foremost where hard knocks were given or received. Now he was in command of an important wing of General Cronje’s force.

A mighty engine of destruction or defence this—its lines extending for miles and miles—waiting there grim, dogged, resolute, to give battle to the richest, most resourceful, and determined Power in the world. A terrible force to reckon with; its impelling factor, a calm fanaticism born of an unswerving conviction of the justice of the cause and the sure and certain alliance of Heaven.

In the simplicity of his veldt attire, with little or nothing to mark him out from those whom he commanded, Andries Botma looked even more a born leader of men than when last we saw him, swaying his countrymen with all the force of his fiery oratory. His strong rugged face, eager, yet impassive, was bent upon the scene of battle, as though not to lose a detail, not to miss a chance. He was surrounded by a little knot of

middle-aged and elderly Boers, most of them holding subordinate commands under himself.

“Whirr!” The screech of a shrapnel sailing over the foremost lines. It falls into the river, throwing up the mud with a tremendous splash. Another and another. This last, better aimed, strikes among the rear lines —result as before: agony, wounds, death. At the same time another hits the kopje not many yards below, exploding in all directions with appalling effect.

The splinters fly from an ironstone boulder not two yards distant, but Andries Botma does not move a muscle. One Boer in the group utters a mild ejaculation, and then is seen to be winding a bit of oiled rag, kept for gun-sponging purposes, around his middle finger. Through this rude bandage the blood slowly oozes, but nobody seems to think the circumstance worthy of remark. Colvin is conscious of a creeping sensation in the region of the spine, as the jagged iron explodes around him with vicious metallic hiss. And the voices of the long-range duel undergo no diminution, the deep-mouthed boom of the heavy guns, and the sharp, snapping bark of the smaller ones.

Things, however, are not destined to continue that way. As the hours wear on the advance of the attacking force is made out. From this part of the field the latter can be seen in skirmishing order, drawing nearer and nearer; those khaki-clad dots on the great brown expanse affording but an insignificant mark. And then there begins the sound of rifle-shooting, literally as “the crackling of thorns under a pot.” Down and along the lines it sweeps, in waves of sharp staccato sounds, and the spludges of dust, before and behind those khaki lines of advancing skirmishers, but mostly before, are like the dropping of water on red-hot iron. Now, too, it is near enough to mark the effect of those deadly volleys. That inexorable advance continues, but as it does it leaves behind lines of dead and dying and grievously wounded. Not all on one side, though, is the red slaughter. Here among the patriot trenches men are falling, and falling fast. Shell after shell, too, drops into the little township, and the crash of shattered brickwork, and the shrill clangour of battered-in corrugated iron, mingles with the gradating roar of projectiles, as they leave each grim nozzle sentinelling miles and miles of that sullen river front.

Those on the kopje are now well within the line of fire. More than frequently a shrill vicious “whigge” as the Lee-Metford bullets clip the air, or shatter to a flattened lead mushroom against a stone, causes an involuntary duck. The American is taking plentiful notes in shorthand. Colvin, who is without this resource, also devoid of the natural excitement of the combatant of firing at the enemy as well as being fired at by him, takes longer to get used to the hum of bullets and the bursting of shrapnel than would otherwise have been the case, for he is totally unarmed, a precaution taken against the eventuality of capture by his own countrymen. And the effect of this precaution is strange. He feels out of it. Needless to say he has no desire to draw trigger on his said countrymen, yet the consciousness that he is being shot at—no matter whom by—without the power of replying, is strange and novel. But his nerves at last become attuned to the hum of missiles, and he watches the whole arena of the battle with a vivid and increasing interest.

Higher and higher mounts the sun, more blistering and scorching his rays, giving forth from the ironstone of the kopje as though reflected from an oven. A strange mirage, watery, crystallised, hangs over the brown expanse of veldt, going off into limpid blue on the far horizon, where the distant flat-topped hills seem to be suspended in mid-air. Whether it is that this lake-like liquid tranquillity emphasises the torrid heat or not, those on the kopje feel what the burning of thirst means. They have water-bottles from which they refresh, but sparingly. Those in the trenches feel it too, but their attention is on the dire, stern business of the day. No time have they to dwell upon mere corporeal cravings.

Whigge! Crash! Shell after shell is breaking within their lines. Men writhe, shattered, screaming, where the hideous dismemberment of the human frame is beyond all human endurance, however willing the spirit, the dogged, stern, manly, patriotic spirit—proof against mere ordinary pain—agony even. One of the group round Andries Botma sinks to the earth as a Nordenfelt missile, crashing and splintering among the stones which form his cover, buries a great fragment of jagged iron deep in his thigh. All run to him, foremost among them the Commandant, reckless of the perfect hailstorm of bullets which already, although at long-range, is beginning to spray the kopje, while some signal wildly to the ambulance

waggons away and below in the rear. But Field-cornet Theunis Van Wyk has got his death-blow, and his wife and children—he has three sons fighting below in the trenches—and grandchildren will see him at home smoking the pipe of peace no more. The flow of blood is already rendering him faint, and with a hasty jerked-out message delivered to his old friend and Commandant to carry to them, and a quavering attempt at singing a Dutch hymn upon his lips, he passes out like a brave man, without complaint or rancour, as many and many a one has done and will do before this day of striving and of carnage is over.

And as the advancing host draws nearer, now in quick intrepid rushes over open ground where the leaden hail sweeps in its remorseless shower, now prone and in skirmishing formation, the roar of battle waxes louder and louder. On both sides the crackling din of volleys is well-nigh incessant—as the rifles speak from trench or temporary cover, with dire effect. But there is very little smoke, although the plain on either side is simply spurting puffs of dust where each bullet finds its mark—save where such mark is not mother earth. In the background the ambulances hover, their heroic attendants darting in now and again, and rescuing the maimed victims under the leaden shower itself. And above the ceaseless crackle of small arms, the heavier boom of artillery rolls out more continuous, more unbroken than ever.

Colvin has got over his first shrinking of nerves. He hears the humming of missiles overhead and around with something of equanimity, he sees the splash of lead against rock—or the dust-cloud leaping out of the ground as the bursting iron of shell tears up the surface. Two more of those upon the kopje fall, one stone dead, the other dying. It may be his turn next. And then, as even the excitement of the day-long battle begins to wane and go flat, his thoughts refer to that last parting with Aletta. What a parting that had been—as though he had been going to his death, to his execution! He realises the burden of it now, as he looks on the sad havoc of human life below and around him—the swift sudden fate leaping out of nowhere—the mangled, the mutilated, moaning for the boon of death—of being put out of their sufferings; the lifeless—a moment ago rejoicing in their youth and strength with all their years before them. Ah yes—and this is war—glorious war!— and at this very

moment there are tens of thousands in the vigour of their youth and strength now panting and longing for the opportunity to become such as these.

“Oh, Kershaw. Guess the British’ll bust our centre right now. They’re coming right through the river.”

It was the voice of the American. Chewing a cigar in the corner of his mouth, he was calmly and unconcernedly taking his notes, while keenly watching each new development of the day. Colvin, following his glance, could make out a crowd of forms in the river bed some distance down. Then the rattle of rifle-fire became one long deafening roll, as all the energies of the Republican forces, anywhere within reasonable range, became concentrated on this new attempt. But the result he could not determine. The whole thing had more than begun to bewilder him. His ears were deafened by the unintermittent roll and crackle, his eyes dim and dizzy with watching, or trying to watch, the movements of both lines of striving combatants. He heard Andries Botma give orders, and then saw a great mass of mounted Boers, stealthily keeping cover as far as possible, dash forth and pour volley after volley into the waggons and trek-animals of the opposing force; hanging on the outskirts of the latter, with the result of throwing it for the while into hideous confusion. He saw frightful sights of dying men, mangled and shell-ripped; but by then his susceptibilities were blunted, the whole world seemed changed into a hell. The voice of his American friend again aroused him.

“Mind me, Kershaw. Next time you come to view this sample of scrimmage, you get something to do. You got nothing to report for, and of course you can’t shoot at other English, so it’s bound to get on your nerves.”

“There’s something in what you say, Acton,” replied Colvin. “There’s a sort of passive helpless feeling about it all to me. I seem to realise what the ambulance people’s work is like; but even they have work. Now I have nothing but to sit and look on.”

“Pity,” said the other. “But we haven’t got the best ground. Too much near the end of the line. Well, it’s no great matter. I’ll make it all read

beautiful," glancing with pride down his columns of notes. "You have a cigar?"

"Thanks," lighting up the weed. "But— what's on now?"

They were, as the American had said, near the end of the line. Now they could see, confusedly, and in the distance, that the British were in and through the river, forcing the centre of the opposing line. And the wild cheers of the soldiers reached them through the incessant din and roar of fire. At the same time those in the trenches on the further side of the river had abandoned their position and retired across.

The sun was sinking now. It was hard to realise that a whole day had been passed in the turmoil of this unending rattle and noise. Yet to Colvin the effect was almost as though he had spent his whole life in it. His mind represented but a confused notion of what he had witnessed, of what he had been through; and when at nightfall the word was silently passed to retire, to evacuate the position, and take up another, some miles in the rear, where everything was more favourable to meet and again withstand a sorely tried but valorous and persistent foe, he seemed to regard it as no more of an out-of-the-way circumstance than the order to inspan a waggon or two. Yet he had spent that day witnessing one of the fiercest and most stubbornly contested battles in which his country's arms had been engaged within the current century.

Chapter Seven.

Ocular Evidence.

Not until Colvin had gone did Aletta actually realise all that that parting meant.

Why had she let him go? she asked herself, a score of times a day. She could have restrained him had she put forth all her influence. Why were men so restless? Why could not this one have sat still and made the most of the happiness that was his—that was theirs? Ah, and now those happy times—and they had been happy times—were in the past. Never to come again, perhaps—her heart added with a sinking chill.

If the English would but make peace; and then she remembered, with sad amusement, her patriotic enthusiasms in the old days at Ratels Hoek, and how condescendingly she had been willing that her countrymen should allow a few English to remain, during her discussions with Adrian—yes, and even with Colvin himself. What now was the patriotic cause to her? She was only conscious of an empty, aching, and utterly desolate heart.

“Aletta is fretting, Piet,” said the latter’s consort one day—the subject of the remark not being present. “She is fretting terribly. I can see it, although she is very brave, and tries not to show it. I did not think she had it in her to allow herself to be so entirely wrapped up in one man, and that an Englishman. What can we do to cheer her up?”

“Get the ‘one man’ back, I suppose,” rejoined the practical official. “*Maagtig*, Anna—if ever any man had reason to sit still and be thankful, that man was Colvin. But, no. Off he must go, not because he’s wanted for fighting purposes, but just to see the fun—as he calls it. Well, he’ll see a great deal that he won’t find fun at all. But these English are all alike, fussy, restless—must have a finger in everything that goes on—in a fight most of all.”

Yes, Aletta was fretting, if a pale and careworn look upon her face

was any index to the mind within. Now, with a rush, all came back—all that this man was to her. She recalled the hours they had spent together—every tone and every look—all that he had ever said, and how time had fled like a streak of sunbeam when she was in his presence—how, too, her first thought on awaking to another day, again and again, had been one of half-incredulous, blissful gratitude that in this way she was to go through life. And now he was gone, and at any moment, for all she knew, he might be lying dead and still for ever upon the veldt. Oh, it would not bear thinking on! She had not known what love was before, she told herself. She knew now, and when he returned to her he should know too. This separation had taught her. Surely, too, it had taught him.

Among those who frequently visited at Piet Plessis' to try to cheer her up was, somewhat to her surprise, her cousin Adrian; remembering how badly he had taken her refusal in the first instance, and the dire threats he had used towards whosoever should usurp what he chose to imagine was his place. Then she reflected that, after all, he had justified the good opinion she had always held of him, in that he had accepted the inevitable in a sensible and manly way. True, once or twice it occurred to her uneasily that he might be taking the opportunity of ingratiating himself once more in view of possible accidents; but she put the thought from her Another source of surprise was the way in which she found herself talking to Adrian about the absent one. At first she had shrunk from so doing, deeming the topic an unpalatable one to him. But he had not seemed to regard it as such, and she soon lost her constraint on that head. Then Adrian's visits became of daily occurrence, and Piet and his wife, seeing they seemed to brighten Aletta up, encouraged them.

One day she asked him how it was he still remained in Pretoria. Now that the war was an accomplished fact, his place, she should have thought, would be at the front. News kept coming in—together with more prisoners—news of brilliant engagements, and successful stands made against the foes of the Republic—yet Adrian, who had always been so energetic in his advocacy of an appeal to arms, dallied here, instead of marching with those who were fighting for the patriot cause. To this he had replied that there was time enough before him. The struggle was young yet; long before it reached its culminating point, he would be in the

midst of it—yes, and would have made his mark too. Thus he told her.

The while, however, he was playing his own game, and that necessitated more than one trip over to Johannesburg, more than one conference with that other Kershaw. The plot concocted by these worthies was nearly mature.

The time had now come for playing a new card. When Aletta waxed eloquent over her absent lover, Adrian, hitherto kindly and considerately responsive, now preserved silence; indeed he lapsed into silence with just sufficient markedness as to move her to notice it. This he did some few times, until one day she asked him the reason, point-blank.

“Oh, it’s nothing, Aletta,” he answered. And then he abruptly took his leave.

But at the very next of his visits she returned to the subject, as he knew she would, and intended she should.

Why had he become so markedly constrained? she asked, a sudden deadly fear blanching her face. Had he heard anything—any bad news?

“From the front, you mean? No, no; nothing of that sort,” quailing involuntarily before the set, stony look of anguish, and half wavering in his plan. Then, recovering himself, “Well then, Aletta, it’s of no use keeping it to oneself any longer; besides, you ought to know. Are you sure there is anyone at the front in whom you have any interest at all?”

“Why, of course! Why, what do you mean, Adrian? Is not Colvin at the front?” she said, bringing out her words with a kind of gasp.

“At the front? Well, I don’t think he is, considering I saw him only this morning at Johannesburg.”

“Oh, then, he is on his way back,” cried Aletta, her face lighting up with such a radiancy of joy as confirmed the other more than ever in his purpose.

“I think not,” he said; “for to-day is not the only time I have seen him

there. I saw him the day before yesterday, and one day last week."

"Adrian, think what you are saying. It is impossible." But as she stood looking him in the face as though her gaze would pierce and lay bare every secret of his brain, a cold and terrible misgiving smote her. She remembered the positive assertion made by Adrian before on this head, and in Colvin's own presence. Dr Da Costa's remark, too, she remembered; likewise her own misgiving, which act of distrust she had since lamented to herself with bitter and remorseful tears. What if this thing should be too true?

"But I have letters from him," she went on. "I have heard from him twice—from Bloemfontein before he joined Commandant Botma. You must have seen that extraordinary 'double' of his, Adrian."

But Adrian was armed at this point too.

"See you now, Aletta?" he said. "It is very easy to get anything posted in Bloemfontein. Plenty of people travel down there from Johannesburg. As for that 'double' idea, I thought at the time that the story was too weak altogether. But now, I ask, does his 'double' also know Miss Wenlock? Anyhow, she seemed to be bidding him a very lingering farewell on the *stoep* of a house."

This seemed improbable. Still, grasping at the chance, Aletta flatly refused to believe the statement. And then she rounded upon her cousin, and for a space that estimable youth had a very bad time indeed. He had invented this scandalous falsehood, she declared, had invented it out of malice. She remembered his threats that day at Ratels Hoek; but such, at any rate, had pointed to a more manly course than this traducing of the absent. No, she did not and would not believe one word of the story. Adrian could get away out of her sight and never look upon her face again.

But she did believe it partly, and Adrian knew she did. He felt quite secure now.

"Very well, Aletta," he answered, with a quiet dignity, "I will do as you

wish, and you need not be troubled with me any more. That is the treatment I might have expected for opening your eyes to the—well, trick that has been played upon you. Yet I don't see why you should think me a liar; so it is only fair to give me the chance of proving my words."

"But how are you going to prove them?" she asked, speaking quickly.

"In the best possible way. Will the evidence of your own eyes satisfy you, Aletta?"

"I cannot refuse to believe my own eyes," she answered slowly. "That is, in broad daylight," she added.

"Yes, of course. If you will go over to Johannesburg with me to-morrow you shall be amply convinced. Will you come?"

"Yes. And mind this, Adrian. If you fail to prove this lie—I mean this charge of yours—by the evidence of my own eyes, you shall never receive a word from me again—from any of us, indeed. Never."

"Oh, I am not uneasy about that. And now I must go. So long. To-morrow, mind."

The road in which stood Jim Dixon's abode was well-nigh as deserted at midday as in the dusk of the evening when Adrian had first come into contact with Kenneth Kershaw. Now as he walked slowly along, with Aletta beside him, he could hardly answer her save at random. What if the plan failed? A miscalculation of time on the part of one or both confederates and such might easily be the case. His first idea, which indeed would have been a safer one, was to take up a position in, or concealed by, one of the deserted houses opposite, of which there was a whole row, and watch; but even if he could have got Aletta to consent to this plan, one very important move in the game—the most checkmating move of all, as we shall see—must of necessity be omitted.

The girl was looking pale and worn, for she had had but little sleep. Her determination and spirit, the very vitality of the matter at stake, had

kept her up. There were times, too, when she said to herself that this thing could not be, that she was about to discover what a mistake Adrian had made; and in the gladness of the thought she was going to be forgiving to Adrian in that event, not, however, until she had most severely lectured him.

He for his part had affected a demeanour that was gravely compassionate. If he seemed now and then ill at ease, why that struck Aletta as natural—having regard to the delicate nature of the errand on which they were bound. And he had some reason for his uneasiness, for they would soon be right opposite Dixon's house, and he did not desire to be seen by, at any rate, one of its inmates. What was that cursed fool about, he said to himself, not to show? It was past the time, and they could not patrol up and down for ever.

"Look now, Aletta!" he said, suddenly. "Look! Was I mistaken?"

The front door of a house about a hundred yards further down on the other side of the road had opened, and two figures came out on to the *stoep*. Aletta recognised them instantly. One was that of May Wenlock, but the other—

No. There was no mistaking it. There he stood, and he was looking down into May's eyes as he talked to her, was holding her hand in his for a considerably longer time than was necessary for the purpose of bidding farewell. There he stood, her perfidious lover—he who had left her with such words of sworn affection upon his lips, that would be with her until her dying day—he, the thought of whom, hourly, momentarily, it might be in peril of death on the battle field, had filled her mind waking and sleeping—while all the while here he was in quiet safety, carrying on his intrigue with this girl. There he stood; there could not be two Colvin Kershaws in the world, that ingenious story of the "double" notwithstanding. This was the "double" then? Yet it was wearing exactly the same clothes, exactly the same hat, even, as when taking that last farewell of herself—that farewell whose memory had thrilled her heart ever since.

"Courage, Aletta! Courage!" she heard Adrian say, but his voice

sounded as from another world. “Keep up a little longer. Now we will make certain. Look!”

The man had parted from his companion now, and as he came down to the front gate, his head was half turned, as with a last loving look towards May, who was still on the *stoep*. Then he came out into the road, and the door of the house closed.

He walked slowly along at first, not looking up. Then suddenly he did look up, and caught the eyes of the two on the opposite side. The effect was magical. With a bewildered start he half stopped as though irresolute, then, averting his eyes, he trebled his pace and walked rapidly away. But during that swift second his glance had met that of Aletta straight and full; and if ever a human countenance showed dismay, consternation, guilt, utter confusion, assuredly all these emotions were stamped upon this man’s countenance in that brief moment.

“Well now, was I mistaken?” said Adrian again, his voice sounding even farther away this time. “Can you believe your own eyes now, Aletta? You have seen?”

“Oh yes,” she gasped. “I must believe my own eyes. Yes—yes, I have seen.”

The girl’s face was colourless, her lips livid and shaking. Her steps even seemed unsteady. Adrian feared that she would faint. But she did not.

Chapter Seven.

Very like a Prisoner.

Colvin was beginning to have enough of it.

He had spent some weeks with Cronje’s force, and into that short space about half a lifetime of strange and stirring experience seemed to have crowded itself. Besides the Modder River battle, he had witnessed

the British repulse at Magersfontein, and had seen several desultory skirmishes. More than one narrow escape had he known, and had been slightly cut about the hand by the splinter of a spent shell. But he had become inured to the rush and whirr of missiles, and now paid no heed whatever to them. He had likewise adopted the American's suggestion, and started in to take notes on his own account. He might make some use of them after the war, he declared, and, at any rate, as Acton had said, the taking of them gave him something to do. By this time, too, he had become indurated to the ghastly and horrifying sights which had so got upon his nerves at first. Yet he had had quite enough of it, and thought longingly that he would gladly be back at Pretoria. And what stimulated this longing was the fact that during all the time he had been away he had received neither line nor word from Aletta.

At first he had thought but little of this, attributing it to a natural delay consequent on the hurry and bustle of the times. But as days became weeks he began to think it strange and to feel uneasy. Several of the burghers had received letters from their people, and plenty of messages and despatches reached the various field commandants from headquarters. Surely the influence of Piet Plessis would suffice to command means of sending through the communication for which he now began so ardently to long.

Even then no idea approaching suspicion of the real state of affairs crossed his mind. Some technical difficulty might be standing in the way—Piet might not be able to use his official position for such purposes. No, that did not seem to account for it either. Colvin began to feel anxious—he hardly knew why. He had wanted to see the fighting, and he had seen a great deal of it—enough, he thought, to last him for life. The fierce glare of summer midday, with its dust-clouds and chronic and tormenting thirst—the bitter chill of night on the high veldt—lying out under the stars, while every now and then the searchlight in the beleaguered town away in the distance swept round its fan-like ray, now and then drawing the muffled boom of a shot—of all this he had had enough. He made up his mind to obtain Commandant Botma's permission to return to Pretoria.

Hardly had he done so than a letter was put into his hand. Ah, the longed-for communication at last! and the thrill of delight that went

through him almost made up for the long, wearing anxiety. But this was nipped in the bud by a second glance at the envelope. It was not directed in Aletta's handwriting.

He tore it open. A glance at the end of the sheet showed that the handwriting was that of Piet Plessis' wife. At the same time an enclosure fell out. This at any rate was from Aletta. Eagerly he picked it up—then, as he mastered the contents, a look of the blankest dismay and bewilderment came over his features. For the contents were very brief, and they ran thus:

"I am going home at once. No explanations are needed, are they? For, remember—*I saw*.

"Good-bye, Aletta."

He stared at the sheet of paper, and his look of bewilderment grew blanker and blanker. What did it mean? What on earth *could* it mean? No explanations needed? But they very much *were* needed, he thought. And what on earth mystery lay covered by those words, so significantly underlined—"*I saw*?" What did the writer see? The thing passed comprehension. He turned to the other letter with some wild hope of finding enlightenment there.

It did not afford him much. Aletta had asked her to enclose this note to him, wrote Mrs Plessis, and was going back home to Ratels Hoek at once. "I hope there is nothing wrong," she went on, "but the child has been very strange during the last two or three days. I don't know what to make of it. She will not give me her confidence, and made me promise faithfully not so much as to hint to Piet that anything had upset her. She leaves us to-morrow, and travels back home in charge of Adrian. But I trust there is nothing really the matter."

In charge of Adrian! Ah, now he began to see light. Adrian was behind whatever had happened. Why, of course. His every motive made that way. All that cordiality of his had not altogether gone down with Colvin. There was a suggestion of malice underlying it, which should

have put him more on his guard. Adrian had played him some dirty trick in his absence, though what it might be he could as yet form no idea.

He glanced at the letter, also at the note. Both bore a date some ten days old. Why, Aletta would have been home now for days. Well, his mind was made up. Instead of returning to Pretoria, he would proceed straight to Ratels Hoek. No explanation needed! It struck him that that very thing was most urgently needed.

He applied to Andries Botma for facilities, which, being English, he would need to prosecute his journey and to ensure his safe passage through any of the Republican forces he might fall in with. These were readily granted, and the Commandant bade him a kind and cordial farewell.

“I need not remind you, Mynheer Kershaw,” he said, in Dutch, for “The Patriot” never spoke English, although perfectly able to do so, unless positively obliged—“I need not remind you that you have pledged your solemn word of honour to divulge nothing that you may have seen or heard during the time you have been with us. But it is not entirely the other side I distrust, and therefore I would impress upon you the necessity of using the greatest caution in conversing with those who, by nationality, are our own people. But many of them (with shame I say it) are not really our own people—that is, they are not heart and soul with us. They will not strike a blow for the sacred cause—at least not yet. They are waiting to see which will prove the victorious side—as if there could be any doubt. These are the people I would warn you against, when you are back once more across the river. But you are one of us now, for I hear you are to marry Stephanus De la Rey’s daughter. In that receive my most cordial wishes—and carry my compliments to Stephanus and all our good friends in the Wildschutsberg. And if hereafter I can be of service to you at any time—why, it will be to me an agreeable duty. Farewell.”

Colvin shook hands warmly with the kindly Dutch Commandant, and, armed with his credentials, went forth. At the moment he little thought of the weight of that last promise, still less what it might or might not be destined to mean for him in the not distant future. He thought more on the

subject of the other's congratulations, for they stirred up a very real and desolating misgiving. What if events should already have rendered them devoid of meaning?

His journey to the border seemed to him intolerably long and depressing, but its monotony was varied more than once by meeting with a party of burghers patrolling the country or on their way to join Cronje's force. These would scan his credentials narrowly and suspiciously, but the name of Andries Botma was as a very talisman, and they allowed him to proceed. At the passage of the Orange River, some delay occurred. This, however, was at last surmounted, but it was towards the close of the third day that he found himself—riding a very tired horse—entering the Wildschutsberg range, just beyond which lay his own home, and, yet nearer, Ratels Hoek.

Straight to the latter he intended to proceed, and now, as he drew so near, for the hundredth time he was cudgelling his brains over the mystery of Aletta's strange behaviour, and for the hundredth time was forced to own himself no nearer finding a clue to it than before—except that he still connected it in some way with the evil influence or trickery of Adrian. Well, two or three hours more would clear it up, for he and Aletta would talk face to face, and in her own home.

Ah, but would they? With a dire chill the thought struck him—what if she were no longer there? had left home, perhaps, and gone away to Cape Town, as she had done before? Well, even thither he would follow her, if necessary, and claim an explanation.

What was this which had come between them? Had their times been too bright, too unclouded, rendering some such trial needful? They certainly had been that Day by day, so far from stagnating, from turning into the easy matter-of-fact groove, their love had grown—had intensified—right up to the moment of parting, so ardently mutual had it been. It had seemed that nothing could add to it—that no margin was left for any further extension of it. Yet as he rode along now, saddened, heart-desolate, almost bereaved, Colvin thought to himself that this ordeal had seemed needed to prove that there was.

As he entered the mountains, the roll as of an approaching storm had boomed sombrely away on his left. Now, in the opposite direction, beyond the range, came faint and far, other deep thunder voices. This was not thunder though. It was a sound he had become tolerably familiar with of late, the distant roll of guns. A battle was in progress in that direction. Well, it did not concern him. He was nearly at home again.

He looked up. The shadows of evening were already lowering. In the dusk something white attracted his glance. A white stone—and then, with a rush, the familiarity of the surroundings swept in upon his mind. He had reason to know that white stone, for it was while passing that very object he had been fired at on the night he had first seen Aletta. The track he had been following here struck the main road, just where it forked, in the direction of his own home, and in that of Ratels Hoek. Well, he would soon be at the latter place now, and then—and then— Ah, how that other evening came back!

This stage of his meditations received a shock, being, in fact, disturbed by a loud, harsh voice calling upon him in Dutch, and very peremptorily, to halt. It proceeded from in front and above. Looking up, Colvin became alive to the startling discovery that some twenty rifles were levelled straight at him, at a distance of about that number of yards. There was no disputing such a summons.

“Dismount!” repeated the voice.

Again there was no alternative but to comply, and, as he did so, several Boers, still keeping him covered, arose from their concealment, and came towards him. Some two or three were men from the surrounding district, whom he knew by sight, but most of them were strangers.

“Who are you?” asked the leader crisply, in Dutch. “And where are you from?”

Colvin told him. The news that he had come straight from Cronje’s force in the field, and had witnessed several engagements, impressed them somewhat. They began to look at him with considerable interest

and increased respect.

"*Daag*, Gideon," he exclaimed, suddenly becoming aware of the presence of Gideon Roux among the party. The Boer came forward and greeted him as though nothing had happened. They chatted a minute or two together as to the local news and so forth. Then Colvin said:

"Well now, friends, I must bid you good-night. I am going on to Stephanus De la Rey's."

"You cannot go on to Stephanus De la Rey's to-night," rejoined the leader promptly.

"Why not?"

"Because you have to go with us—to Commandant Schoeman's camp at Krantz Kop."

This was a terrible facer, but Colvin was forced to accept the situation with what grace he could. At first he tried expostulation, urging every reason he could think of for being suffered to pursue his way. In vain. Even the magic name of The Patriot seemed to fail in its power here. The burghers got their concealed horses from behind the rocks and they started.

It was quite dark when they reached the camp, which had been pitched around Gideon Roux' farmstead. How well Colvin remembered the last time he had visited this place—the discovery of the concealed arms, the squalid household and his doubtful reception, Hans Vermaak's warning and its ample justification. Now, as he saw the place again, under circumstances suspiciously like being made a prisoner of, a great despondency came upon him. He had beguiled the journey chatting with his escort, or captors, or whatever they were, and learned that for the past day or two fighting had been going on with the British forces out beyond Schalkburg, and that a few prisoners had been taken, most of whom would be forwarded to Bloemfontein. There was one, however, who was exceedingly obstreperous. If he was not careful he would very likely be shot.

They were challenged by vedettes as they reached the outskirts of the camp, but allowed to pass through. In the darkness Colvin could make out a few waggons and several tents pitched without any particular regard to order. In one or two of these some men were singing Dutch hymns in a slow, droning tone—but, early as it was, most of the burghers had turned in for the night. Once, as he passed the farmhouse, he thought to detect an English voice, proceeding from the stable, cursing and swearing, its owner the while kicking vigorously against the door, and supposed this must be the obstreperous prisoner they had been telling him about. He was shown to a tent, which he found he had to share with three other men, who were already asleep.

The Commandant? Oh, he could not be disturbed that night. He was asleep. So there was nothing for it but to put the best face on things. And yet it was not with pleasant foreshadowings that Colvin Kershaw at last closed his tired yet sleepless eyes in the burgher camp, realising that he was something very like a prisoner.

Chapter Nine.

Commandant Schoeman's Camp.

"Who on earth is making all that row?" was Colvin's first remark on awakening from sleep the following morning to the well-worn strains of "Ta-ra-Boomdeay" bellowed in stentorian tones, yet somewhat muffled as though by distance and obstruction.

"It must be the Englishman—one of the prisoners," yawned another occupant of the tent, sitting up and rubbing his eyes sleepily. "He is very violent and noisy, so they have shut him up in Gideon Roux' stable away from the others."

"Is he mad?"

"No. Only violent. Wants to fight everybody with his fists."

"*Nouwja*. I would cure that 'madness' with a *sjambok* if I were the

Commandant," growled another, sitting up and listening. "He gives all the trouble he can."

The hour was that of sunrise, and although midsummer, the air at that altitude was raw and chilly when Colvin turned out, shivering, to look after his horse, which had been picketed among the steeds of the burghers. As he did so the sun, mounting above the surrounding heights into the fresh clear air, seemed to shed around a new hope, to light up a new exhilaration in his mind. His own atmosphere would clear, even as the dewy mists of night had done before the great flaming luminary. He would now seek out the Commandant, explain matters, and resume his way. And having so decided, he was straightway confronted by a couple of burghers summoning him to the presence of that official without delay.

Commandant Schoeman was an elderly man with a hard, wooden-faced expression. He wore a straight lank beard, a chimney-pot hat, once white, and weather-beaten moleskin clothes, which looked as if they had not been off him for a month, which indeed was very near the truth. He was a Boer of the most unprogressive type, and as entirely dissimilar to one of the stamp of Stephanus De la Rey as could possibly be imagined. He was lacking in the good qualities of Andries Botma, who, however fiery and perfervid as a patriotic orator, was a kindly and courteous gentleman beneath. This man was brusque and uncouth, and cordially hated everything English, both in season and out of season.

He was seated in his tent as Colvin came up. The flaps were folded back so that those surrounding him who could not find room inside could still assist at what was going on in the way of official business. These consisted almost entirely of Boers holding subordinate commands under him. They wore their bandoliers, and their rifles lay on the ground beside them.

"*Daag*, Mynheer Commandant," said Colvin, mindful of the way in which a greater than this had received a less formal mode of address.

"*Daag*," replied Schoeman curtly, tendering a cold lifeless paw, and just touching the other's outstretched hand.

The same ceremony was gone through with the others. Two old acquaintances Colvin recognised—Swaart Jan Grobbelaar and old Sarel Van der Vyver. These responded to his greeting characteristically—the first showing his tusks with a sort of oily, half-satirical grin, the other infusing a heartiness into his reply, and then drawing back as though half-frightened. There was a third present, however, whom he recognised—recognised, moreover, with some astonishment—Morkel, the Civil Commissioner's clerk.

"Hallo, Morkel!" he exclaimed in English. "I never expected to see you. Why, what on earth are *you* doing here?"

"I am acting as secretary for the Commandant," answered Morkel, making believe to be wondrously busy with some papers on the rough wooden table in front of him. His momentary embarrassment was not lost upon Colvin, nor a look he fancied he detected, warning him not to ask questions.

"I do not know why we need talk English here," said the Commandant curtly. "Sit."

Colvin obeyed, and subsided on to the floor of the tent by Swaart Jan, who made room for him, at the same time offering his tobacco bag, for they were all smoking. The great man and his "secretary" were the only ones who occupied seats, and these consisted of inverted packing-cases. The rest squatted primitively on mother earth.

Then turning to Colvin, the Commandant began to put him through a pretty close cross-examination, causing Morkel to take down the answers, partly with a view to impressing the others with his magisterial dignity, partly from a genuine motive, for he was an illiterate man, and had all the suspiciousness which characterises such. He questioned Colvin with regard to all as to which he had been an eye-witness when with Cronje's force, and with regard to a great deal as to which he had not, the others listening with vivid interest.

And here Colvin began to feel himself in somewhat of a quandary, remembering the parting injunctions and warnings of Andries Botma. The

latter had especially cautioned him against revealing matters even to the burghers on this side of the Orange River, and now the warning rose clear in his mind. Who could say that there might not be spies among those here present, or, at any rate, but lukewarm adherents of the Republican cause? And the result of such misgiving was that his answers were somewhat constrained, and to the distrustful ears of the Boer Commandant more than suspicious.

“Be careful, Englishman,” said the latter bluntly. “You are telling us the truth, are you? You had better tell the truth—oh, much better.”

The rudeness of the other’s words and manner angered Colvin, but he yielded to the expediency of restraining too great a manifestation of resentment.

“Look, Mynheer Commandant,” he said. “I have been courteously received by His Honour the President, I can call Andries Botma my friend and Piet Plessis’”—and he named half a dozen other prominent Transvaal officers—“but it has remained to me to return here to be called a liar by a man of whom I never heard before.”

“All Englishmen are liars,” interpolated a grim old burgher on the opposite side of the tent, spitting on the ground. Schoeman, however, received the reply with a wooden-faced silence. But Colvin did not miss a look of dismay and warning darted at him by Morkel, and at the same time, with anything but satisfaction, he realised that he had probably made a deadly enemy of the Commandant.

“Well then,” he continued, “the whole square truth of the matter is that Andries Botma particularly urged upon me not to talk of what I had seen with Cronje’s force, not even on this side of the river. Does that satisfy all here?” And he looked around the circle.

“*Ja*, *ja*,” assented most of them, Swaart Jan adding:

“It is true, Commandant Colvin is a true man. I know him. He is a friend of ‘The Patriot’. Besides, he is one of us now. He is going to marry Stephanus De la Rey’s daughter.”

“Quite right, Oom Jan,” said Colvin, with alacrity. Then, judging that this was exactly the moment for preferring his request, he represented to the Commandant that it was while on his way to Ratels Hoek that he had been detained and brought here. Might he not now proceed thither?

This request was backed up by most of the assembled Boers. Schoeman, beginning to think it would save trouble, was inclined to yield, when a contretemps occurred, one of those freaks of fate which have an impish and arbitrary way of skipping forward just at the right moment to divert and ruin the course of human affairs when such course is beginning to run smoothly. A considerable hubbub had arisen outside; curses and threats in Dutch and English, with the sound of scuffling, and, over and above all, a voice lifted in song, bellowing stentoriously, if somewhat jerkily:

“Ta-ra-ra-ra Boomdeay!
Oom Paul op een vark gerij,
Af hij val en rier gekrij,
Toen klim op en weg gerij.”

The concluding words were hurled, so to say, right into the tent, for a group of burghers had appeared, and in their midst was the singer. The latter was receiving somewhat rough usage—though, truth to tell, he was bringing it upon himself. His arms were tightly pinioned to his sides with a long coil of reim, and he was being hustled forward with varying degrees of roughness. But the more they hustled and cursed him the more defiantly he shouted his idiotic and, under the circumstances, insulting doggerel. Colvin, with dismay and consternation, had recognised the stuff and had recognised the singer, and, even before the latter had been dragged into sight, knew that it could be no other than Frank Wenlock. So this was the obstreperous prisoner? Well, Frank Wenlock could be pretty obstreperous, as he knew by experience.

“Still, man, still!” growled one of his escort, shaking him violently. Here again was an old acquaintance, in the shape of Hermanus Delport. But the big Dutchman’s face was considerably damaged, one eye being totally closed. Frank had been using his fists to some purpose. Now he let off a volley of perfectly unprintable expletives.

“You’d dare lay a finger on me but for this *reim*, wouldn’t you?” he yelled. “I’d plug up your other eye for two pins, and every man’s blanked eyes in this camp.” And more to the same effect.

“Still, man, do you hear?” repeated Hermanus, administering another shake. “The Commandant is speaking to you. Do you hear?”

“Is he? Well, then, I don’t care a little damn for Mr bally Commandant or the whole lot of infernal rebels and traitors in that tent. Aha, Swaart Jan! you may well look sick, you old liar; there’s a nice rope waiting for you. Old Sarel, too? What a hanging of rebels and traitors there’ll be by-and-by! And Morkel? *Ja*, you will dangle, too.” Then becoming alive to the presence of Colvin, he burst into a very roar of derisive hatred. “Good-day, Mister Kershaw—or should I say Commandant Kershaw?—the biggest blanked traitor of the lot. You’ll be blown from a gun, I should think.”

These ravings, uttered half in English, half in Dutch, were not without effect upon most of those within the tent. They had about concluded that the violence and insolence of this prisoner had reached limits.

“Let him taste the *sjambok*” growled the old burgher who had expressed the opinion antagonistic to British veracity. But Commandant Schoeman gave no sign of perturbation. Save for a stern and ominous look in his cold, snaky eye, he might not have heard.

“Frank—Frank! Do be quiet, man,” said Colvin earnestly. “Don’t make a silly ass of yourself. You are doing yourself no good.”

“Not, eh? I’d do you some good though if I could get at you; I’d give you the jolliest hammering you ever had. Look at Mani Delport’s mug there. That’s nothing to what yours would be, you infernal traitor.”

“It might not be so easy, Frank. But do be reasonable. How can you expect decent treatment if you will persist in behaving like a lunatic?”

“Would you be reasonable if you had seen your home sacked and gutted by a lot of rebels and traitors, and your mother turned out

homeless, Mister Dutchman Kruger Kershaw?" snarled Frank. "No fear though. Your place wasn't interfered with. You're one of them, you know."

Colvin was not disposed to deny this in the faces of those present, intending to use that very argument in favour of being allowed to proceed on his way. But he was deeply concerned on behalf of Frank. The fool was simply committing suicide. Yet—how prevent him? He had seen Frank very uproarious more than once, in his cups, but here that motive power was lacking. The silly chap seemed to have gone half off his head with racial antagonism. But his own endeavours to persuade the Boer authorities to that effect drew forth a renewed outburst from the man he was striving to befriend. The Dutch Commandant lost patience.

"Be still, Englishman," he said, very sharply and sternly. "I am going to speak, and if you open your mouth again until I have finished, you will have that thrust into it which will quiet you. Well, then, you were treated no worse than others in your position until you brought rough treatment upon yourself. You have been as violent; as a drunken Bastard Hottentot, without his excuse. You have assaulted and struck our burghers, and you have only opened your mouth to shout out insults to His Honour the President and horrid blasphemies to Almighty God. There can be no place for such a man as you among our God-fearing burghers, and we are not going to release you while so many of our brave comrades are rotting on your English prison ships. It may be that you have not many hours left in this world, and I advise you to think over and ask pardon of Heaven for all your blasphemous words." Then to the guards, "Take him back whence he came while we deliberate."

"That for your cant, you cursed, whining old snuffle-nose," yelled Frank, spitting in the direction of the Commandant. "You can shoot me if you like, but you'll all hang—every man jack of you—infernal rebels and traitors. Hurrah! God save the Queen!" And thus vociferating, he was hustled away.

"Do not hold him responsible for what he says or does, Mynheer Commandant," said Colvin earnestly. "I think his misfortunes have turned his brain. He was always excitable. We cannot hold a man responsible when he is off his head, can we?"

To this plea Commandant Schoeman made no reply. He turned a cold, fishy eye upon the pleader, then remarked to the others:

“*Toen, Heeren*. We had better discuss, under the guidance of Heaven, what our best course will be with regard to this violent and blasphemous prisoner. For yourself, Mynheer”—to Colvin—“you would doubtless prefer the rest and quiet of your tent—or to see if some of your friends are in our camp.”

Colvin promptly acted upon this more than hint. But with all his anxiety to reach Ratels Hoek, a kind of instinct on Frank Wenlock’s account reconciled him to a further sojourn in Schoeman’s camp. He suspected that Frank stood in grave peril of his life; and if so he must exert all and whatever influence he himself possessed on behalf of his friend and former comrade.

His instinct proved an accurate one, and his worst fears were justified. Not until near evening, however, did he learn that Frank Wenlock had been sentenced to be shot, and would meet his death at daybreak.

Chapter Ten.

The Net draws in.

It was Morkel who brought the news. Their deliberations on Frank’s fate had lasted for some hours, being interspersed with a sort of impromptu prayer-meeting or two—and in the result he had been brought before the Commandant again, and being asked if he had any thing to say in excuse for having repeatedly insulted the President, blasphemed Almighty God, and taken up arms against the Republic, part of whose territory this had now been proclaimed by annexation, replied simply by a savage renewal of all the abuse he had already been foolish enough to heap upon those in whose power he was. So he was condemned to be shot at daybreak on the following morning.

Not all had been in favour of that extreme measure, said Morkel.

Swaart Jan Grobbelaar for one, and old Sarel Van der Vyver for another, had spoken on the side of mercy; possibly with an uneasy eye to eventualities. But Commandant Schoeman, who was a Free State Boer, and whose own position as a mere belligerent was secure in any event, had overruled them, and by that time to-morrow poor Frank Wenlock would no longer exist. “What can be done, Morkel?” said Colvin, very much moved. “Do you think they really intend to do it?”

“Dead certain,” was the gloomy reply. “You know the poor devil simply brought it upon himself. You saw how he behaved this morning, Kershaw. Why he was simply committing suicide.”

“Would it be any use if I were to try and talk over Schoeman? Might persuade him to let the chap off with a bit of a fright. I am in with some of the big bugs up at Pretoria, you know.”

“Not an atom of use,” said Morkel decidedly. “You are in fairly bad odour yourself, you see, Kershaw.”

“It’s ghastly. I can’t believe they really intend to shoot the poor chap. But, by-the-by, Morkel, how is it you are up here among them? I thought you were so rigidly—er—Imperialist?”

Morkel looked embarrassed.

“So I am—er—was, I mean,” he answered, speaking low. “But it’s all Jelf’s fault. He took on a fad to collect the state of feeling among the farmers, and was always wanting me to go round and find it out. I went once too often; for when Olivier and Schoeman crossed from the Free State, and the whole of the Wildschutsberg and the Rooi-Ruggensberg rose as one man, why they simply commandeered me.”

“But as a Government servant—”

“*Ja*—a fat lot they cared about the Government servant part of it. A man of my name could not be on the English side, they said. So they just gave me my choice—to join them or be shot as a spy. I was a spy, of course, they swore. They knew I had been sent out by the Civil

Commissioner to find out things. So there it was."

"But it'll come rather awkward for you when all this is over, Morkel?"

"I'll have to chance that. It, at any rate, is a chance, but the other was a dead cert. *Maagtig*! Kershaw, when you see half a dozen fellows with rifles step out, all ready to let daylight through you in ten minutes' time, why you prefer the chances of the remote future to the certainty of the immediate present. If you don't think so—why, you just find yourself in my shoes, and see."

This was undeniable—and then the *ci-devant* Civil Commissioner's clerk went on to explain that he was by no means certain that things were going to turn out so favourably for the English as had at first seemed probable. The Republics might get the better of it practically, in which event he would likely drop in for something worth having—anyway, he couldn't help himself. Besides, it would have happened in any case, for the burghers had jumped Schalkburg and commandeered every man there who bore a Dutch name, as well as all the stores. But with regard to the De la Rey household Morkel could give no reliable information. He had heard that Stephanus and his wife were away in the Free State, but even that he did not know for certain, nor whether the girls were at home or not.

"But how did Frank manage to get captured, Morkel? Was he fighting?"

"No. They went to his place, and started in to commandeer all his stuff. You know what a violent beggar he is when his monkey is up—and he started punching heads by the half-dozen. What could he do against a crowd? The wonder to me is they didn't shoot him then and there. But they broke up everything in the house, and turned the old lady out of doors and locked her own doors on her. Good job that pretty sister of his was away from home, for they were the lowest down type of Boer—of the Mani Delport sample."

Both men puffed gloomily at their pipes for some minutes in silence. Then Colvin said:

“Look here, Morkel. I am going to have another try at old Schoeman. You must persuade him to see me. So cut along, old chap, and do so. By the way, if the worst comes to the worst, he must let me see Frank.”

“I’ll try, Kershaw,” said Morkel. “I’ll try my darnedest, but I’m not over sanguine.”

Nor was Colvin, and his despondency was fully justified when, after nearly an hour, Morkel returned. Commandant Schoeman flatly refused to see him that night, nor would he authorise him to hold an interview with the prisoner, or any communication whatever, on peril of the utmost penalty.

“The infernal old brute!” was the only comment Colvin could make.

“Yes, he is,” rejoined Morkel gloomily. “And now I must clear out—for he has a lot of ‘secretarial’ work for me to-night, he says. Well, we have done all we could, and if we can’t help the poor chap we can’t. It’s the fortune of war. Good-night.”

Left to himself Colvin sat for a while thinking hard, and as he did so his despondency deepened. Poor Frank! Was there no way out of it? His memory went back over the period of their acquaintance—over the old days when they had campaigned together as comrades—over the times they had spent together since, under more peaceful auspices—by what a mere chance it had come about that they were not much more nearly related. With all his weaknesses, Frank was far too good a fellow to come to such pitiable grief as this. What could be done? And still the inexorable answer—Nothing.

Rising in the sheer restlessness of desperation, he went outside the tent. It was nearly dark now, and the cooking fires of the camp were ablaze in all directions, and the deep-toned voices of the burghers buzzed forth on all sides. As he stepped outside, a figure looming out of the dusk barred his way.

“Stand! Go no further.”

“What is the meaning of this? You hardly seem to know me,” said Colvin.

“I know you, Mynheer Kershaw,” was the reply. “But the Commandant’s orders are that you do not wander about the camp to-night.”

“The Commandant’s orders?”

“*Ja*, the Commandant’s orders,” repeated the Boer. “Go in again, if you please.”

There was nothing for it but compliance. As he re-entered the tent, Colvin realised that he was indeed a prisoner, and guarded by an armed sentry. What did it mean? Why, simply that for any power he might have to help Frank Wenlock that night—by fair means or foul—he might as well have been in Patagonia or Pekin. More, a very uneasy feeling had come over him that he might ere long stand sorely in need of aid himself.

These precautions seemed to point that way too. Here he was as much a prisoner as the man to whom death would come with the morning light. It struck him in a passing way as singular that the men who shared this tent with him were not here to-night, and he was alone. Hour after hour wore on, and still he racked his brains. Once before he had saved Frank Wenlock’s life in the heat and excitement of warfare. He could not save it now. That wily old fox Schoeman had seen to that.

Colvin was very tired. The strain of the previous day had told upon him—the strain of those long night hours too. He could not have told approximately at what hour his eyes had closed, and a whirling round of confused dreams were chasing each other through his slumbering brain. Now he was back again in peace and quietness at Piet Plessis’ with Aletta, radiant and happy. Now he was at Ratels Hoek, but Aletta was not there. A cold blank void seemed to take her place, and then into it floated the form of May Wenlock, her face turned from him in horror and loathing, as though requiring her brother’s blood at his hands. Then he awoke with a cold start, wondering confusedly whether all that had happened the day before were but a dream—awoke to the light of another day, with the

beams of a newly risen sun pouring into the tent—awoke to behold three armed burghers standing over him. Even then he noticed that the expression of their faces was grim and ominous, and that they replied to his morning salutation as curtly as possible.

“So! You are awake at last,” said one. “We were about to awaken you. You must come before the Commandant at once.”

“Before the Commandant?” echoed Colvin, still hardly awake. “By the way—the prisoner? What about the prisoner? The Commandant has pardoned him, has he?”

The men exchanged a very strange look with each other at the words.

“It is about the prisoner that the Commandant needs you, Mynheer,” said the spokesman. And Colvin’s heart sank. He was wanted to receive the doomed man’s last wishes, he supposed, being the latter’s fellow-countryman. Poor Frank—poor Frank!

“I am ready,” he said, springing up. “But—tell me. Are they really going to shoot him after all? Surely—surely not!”

The men looked more strangely than ever.

“You ought to know best whether that can now be done or not, Mynheer,” was the enigmatical reply. “Come!”

Colvin went forth with his guards—one of whom walked on each side of him, and the third behind. This was being under arrest with a vengeance, he thought. As they passed through the camp he noticed that the burghers were gathered in groups, conversing in very subdued tones, which at sight of him would become suddenly hushed. There was something solemn and cold-blooded about these preliminaries to the execution he was about to witness that got upon his nerves. As we have pointed out, he had witnessed many a ghastly and horrifying sight during the last few weeks. But this, he felt, was going to be more trying than any.

Commandant Schoeman was seated in his tent, surrounded by his

handful of subordinate officers, exactly the same as on the day before. To-day, however, in addition, a few burghers were grouped outside the tent, the butts of their rifles grounded, as they watched the proceedings. But where was the prisoner? Where was Frank Wenlock?

A dire sinking gripped Colvin's mind. Had they done it already? Surely the volley would have awakened him, or had he slept too soundly? Involuntarily he gazed from side to side.

"Stand there," said his guard, halting him in front of the Commandant's table.

The latter looked up at Colvin's greeting, barely returning it; then he said:

"What have you to say?" Colvin looked fairly puzzled.

"To say?" he echoed. "I do not understand, Mynheer Commandant."

"The prisoner Wenlock has escaped."

Colvin started, and his whole face lit up with satisfaction.

"Escaped, has he? Well then, Mynheer, all I can say is, I think you are well rid of him. Frank is a good fellow ordinarily, but he can make himself most infernally objectionable at times—as yesterday, for instance."

He thought it politic to make no allusion to the death sentence. But at heart he was overjoyed.

"*You* it was who helped him to escape," said Schoeman, and the tone, and the look of fell menace on his face, suddenly revealed to Colvin that he was standing on the brink of a yawning abyss. It behoved him to keep his head.

"Look now, Mynheer," he said, "I would ask how I could have helped him to escape when I never left my tent the whole night."

“That we shall see,” rejoined Schoeman.

“But how could I have left it, when I was kept in it by an armed guard placed there by your own orders?” retorted Colvin.

“I know nothing of such a guard, and I gave no such orders. It is now time for prayers, also for breakfast. There are those here who are ready to prove that you helped the prisoner to escape. In an hour’s time I shall require you here again. I warn you, Mynheer, that unless you can disprove the statements of these, things will be very serious for you. Retire now to your tent.”

Escorted, as before, Colvin went; and as he went he reflected. The extreme gravity of his position became plain in all its peril. It occurred to him that somebody or other desired to be rid of him. Yet, why? He had no enemies in the camp that he knew of. True, he had somewhat wounded the Commandant’s self-esteem at first, but surely Schoeman’s vindictiveness would not be carried to such a length. Well, there was no telling. Either Frank Wenlock had been allowed to escape, in order that the charge of aiding and abetting might be fastened upon himself, or he had been quietly made away with—always with the same object. And looking at it in this light, Colvin realised the trap he was in, and that his own life was in very considerable danger.

Chapter Eleven.

To take his Place.

It was a curious court-martial this before which he was now convened, thought Colvin, the ridiculous side of things striking him, as an hour later he stood once more before the Commandant's tent, having washed and got some breakfast in the interim. This old Dutch farmer, clad in greasy moleskins, and crowned with a weather-worn, once white chimney-pot hat, was his judge, with absolute power of life and death, and looked moreover as solemn as though he thoroughly realised it. Those others too, squatting on the ground, smoking pipes, and very frequently spitting: on their good word depended to a very great extent his own life.

"Do you confess to having assisted the prisoner to escape?" asked the Commandant. "It will save trouble and lighten the guilt upon your soul if you do."

"Certainly I do not, Mynheer," returned Colvin. "How can I have assisted any prisoner to escape when I was a prisoner myself?"

"*Maagtig*! Said I not that all Englishmen were liars?" grunted the old burgher, for the benefit of those within the tent.

Morkel, too, Colvin had not failed to observe occupying the same seat as yesterday. But Morkel had turned on a wooden expression of countenance, and avoided catching his eye. Clearly Morkel believed in the maxim anent self-preservation. He had a wholesome fear of drawing suspicion upon himself.

"We will first hear the testimony of Adrian De la Rey," said the Commandant.

Colvin managed to repress the astonishment he felt as Adrian came forward. The latter differed in outward trappings from the other burghers only in the fact that his get-up was smarter. He, too, avoided Colvin's

glance.

“Tell your story,” said the Commandant shortly. But before the other had said half a dozen words, Colvin interposed:

“Excuse me, Mynheer Commandant. But in taking evidence it is usual and indispensable to take it on oath—to swear the witness to tell the truth. Now this has not yet been done.”

It was just possible some advantage might be gained by this formula being observed, but Colvin did not reckon it would amount to much. Morkel, however, put in a word in favour of the suggestion, and accordingly Adrian was sworn after the usual Dutch method, with his right hand held up. Then he proceeded to tell his story.

As one of the field-captains of the burgher force it had been his duty to go the round of the sentries. Two mounted guard over the place wherein Frank Wenlock was confined, namely, the stable at the back of Gideon Roux’ house. The door was locked with a strong padlock, and there was one window, which was iron barred, and fairly strong. One sentry was stationed beneath this, and the other before the door. When he arrived at the stable he was surprised that the sentries gave him no recognition, but, on examining further into the matter, he found they were both asleep. Moreover, he could hardly wake them, and when he did, they excused themselves by saying that the Englishman in the camp—not the prisoner, but the other Englishman—had given them a *soepje* out of his flask. His first thought being for the security of the prisoner—the witness had ordered the door to be opened. But the key could not be found. It had been in the first sentry’s keeping. Then having called several times to the prisoner inside, and receiving no answer, the witness had caused the door to be broken open. The prisoner had vanished.

This had happened at about twelve o’clock. But half an hour earlier he had met Colvin Kershaw wandering through the camp, and they had stood chatting for a while. Kershaw had told him he had been at Gideon Roux’ house, and was returning to his tent. After his discovery of the escape he, Adrian, had thought of arresting the accused, but had placed his tent under guard until the morning.

“The accused man says it was under guard all night,” said the Commandant. “Do you know anything of such a guard?”

“Nothing whatever, Mynheer.”

Now, indeed, the whole mystery was clearing up, decided Colvin, but clearing in such wise as would be disastrous, if not fatal, for himself, Adrian De la Rey was the prime mover then in this matter. Adrian had every motive for destroying him, and now Adrian had concocted this plot for his destruction. He saw through it now, and his heart sank within him. Schoeman and his crew would be willing accomplices. He had no friends here in this camp, and he knew, all too well, that no chance would be allowed him of communicating with those he had elsewhere. Now he claimed his right of cross-examining witnesses. At first the “court” was not inclined to allow this. Of what use was it? It savoured of the blasphemous. God-fearing burghers, who had sworn to tell the truth, and had called God to witness, could not lie. But he pressed his point and, being supported by Morkel, carried it.

Not much good did it do him, however, with this witness. Not all his cross-examination could shake this tissue of amazing lies which Adrian reeled off with a glibness which imposed on his hearers up to the hilt. Everything he had said he stuck to; doing it, too, with a sorrowful and against-the-grain air. This Englishman with all his lawyer tricks could not shake that honest and simple testimony, decided these unsophisticated burghers, and all his efforts at doing so only served to deepen the adverse feeling.

The two sentries were then called, and their testimony exactly corresponded with that of Adrian! They were somewhat heavy-looking young men—brothers, named Hattingh. Asked what the drink consisted of, they thought it was whisky. It was not square-face or *dop*? No; they were sure it was whisky. All Englishmen drank whisky; therefore, decided the hearers, the man who gave them the drink must have been this Englishman.

Both brothers had the same tale to tell, and they told it so glibly, so naturally, as to puzzle even the accused himself. They were of the type

that do not make good liars—that is, in the sense of ability to sustain a series of consistent and circumstantial lies; indeed, had he been an impartial auditor of their testimony, instead of one vitally concerned therewith, he was forced to own to himself that he would have believed it. Such being the case, it was hardly to be wondered at if those who heard it believed every word.

These witnesses knew this Englishman, but not very well. They had seen him sometimes about the camp, and when he came up and chatted to them, and offered them something to drink, they were only too glad, for the nights up here in the Wildschutsberg were chilly, and a drop of something warmed a man.

And here we will digress briefly to explain that what would have been a very serious offence for all concerned, in the British regular, or even irregular forces, constituted just no offence at all in a Boer commando. For a Boer commando represents a chronic state of “marching-at-ease,” and the fact of a couple of sentries having a chat with a comrade and a “nip” out of his flask was nothing.

Both these men Colvin cross-questioned, not at any length, and in a conciliatory tone, and his main points were as to how they could be sure of his identity in the dark, especially as they had owned to being personally unacquainted with him. But the questions seemed genuinely to surprise them. For one thing, it was not so dark. The stars were shining very brightly. A Boer was not an Englishman that he could not see out of doors by starlight.

Then followed Gideon Roux, who testified that Colvin had spent at least two hours at his house the evening before. He would have left about the time named by Adrian De la Rey, but he could not say for certain within half an hour or so.

What had the accused to go upon? One after another of these men came forward unhesitatingly to swear away his life, for that is what he fully realised this mock trial to have for its object. The net was winding itself more fatally about him, and by nothing short of a miracle now could he be extricated from its entangling meshes. In Gideon Roux’ malignant

face a gleam of devilish exultation seemed to lurk, as though he recognised that this was a safer, surer method of disposing of an obnoxious and inconvenient person than shooting at him in the dusk from behind a rock. Those around listened in solemn and impressive silence. The groups of bystanders had been steadily augmenting, and now nearly the whole camp stood crowded around, in a strangely picturesque armed assembly.

After Gideon Roux followed that worthy's *vrouw*, looking quite as slatternly and rather more frightened than on that occasion when Colvin had partaken of her somewhat grudging hospitality. She emphatically confirmed all that her husband had said. The course the accused took with her was to remind her as impressively as he was able of the oath she had taken, and to suggest that she had better think well over her testimony lest she should have been mistaken. Sheer waste of words.

Colvin realised that he was doomed, and that every man in that camp believed every word that had been stated with regard to him. So when Hermanus Delport, and one or two others, came forward to corroborate that he had spent the evening at Gideon Roux' house, he simply refused to waste time or trouble asking any more questions. What he would ask, however, was that the man who had mounted guard over him should be put forward the man who had kept him a prisoner all night —that was, from just after sundown—by the Commandant's orders.

"I gave no such orders, as I have said before," said Commandant Schoeman. "Were any such orders given, *Heeren*, by any of yourselves?" turning towards the other occupants of the tent.

"*Nee—nee*," came forth the reply, universal and emphatic. "We know of no guard being placed over the accused during the first part of the night."

Colvin had thought they had now got more than ample testimony—false testimony—to afford them all the pretext they wanted. But he reckoned without Commandant Schoeman. Said the latter:

"Mynheer Morkel. Will you kindly stand where the others have stood,

and tell what you know of this matter?”

Morkel fairly started, a great look of dismayed consternation overspreading his features.

“But I know nothing about it, Mynheer Commandant,” he protested. “I have not seen or spoken to Kershaw since I begged you to grant him an interview last night.”

“Just so, Mynheer Morkel. But we want to know what passed between you and the accused man *before* that. Stand up. The exigencies of the Republics imperatively require it.”

This was a command there was no disobeying, so Morkel stood up, and was duly sworn. He would willingly have perjured himself up to the scalp in such a cause, but he knew it would be useless. There might have been spies overhearing all that had passed between him and Kershaw relative to Frank’s condemnation, or even if not there would be no difficulty in putting forward sufficient witnesses to swear that they had overheard it, giving of course their own version.

Bidden by the Commandant to state exactly what passed between himself and the accused with regard to Frank Wenlock, Morkel said that he himself had brought Kershaw the news that the other was condemned to death. How had the accused received it? He had been very much shocked and distressed naturally, the other having been a great friend of his—Morkel left out “fellow-countryman” just in time. But even with all his Court experience he made the mistake of expatiating on what had led to that friendship, realising with dire dismay, when too late, that he had furnished an additional motive for Colvin to act as was alleged.

“Did he not ask what could be done for the condemned man?” inquired Schoeman.

“He did, Mynheer Commandant. But—”

“He asked that question more than once?” interrupted the remorseless voice.

“Naturally, Mynheer. That was why he so urgently wished for an interview with yourself—to plead the cause of his friend.”

“And when he found that he could not obtain that interview, what then?”

“He was disappointed, naturally. But he said it would all come right. He could not believe that brave men—burghers fighting for their liberties and independence, civilised Christian men, could take the life of a man, especially a young man, by nature hot-headed and foolish, simply because he had made some rude and insulting remarks,” added Morkel, somewhat mendaciously, and indeed he seemed to have scored a strong point, for a murmur, not unsympathetic, went up from the audience. “The behaviour of Frank Wenlock was insulting and offensive, the accused had said, but surely not a crime worthy of death,” went on Morkel, waxing eloquent.

“That will do, Mynheer Morkel. You can now take your place again,” said the Commandant. Then to Colvin, “What have you to say? Now we have heard all the witnesses, what have you to say?”

“Very little, Mynheer. This is a plot. Adrian De la Rey has a grudge—a bitter grudge—against me, the reason of which does not matter. I believe he has manufactured the whole of this accusation. I believe he himself let Wenlock escape so as to fasten it on to me. Gideon Roux owes me money, and therefore would naturally turn against me. His *vrouw* looked frightened enough to satisfy even you that she was talking under compulsion. Hermanus Delport is a friend of and related to Gideon Roux. As for the two men who were on guard over Frank Wenlock, I believe they are under some extraordinary delusion and were speaking the truth as far as they knew. Morkel has stated the burden of our conversation quite correctly. But there is one witness we have not heard, and that is the man who turned me back into my tent last night.”

“There is no such man,” retorted Schoeman shortly. “It is all a fabrication. Well, then, that is enough. You came into our camp, and enjoyed our hospitality.”

“No, I was brought here by force,” interrupted Colvin.

“Still, still! Do not interrupt. You then took advantage of your position here to commit a hostile act—an act of hostility against the Republics, which have sheltered and shielded you—by aiding and abetting the escape of a prisoner.”

“That is not true,” retorted Colvin. “Before God, in whose presence we stand, I know no more of Frank Wenlock’s escape, have had no more to do with it, than the President himself.”

“Do not add lying and blasphemy to your offence,” said Schoeman unctuously. “For the crime of which ample testimony has convicted you, you will take the escaped prisoner’s place. You will be shot at sundown.”

A gasp went up from the listeners. The proceedings had impressed them deeply.

“Not yet,” said Colvin, in a loud firm voice. “I appeal to the President. In the presence of you all I appeal for justice to His Honour the President of the Transvaal Republic.”

Schoeman smiled coldly. “His Honour is not *our* President—not yet. We are not of the Transvaal Republic. Do you wish to converse with a minister of the Gospel to prepare you to meet your Creator?” he added, still unctuously.

“Yes,” answered Colvin, unwilling to let slip any potential loophole, however minute. “Mynheer Albertyn, of Schalkburg, is a good man. Can he be fetched?”

The Commandant looked surprised, then conferred in a low tone with his subordinate commanders.

“He can be fetched,” he answered. “And as you have shown a proper frame of mind, instead of blaspheming God—as your fellow-countryman did—more time for preparation shall be allowed you. Instead of at sundown, you must be ready for death an hour after sunrise to-morrow. That will allow you some hours to pray with the *predikant*.”

“I am grateful for that, Mynheer Commandant. But now, hear me. Standing here, on the threshold of death, I proclaim Adrian De la Rey a liar and perjurer—a perjurer who has taken the name of the great God to witness his falsehood. Out there,” waving his hand in the direction of the far-off British entrenchments, “is possible death for any man—glorious for the patriot, but for the liar and perjurer what—? I see you, Adrian. Do not try and skulk out of sight among honester men than yourself. Well, then, look me in the face, liar! So sure as I stand here will death find you. Within three days death will find you out. Now, liar and coward, well may you grow pale.”

Adrian, white as a sheet, was trying to meet his denouncer’s gaze, but for the life of him could not at that moment. Muttering something, he slipped away. And Colvin Kershaw followed his guards to his final prison, well knowing that his hours were numbered.

Chapter Twelve.

Gert Bondelzwart’s News.

The town of Schalkburg was still in possession of the enemy. The Free State flag waved above the Court-house, and the “patriot” burghers, whether of the Free State commando or rebel colonial Boers, had things all their own way, and a great time generally, for they proceeded to “commandeer” all the necessaries of life, and a good many of its luxuries, from the temporarily conquered people, and to make themselves very much at home among them, mostly at the expense of the latter. For these the only thing to do, however, was to accept the situation, and make the best of it.

There was one to whom this course recommended itself, and that was Mr Jelf. He would laugh ruefully over his enforced suspension—ruefully because he was sure the Colonial Office would hold him responsible, since for what is a long suffering Civil Commissioner not responsible—and play whist with his superseder, a Free State attorney, who had been set up by the burghers to administer the law as Landdrost.

But there was practically no law to administer in Schalkburg, for now every man did what was right in his own eyes, unless some misguided and commandeered native shirked or strove to abscond. In such cases the newly fledged Landdrost did administer the law, resulting in vehement contact between raw hide and the aboriginal cuticle.

Jelf was not a little anxious on the score of his absent subordinate, who had been away on one of those semi-official investigations what time the town was captured. He hoped Morkel had not come to grief with those fiery English aspirations of his; and then he would smile to himself as he reflected that such sentiments were patient of sudden metamorphosis under stress of circumstances. No, Morkel would turn up again sooner or later, he supposed.

He had felt very disgusted at the behaviour of Jan Grobbelaar. This was the ultra-loyal Field-cornet then! Stephanus De la Rey, at any rate, had been an honest man, but Swaart Jan was a snake in the grass, and he, Jelf, had not hesitated to tell him so when he had ridden up beside Commandant Schoeman to demand the keys of the offices. But the little man had merely shown his tusks in a deprecating grin. “What would Mynheer have?” he said. “A man must march with his own countrymen. But Mynheer and he need be none the less friends for all that.”

As a matter of fact, Jelf had no reason to complain of his treatment under the circumstances. He was a good-natured man and not unpopular among the Dutch farmers of his district, and now these showed him respect and consideration.

Schalkburg just then comprised another inmate, and that a personage not the least important in the unfolding of our narrative, namely, Aletta De la Rey. She was staying with some relatives, an old couple who had retired from farming, to settle in the township on their own *erf*; and she had been obliged to seek shelter with them because on reaching home she had found that all the family were away in the Free State—a fact which had not been known to her, partly owing to her sudden and unexpected homeward move, partly that, thanks to the war, communication was frequently interrupted and always uncertain. But, as it happened, she welcomed the discovery with a feeling of intense relief.

She had shrunk in anticipation from the questionings of her own family, now she would be spared these for a while longer. The Van Heerdens, her relatives, were a very old couple with hardly an idea outside their own *erf* and the covers of the family Bible. They were not likely to bother her with inconvenient questions.

Poor Aletta! She had indeed gone through the fire since the day of that horrible discovery. What a bright Paradise had she been living in—and now? Her ideal vanished—her idol fallen and shattered—what more did life hold out for her! Ah, to think of it, this man who had been to her as a very god—who was not as other men—who had come into her life to take possession of it, and to whom she had surrendered, a willing, happy captive—for him to deceive her, to make her the victim of such a commonplace, petty form of deception! Surely that discovery had killed her love.

Why had he done it? It was so needless, so commonplace, so cruel! Why had he left her to endure the agony of apprehension on his account for days, for weeks—the while he was safe and sound within a few hours of her, carrying on this intrigue? She would rather—infinitely rather—that that agony had met with its worst and fatal fulfilment, that he had been brought back to her dead. To think that he, her god, could stoop *so* low, could place himself in such a contemptible, pitiable light before her. That look in his face as he met her glance—the startled shame and consternation at being found out—that would haunt her to her dying day.

Why had he ever professed love for herself? And having done so, why—if he had found such profession premature—did he not say so openly? It would have been a cruel insult; still she thought she could have borne it better. She had never grudged May Wenlock her bright physical attractions; indeed, she had recognised them openly and to the full. She remembered how often they had laughed over old Tant' Plessis' favourite saying as to May being the only English girl, and now she concluded that the old lady was not such a fool as they had supposed. Possibly nationality did count in the long run, though, where love was the consideration, Aletta, for her part, could not understand how nationality should make a hairsbreadth of difference. And, again, she thought, she herself was not even decent-looking—well she remembered how that

statement had been received by him to whom it was addressed—whereas this English girl was bounteously dowered by Nature with outward attractiveness, and, after all, she supposed this was what weighed with men. Well, she must get this man out of her mind. With time and determination she supposed it could be done. She must grow to regard him as one who had passed out of her life, as one who was as completely dead to her as though actually so to this world, and must contemplate the fact with equanimity, with utter indifference. Oh yes, that would come—in time.

Would it? This was a very changed Aletta now, and the merry, happy, spontaneous peal of laughter was never now heard—even the faint and ghostly semblance of it but seldom. The sweet, bright, radiant spirits seemed to have found a grave. Yes, on the whole, perhaps it was as well that these relatives of hers were too old, and other people too preoccupied with the movement of events around, to notice the difference.

“Missis, I have something to say,” exclaimed a voice in Dutch. Looking up, Aletta saw a tall, ragged, travel-worn looking yellow man. His hands were trembling as he fumbled with the catch of the garden gate. She came quickly down the garden path to meet him, realising as she did so, that her walk was somewhat unsteady. For in the man who had thus suddenly broken in upon her meditations she recognised Colvin’s Griqua servant, Gert Bondelzwart.

“I have dreadful news for you, Missis,” jerked forth the latter, his voice shaking with excitement. “They are—going to shoot him!”

Aletta could feel her cheeks grow pale and icy.

“Who is going to shoot whom?” her bloodless lips managed to gasp forth.

“Baas Colvin. *Die Boeren mensche*,” he answered. “*Ja*, they have sent in now for the *predikant* to come out to the Baas. He is to be shot to-morrow morning.”

“Oh, good God!”—No, she must not faint, she must act. “Where, Gert?” she went on. “Where?”

“At Krantz Kop, Missis. Gideon Roux’ place—Schoeman’s commando.”

“Has Mynheer started yet? Quick! Say.”

“*Nee*, Missis, not yet. Four burghers came to escort him out, and they have off-saddled while the *predikant* is inspanning. Oh, *mijn lieve Baas—mijn lieve Baas*! What can be done, Missis? What can be done?”

The fellow was actually weeping. Even in the agony of the moment the thought flashed through Aletta’s mind that this man could command such devoted attachment from even a Hottentot.

“What can be done!” she repeated. “This is what you have to do, Gert. Saddle up the *rooi-schimmel* there in the stable. Put a man’s saddle on him, for *you* will have to ride him, and come round with me to the *predikants* house—now at once.”

“*Ja*, Missis.” And Gert departed with willing alacrity. Aletta ran quickly to her room. A couple of minutes sufficed for her to get into such travelling attire as she deemed necessary. But one article of her outfit where with she provided herself would have struck with wild amazement and misgiving anyone who should have seen her. She felt devoutly thankful that the old couple had toddled off to exchange gossip with a neighbour, for not only had she the house to herself, but was spared the vexation and delay of explaining her movements.

Mynheer Lukas Albertus Albertyn, V.D.M. resident minister of the Dutch Reformed Church at Schalkburg, was a fair type of the average country *predikant*, which is to say that he performed all the duties of his office with ordinary conscientiousness, had a keen eye to the customary emoluments of the said office, both in currency and in kind, and was regarded with veneration by the female side of his flock, and the older and less progressive of the male. His political sympathies were all with

his own countrymen and the cause of the Republics, and his outward appearance we know, for we have already made his acquaintance during the opening event of this narrative—at the political meeting gathered to hear the fervid oratory of Andries Botma, to wit.

Mynheer was seated in his dining-room snatching a hasty lunch prior to setting forth upon his errand of mercy. Truth to tell, he was rather a puzzled *predikant* at that moment. What on earth did they want to shoot this Englishman for? He was well known to many of them, was in sympathy with them, too, and moreover was engaged to the daughter of one of their most prominent burghers. Again, it was odd that an English man should send for him at such a time. Englishmen of Colvin Kershaw's class, when they did not hanker after Popery, scoffed at all religion, was Mynheer's experience. There was an English *predikant* at Schalkburg, too—one who set up candles and brazen idols, and called those of the Reformed creed ugly names—why did this Englishman not send for him?

Perhaps because of the candles and idols. And at this point Mynheer's reflections were suddenly and somewhat unceremoniously interrupted, for a quick knock sounded on the door-panel, followed by the entrance of its perpetrator almost before he had time to call out "Come in!"

"Why, Aletta!" he exclaimed. And then the words of welcome died in his throat. This girl was engaged to the Englishman who was to be shot on the following morning!

"I am going out to Krantz Kop with you, Mynheer." she began. "I know you will not refuse me a seat in your trap—remembering"—and her voice was caught back by a sob, which, however, she manfully suppressed.

"But, Aletta, my child, only think. You can be of no use, I fear. Had you not better resign yourself to the will of the Almighty and remain at home and pray—while there is yet time?"

Hollow sounding as this commonplace was—claptrap even—it had asserted itself as a mere veil to mask the speaker's own feelings. Anti-

English or not, he was a good-hearted man, this *predikant*, and then, too, Aletta had been one of the most brilliant and satisfactory of his confirmees. He had a great partiality for her.

"*Nee*, Mynheer," she answered, "the time for mere praying has not yet come. And even if it had, I must *see* him once more. Don't you understand? But if you refuse me, I can still go by myself. I have a horse here, and I will ride all the way, even if I kill the animal."

Her quick, eager decisiveness, the utter misery depicted in her face, showed him that here was no mere weak girl to be reasoned with and advised, but a resourceful, determined woman. Here was a side to Aletta De la Rey's character which was a revelation to the worthy *predikant*.

"Well, well, of course you must go with me, my child," he answered very kindly. "They are nearly ready for us."

"I have just time to write a line to my father," said Aletta, moving to a writing table without ceremony. This was no time for trivial observances she felt. She dashed off a few hasty lines, hasty but emphatic, and thoroughly lucid and to the point. Her father was not very far from the Free State border. By an effort he might arrive in time, and his influence was great.

The *predikant's* Cape cart was already inspanned, and the attendant burghers, who were seated in their saddles, stolidly waiting, saluted her as she appeared. Gert Bondelzwart, too, was all ready.

"Gert," she said in a low tone, "you know your shortest, straightest way. Do not lose a minute, even if you kill the horse. A minute may mean a life remember. No one will attempt to stop you, for I have put that upon the letter which will open a way for you anywhere."

"*Ja*, Missis," said Gert, and away he went. Then she got into the cart beside Mynheer, and they, too, started.

Chapter Thirteen.

At the Price of herself.

Up till now Aletta had asked no questions. She had accepted Gert's assurance, of which the man's obvious distress was sufficient confirmation. Her quick-witted, practical nature had asserted itself. That was no time for questions. She must act, and that promptly. Now, however, that they were well on their way, and covering the ground at the best pace the *predikants* excellent horses could put on, she reckoned the time had come to know more. Why was Colvin Kershaw to be murdered —for it was murder she declared? What had he done?

But Mynheer could not tell her much beyond the bare facts of the case as he knew them, for the burghers who had come to fetch him had been extremely reticent.

"Helping a prisoner to escape. But that is not a thing to shoot a man for," she said. "Oh, I will plead with the Commandant, and you will, too, will you not, Mynheer? Ah, if only father were here, they would not dare do it then. But—who was the prisoner, and did he escape?"

"He escaped—yes. It was Frank Wenlock, and he was to be shot for insulting the President and the patriot cause, and assaulting one of the burghers. He was very violent, and very blasphemous—*Ja*, that I can quite believe, for did not he and some of the worst characters in Schalkburg disturb our service one evening at Nachtmaal time, by ringing the bell which hangs outside, and running away? And he gets drunk and rowdy when he comes into the town. No, he is a bad character. Kershaw ought not to have exchanged his life for the life of such a man as that."

They conversed in English so that Mynheer's native groom might not understand. The burgher escort, too, were mostly close to the vehicle.

So it was for Frank Wenlock's sake that Colvin was throwing away his life, thought Aletta. Mynheer had spoken truly indeed, as to the vast disparity of such an exchange. But—he was May's brother. That explained it all. How Colvin must have loved that other girl, to make the greatest sacrifice that human being can make—for her sake! And the thought had a kind of hardening effect upon Aletta, for she was but a

woman after all, not an angel. Why should she continue to pour out her love upon one who had proved so faithless? Only an hour or two ago she had been telling herself that he was practically dead to her. Yet the moment she had heard that he was soon likely to be actually so, here she was moving Heaven and earth to save him, or, at any rate, to see him once more. Well, she would still do all she could to save him, but she would not see him again, in any event. No, from that resolve she would not swerve.

“But how did he get to Krantz Kop, Mynheer?” she said, in continuation of her thoughts. “He was at Pret— Johannesburg when I saw him last.”

“They say he had come from Cronje’s force, and had seen a lot of the fighting near Kimberley. I don’t know this Schoeman, but Jan Grobbelaar and the others ought to be able to do something for him between them.”

“He *had* been with Cronje’s force, then?” echoed Aletta, as though a new idea had come to her. But it was quickly dashed. He had had plenty of time to have gone there afterwards, after that day when she with her own eyes had seen him making love to May Wenlock. With her own eyes! There was no getting round that fact.

And the hours wore on, bringing these two nearer and nearer to their sad and mournful goal.

Night had fallen upon the burgher camp at Krantz Kop, and most of its inmates, habituated to rising with the sun and retiring with the going down of the same, or not long after it, were in the land of dreams. They were under no fear of surprise, for besides the fact of their sentries being well posted there was a strong commando, with artillery, entrenched below on the outer slope of the mountains, and between them and the far British lines. So the camp slumbered in peace and security.

In one tent, however, a light was still burning, throwing the shadows of men—huge, distorted, grotesque, out upon the canvas. Adrian De la

Rey and his two now boon companions—Gideon Roux and Hermanus Delport—sat within. A bottle of *dop*, the contents of which had nearly reached vanishing point, stood on a waggon box in the centre.

"*Toen*, Adrian!" the last of these was saying. "All is going well now. The Englishman will be out of your way to-morrow for ever—out of all our ways, hey, Gideon? We will come to your wedding soon, *ou' maat*—when we have shot a few more of these cursed English. Do you think Oom Stephanus will be glad to see us?"

"Finish up, and go away and sleep," growled Adrian, pushing the bottle towards him, "or you'll be too shaky for anything in the morning, both of you. You'll miss him at ten paces, like you did before at two hundred."

"*Nee*, *kerel*, *nee*. But that was in the dark," replied Hermanus, grabbing the bottle and his tin pannikin, which rattled against the glass neck in the drunken shakiness of his big hand.

"*Maagtig*! leave some for me, Mani," cried Gideon Roux, striving to wrest the bottle from the other. By the time he had succeeded there was precious little in it, and then this noble pair went forth, rejoicing in anticipation of the act of butchery which was to fall to their lot on the morrow.

Left to himself Adrian let fly an ejaculation of mingled thankfulness and disgust. He had indeed fallen, to have become the boon companion of such as these. They were of the very lowest type—hardly removed from the *bijwoner* class—drunken, coarse brutes at that; but now they were his accomplices in his act of murderous villainy—his tools. His tools? Yes, but they would soon become his masters.

No, that they should not—he told himself. Let to-morrow's deed be done and over, and they would soon see that he was not a man to be trifled with. Reveal the conspiracy? Would they? And if so, who was going to take the word of two such shady characters as they? No, indeed. But after to-morrow he would turn over a new leaf—would make a fresh start.

A fresh start? What sort of a fresh start could be made with murder for its foundation? Yes—murder! Alone there in the silent night, alone with his evil conscience, the words of his victim uttered that morning—uttered, too, with the semblance of a prophecy—came back to him: “So sure as I stand here death will find you. Within three days death will find you out.” He shivered. Men on the brink of the grave were, he had heard tell, at times gifted with supernatural foresight. And then in letters of fire upon the darkness of his thoughts seemed to blaze forth those other words: “They who take the sword shall perish by the sword.” For “sword” read “bullet” Colvin Kershaw was to die in the morning, with several bullets through him. He, Adrian, had murdered him—by means of a fiendish plot, and abundance of false testimony. The next few weeks—months even—would bring with them a series of hard-fought battles, and then should *he* escape?

“Bah!” he exclaimed, pulling himself together. “These are all old women’s tales. I must take my chance, and I dare say it is as good as any other’s. What is the use of a college education if I get the funks over old exploded superstitions only good enough for those two pigs who have just gone out? I wish they had left me something in this bottle all the same,” holding it up, as though still vainly hoping, and then pitching it outside the tent. “Wheels!” listening a moment. “The *predikant* must be arriving. Well, much good may *he* do.”

He could hear the trap draw up at Gideon Roux’ house over the way and the sound of voices, could see a light or two, as the people were outspanning. Then he re-entered his tent, and again his thoughts reverted to the doomed man. “Within three days death will find you out,” the latter had said, and again Adrian’s heart failed him as he remembered how likely of fulfilment this prophecy was. Out yonder in the low country the British were advancing, and now their own forces were lying massed ready to give battle. “Within three days!”

A voice outside, drawing nearer, broke in upon his reverie.

“That is his tent,” it was saying. “We will see if he is there. Adrian!” and with the call the flap of the tent was parted and a bearded face appeared. “I have brought you a visitor, Adrian.”

The man made way for a second person, a tall, female figure wearing a long cloak.

“Aletta!” cried Adrian in amazement, as a throwing back of the hood revealed the features. “Well, and what brings you up here?” he went on in a hard tone, trying to hide the mortification, the jealous rage he was feeling.

“I am here to save you from blood-guilt—to save you from heaping a black and cruel murder on your soul,” answered the girl, her eyes shining bright and stedfast upon his face as she stood confronting him.

“No, no. You have come to save this faithless hound—this lover of yours. But you can’t. We are taking too good care of him for that,” sneered Adrian, stung by jealousy and hatred. No conscience qualms inconvenienced him now.

“But I must say, Aletta,” he went on, “that I see you here with very great surprise. After what you saw—saw with your own eyes mind—at Johannesburg I wonder you can give this fellow a further thought.”

“I will not have him murdered. Listen, Adrian. *You* let Frank Wenlock escape in order to fix the blame upon Colvin and so compass his death. Yes, you ought to be in this place.”

For the life of him the other could not repress the amazement, dismay, guilt, which leaped into his face. Aletta spoke with such confidence, such knowledge. How could she know? he thought. Had Roux or Delport been bragging in their cups? As a matter of fact, however, she was merely shooting a random bolt.

“I think you must have taken leave of your senses, Aletta,” he answered. Then changing his tone, as the sight of her standing before him stirred up all the old jealous rage against this English interloper, he went on: “And what if I did? What if I did? He will be shot anyhow.”

“Adrian, I never thought to have to name you a cowardly murderer—one who kills not openly, but by lies and plots.”

“I don’t mind that. What about this valiant Englishman who sneaks in between you and me, and steals away your love from me, only to make a plaything of it? Yes, for it would have been mine, I know it would. And we should have been happy—ah yes, happy. This English dog! What name have you for such as he? And have you forgotten, Aletta, that little talk we had one day in the garden at Ratels Hoek? I told you then that the man who should come between you and me had better look after himself, whoever he might be. I told you that, did I not? Well, this man has come between you and me, and in less than twelve hours he will be dead!—Dead—do you hear?”

His voice had taken on a sort of growl, and his face was hard and set with hate and passion.

“No, he will not be,” she answered. “For I will save him. Yes—I. This very night I will go and plead with the Commandant. He will listen to me for my father’s sake. If the worst comes to the worst, I will denounce you as the real offender. For I can convince him that you are.”

“No—no. I think not,” replied Adrian jeeringly. “Schoeman is as hard as iron, and you might plead with him until the Day of Judgment for all you would effect. The fact of you being your father’s child would not move him an inch. He would be more likely to say it was a shameful and scandalous thing for a girl to thrust herself forward in such a matter. But if you want to make perfectly sure, come with me and I will take you to his tent now. All the same, by going there you will be destroying any slender chance Colvin might have.”

His words, his confident manner, had their weight with Aletta. It was exceedingly probable she might fail to move the Commandant. She had another card in her hand—a better trump she thought—and she decided to throw it.

“Oh, Adrian, I fear you are right,” she said softly, still talking in English, as they had been doing all the time, by way of precaution against prying ears. “But do not let us quarrel and say hard things to each other. I thought *you* would help me if anybody would.” Her eyes filled, and she hardly seemed able to go on. The sight softened Adrian! who was as

madly, passionately in love with her as ever. “Do help me, Adrian. You are able if anybody is. I want to save his life for the sake of what he has been to me. Listen. I never want to see or speak with him again—only to save his life. Oh, it is horrible—horrible that such things should be done! Help me, Adrian! It is only to save his life, and you from murder.”

Ah, she had come down now from her judgment seat. She was the pleader now. Adrian, whose sombre eyes had never left her face throughout this appeal, was conscious of the wave of a new hope surging through his being.

“You only want to save his life? Never to see or speak with him again?” he repeated.

“Yes—yet no. I must just see him to satisfy myself that he is really alive and safe—but not to speak to him.”

For fully a minute they stood there gazing into each other’s face in the dull light of the tent lantern. Then Adrian said:

“You are right, Aletta. I can help you. I can save his life. But”—and his words were slow and deliberate, and full of meaning—“if I do what is to be my reward?”

She understood, but she did not flinch.

“If you do—if you save his life, if you let him escape, I will marry you, Adrian! That is what you wish, I suppose?”

“Great God, it is!” he answered fervently, his dark face flushing with intense joy. “You will soon forget this Englishman, my darling—you, whom I have loved ever since we were children. But—swear that you will keep this compact, Aletta.”

“I swear it,” she answered, hardly recognising her own voice.

“I will keep my side. I will show you this Englishman alive and free, and then you will marry me?”

“But how—how will you do it?”

“That is my affair—leave that to me. Kiss me, Aletta, to seal our compact.”

“No—no. Not here, not now,” holding up a warning hand. “Do you not see? The light throws our shadows on the tent. I am going now. Remember, I trust to you. No—do not come with me. I prefer to be alone.”

It was only a hundred yards across to Gideon Roux’ house, where Aletta was to sleep. She had sacrificed herself to save the life of the man who had faithlessly made a plaything of her love, and her heart was cold and heavy within her, for she had bought that life at a great price—even the price of herself.

Adrian from his tent door watched her retreating form, and his triumph and delight were unbounded. He had won all along the line; and Aletta had immolated herself all to no purpose. For he had no intention of fulfilling his side of the compact. Even though he won her, his peace and happiness in her possession would never be secure while Colvin Kershaw lived; therefore, Colvin should die at dawn, and in a few days he would satisfy Aletta that he had fulfilled his bargain by showing her that other Kershaw whose likeness had deceived her before, but under circumstances which would preclude speech—even as upon that other occasion.

Chapter Fourteen.

In the Shadow of Doom.

“Curious sort of ‘condemned cell’ this,” whimsically thought Colvin Kershaw to himself, as he gazed around the place wherein he was confined, and whence Frank Wenlock had escaped. For Commandant Schoeman’s promise that he should take the late prisoner’s place had been carried out to the letter, and here he was, shut up within Gideon Roux’ stable, only to leave it to go forth and meet his death.

He had pleaded to be allowed the use of the tent he had hitherto occupied—at any rate, until nightfall. Not many more hours of God's air and sunshine would be his, he had urged. But a decided refusal had been returned—a refusal tinged with characteristic sanctimoniousness. He would be better in confinement. There he would find nothing to distract his thoughts in his preparation for the great and solemn change, he was told, as would be the case if he were where he could see and hear everyday sights and sounds, and others moving about him. So here he was, under a strong guard, locked up within a not very clean or sweet-smelling stable for the few remaining hours of his life.

He looked around. Even then he could hardly realise it. More than once he had been in here before, seeing to his horse, on such occasions as he visited Gideon Roux. The worm-eaten and much bitten crib, the pile of old forage ends, and stamped-in grains of stale mealies underneath it, and a curry-comb and brush, and an old headstall or two hanging from a peg—the forage cutter had been taken away—all looked so home-like and everyday. It seemed incredible, incongruous, even absurd to try and realise that this place was for him as truly a condemned cell as the massive walls and stone floor of the preliminary living tomb in old Newgate or Holloway.

He could hear the sounds of the camp—the hum of harsh voices, and now and then the tramp of a horse. Sounds, too, redolent of peaceful and everyday life—the clucking of poultry, the bleat of a goat, the fretful yelp of a child, and the now monotonous, now querulous voices of women, for the house was but a few score yards away. Yes, it was hard to realise that these four brick walls constituted but the ante-room to the far narrower walls of earth, which by that time to-morrow would have closed round his bloody and lifeless remains.

Was there no prospect of escape? Again and again, while pacing up and down his strange prison, had he calculated his chances. Frank Wenlock had escaped, but only through aid from without. Who would aid him, and if any would, how could they? As for any efforts of his own, of what avail? The window was strongly barred, and two guards, armed with magazine rifles, were posted immediately beneath, as he was reminded by the frequent appearance of a face at the said bars. Two more were

before the door, and as for drilling an aperture in the wall, why he had nothing to do it with. The possibility, too, of tunnelling under the foundation of the further wall occurred to him, and here his eye once more rested on the old curry-comb. But the floor of the place was stone paved, and the noise inevitable to the undertaking would betray him twenty times over, even at night. Moreover, he was only too well aware that in view of the former escape the vigilance of his custodians would be more than doubled.

He remembered Andries Botma's final offer of assistance, and his first appeal had been that the judgment upon himself should be postponed until he had communicated with the man for whom these here professed such profound veneration. But this proposal Schoeman had curtly negatived, nor would he permit any communication whatever with the outside world. Such farewell words as the prisoner had to leave for relatives or friends he might remit to the *predikant*, but even these must be written in the presence of Mynheer himself.

Once the thought of sending for Adrian De la Rey crossed his mind. An appeal to Adrian's superstitions and a solemn warning to him to withdraw from this deliberate act of murder might be effectual. But the idea was scouted as soon as conceived. Adrian had everything to gain by his destruction—and was he likely to throw away the crowning triumph of his plot at the very moment of grasping it? Not in the very least likely, and besides, the barrier of pride rose up against any such course.

And what of Aletta? Never now would he get at the mystery which had dictated that enigmatical message, never now ascertain what had caused her great love to fail and waver in distrust and doubt. That Adrian was behind this, too, he was equally certain. He had not been mistaken in Aletta. Her nature was no ordinary one to be disturbed and shaken by a mere ordinary motive for doubt, however craftily suggested. Yet what was the secret of that doubt? Try, rack his brains as he would, he got no nearer to it than before. Her words were always in his mind: 'Remember, *I saw*,' but never suggesting even the feeblest glimmer of explanation. What had she seen—when, where, and how? Nothing that regarded him. On that point his conscience was perfectly clear. Since they had exchanged their mutual love vows his conscience, as towards her, was

as clear as the sky above them at that moment. Yes, looking back now upon those long and happy months, he realised that the latter end of his life, at any rate, had contained for him all that was worth living for. And now that he had touched its outer edge, a strange philosophical feeling of satisfaction that she, at any rate, would not have her life spoiled by his memory, if she had already learned to distrust him, came over him—a satisfaction that well-nigh quenched the bitterness and disillusioning that she had done so. Almost, but not quite—for, after all, he was but human.

The hours wore on. His guards thrust food and drink—of the coarsest description—into his prison, and retired without a word, carefully relocking the door. It was evident that they were under very special orders, and would answer no questions. He was left once more to his own thoughts.

Colvin stood in no greater fear of death than most other men who have more than once seen it very near; yet that helpless sense of being shut up, to meet it in cold blood at a given time, was a trifle creepy and unnerving. More than once, in his dreams, he had been under sentence of death, had even come to the steps of the scaffold, and each time had seemed every bit as realistic as the last, or, if possible, more so. Was this, too, a dream? Should he wake up directly and find himself back again at Pretoria, or at Ratels Hoek, or his own farm? He looked around. Was he really awake—or was this, too, only another nightmare? Ah no. It was very real.

About his worldly affairs he felt but scant anxiety. They were all in order. He was a fairly methodical man, and before leaving for the theatre of battle and hourly risk he had seen to all that. After all, some would be the gainers by his end—some perhaps who needed to be, very sorely—some who would even in consequence remember him with a little kindness and gratitude. Yet there was but little of the last in this world, he reflected, tolerantly cynical.

The sun dropped, and the shadows of evening darkened his place of confinement, and then with the deepening gloom a feeling of great desolation came over the man, a feeling of forsakenness, and that never again would his ears receive a word of sympathy or friendship, let alone

love. He hungered for such then. It was the bitterest moment he had known yet. Seated there on an old wheelbarrow in the close, fusty smelling stable, with the long night before him, he well-nigh regretted that he had been allowed the extension of time. It would all have been over by now. He would have sunk to rest with the evening's sun. Then upon the black gloom of his mind came the consciousness of approaching voices —then the rattle and rasping of the padlock, and the door was opened. One of the guards entered, ushering in three men. He was bearing, moreover, a lantern and a chair, which having set down, he retired.

By the somewhat dingy light of the lantern Colvin recognised his visitors: Schoeman, Jan Grobbelaar, and the *predikant*. He greeted the last-named, with whom he was already acquainted. Then a thrill of hope went through his heart. Had they thought better of it and were here to offer him deliverance?

"We have given your case every consideration, nephew," began the Commandant in his dry, emotionless, wooden tones. "You have professed yourself one of us, and by way of proving yourself to be so have committed the act of a traitor, in that you have set one of our enemies at large."

"Pardon me, Mynheer Commandant," interrupted Colvin. "I have done no such thing. I deny it here on the brink of the grave. I will be candid enough to say that I might have done so had it been in my power. But you know perfectly well it was not."

"You have committed the act of a traitor," went on Schoeman, ignoring the protest as completely as though the other had not spoken, "and therefore you have been adjudged to meet a traitor's doom. But our good brother Mynheer Grobbelaar here and others have pleaded for you, and so we have decided to remit that judgment upon you, subject to one condition. You are to have a chance of proving your good faith. You are to undertake to serve in arms with the Republican forces where and whenever required, until it shall please the good God to bring this cruel and unrighteous war to an end and give victory unto those who serve Him. And to this end you will sign this declaration."

Colvin took the paper, and by the light of the lantern closely scanned it—not without eagerness. It was written in Dutch and contained an oath of submission to the South African Republics and an undertaking to bear arms on their behalf even as Schoeman had set forward.

“And if I sign this your sentence is not to be carried out, Mynheer Commandant?” he said quickly.

“In a word, this is the price of my life?”

“That is so,” said Schoeman.

“Then I refuse the conditions. I will not sign it. I refuse to draw trigger on my own countrymen!”

“*Toen*, Colvin. Sign it, man. Sign it!” broke in Swaart Jan eagerly. “We don’t want you to be shot, *kerel*.”

“Thanks, Oom Jan. I don’t believe *you* do. But I can subscribe to no such declaration, be the consequences what they may.”

Then Jan Grobbelaar, who was really well disposed towards the prisoner, became voluble. Why would he persist in throwing away his life in that foolish manner? He was one with them now, why not throw in his lot with them openly? It did not matter in the long run. The Republics were bound to win, since God and justice were on their side—and so on, and so on. All in vain.

“It is of no use, Oom Jan. I’m grateful to you all the same. But under no circumstances whatever can I consent to fire on my own countrymen.”

The little man was really distressed, and was pouring forth his volubility once more. But Schoeman interrupted.

“Then you refuse the chance we offer you?”

“On those terms—absolutely.”

“Be it so. Your blood be upon your own head. And now we will leave

you with Mynheer, for your hours are but few indeed."

And the two went out—Swaart Jan shaking his head lugubriously over the astonishing obstinacy of the man he would fain befriend.

Colvin was not one of those who sneer at religion, though his views upon the subject were broad enough to have earned the thorough disapproval of the professors of more dogmatic creeds. As we have already hinted, his motive in sending for the *predikant* was primarily one of policy, partly in order to gain time, partly to placate those in whose hands he was. Yet now that Mynheer had come he was not sorry, in that he had someone to talk to, and, as we have said, his loneliness had been getting terribly upon his nerves. So he listened while *the predikant* read some Scripture and said a few prayers, and when the latter asked him if he forgave those at whose door lay his death, he answered that he had no feeling against them; that if they were doing him to death unjustly—well, he supposed he had done things to other people some time or other in his life, which they didn't like, and this might go as a set-off against such. Adrian De la Rey was the hardest nut to crack, but, on the other hand, he had a grievance which he, Colvin, ought to be the first person to make allowances for. No—he didn't think he wanted Adrian to come to grief, although he had said so that morning. It didn't matter to himself anyhow.

Then he wrote some final letters relating to his worldly affairs, the *predikant* having obtained for him, at some difficulty, the requisite materials. He left a few lines for Stephanus De la Rey, and more than a few for Aletta. Even then of the girl's presence in the camp Mynheer Albertyn did not inform him, and the reason lay in Aletta's own wish. She had decided not to see him. She had saved him—as she thought—and it were better not to see him. It was part of the bargain with Adrian, likewise it would bring back all too forcibly the last time she had seen him.

"Well, Mynheer," said Colvin at length, "now we have put all that straight we can chat for a little. It seems rather selfish keeping you up all night like this, and it was very good of you to come. You won't regret it either. But you don't have to sit up every night with a poor devil who's going to be shot at sunrise anyhow."

This cheerful calmness under the circumstances was clean outside the *predikant's* experience. He felt as though he must be dreaming. It was unreal. Here was a man whose life had reached the limits of a few hours, who was to be led forth to die in cold blood, in the full glow of his health and strength, yet chatting away as unconcernedly as if he were at home in his own house. Jesting, too, for Colvin had touched on the comic element, not forgetting to entertain Mynheer with the joke about old Tant' Plessis and Calvinus. So the night wore on.

The doomed man slept at last, slumbering away the fast waning hours that remained to him of life.

Chapter Fifteen.

Love’s Triumph.

The sun had mounted above the eastern end of the Wildschutsberg, and now an arrowy beam, sweeping down from the gilded crags, pierced like a searchlight the cold grey mists of early dawn.

The burgher camp was astir, roused by no bugle call or roll of drum; opening the day by no parade of flashing accoutrements or inspection of arms. Yet every unit in that force was alert and ready, prepared to receive the orders of the day and act upon them with unparalleled celerity and absence of fuss.

This morning a solemn and awed tone seems to pervade the camp, a demeanour perhaps to be explained by the approach of a great and terrible battle; yet not altogether, for most of these men have been through such and it has not so affected them. There is, however, another explanation, for among the first of the orders of the day is that decreeing the taking of the life of Colvin Kershaw.

The life of one man! But they have counted their own dead by dozens already in battle, those of the enemy too. Yet the anticipation of the extinction of this one man is sufficient to move the whole camp to awe. Ah! but there it is. The excitement of the strife is wanting: the combative instinct dashed by the loftier motive of patriotism. This man is to be done to death in cold blood.

Beyond Gideon Roux’ homestead, on the side furthest from the tents, is an open space, backed by the steep slope of the hillside. Here the whole camp is collected. The burghers, all armed, are standing in two great lines, not in any order except that the ground between these lines is kept rigidly clear for about twenty yards of width, and the reason thereof is now apparent. The doomed man, escorted by half a dozen guards with loaded rifles, is drawing near.

Colvin’s demeanour is calm and self-possessed, but entirely free

from bravado or swagger. His clear searching eyes wander quickly over the assemblage, and a faint, momentary surprise lights them as he notices the presence of a few women among this crowd of armed men. They are placed, too, at the further end, quite close to where he himself shall stand.

As he enters the avenue thus left open for him, every head is bared. He lifts his own hat in acknowledgment of this salutation, and proceeds to the place pointed out, which is marked by a *reim* placed on the ground. It is the line which he is to toe. The *predikant* is not beside him, in compliance with his own wish.

As he stands facing his slayers, a dead hush of silence is upon the crowd. Through it rises the voice of Commandant Schoeman, hard, emotionless, yet crisp and clear.

“Even now, Colvin Kershaw, even now, as you stand upon the brink of your grave and are about to pass into the presence of Almighty God, even now we have decided to offer you one more chance. Will you sign and abide by the declaration which was tendered you last night?”

“I refused to purchase my life at such a price last night, Mynheer Commandant, and I refuse again. Here, as you say, upon the brink of my grave, I will die rather than draw trigger on my own countrymen. My sympathies with the Republics and their cause are great, as many here know. But I will not fight against my own countrymen.”

The tone was firm, the answer clear and audible to every soul there present, and the effect thereof did not differ greatly. Some were inclined to resent what they called the obstinacy of the prisoner, but to the minds of most the words carried increased respect.

“One thing more I desire to say,” went on Colvin, holding up his hand as he noticed that the Commandant was about to give the signal. “Here, on the brink of the grave, I solemnly repeat I am being put to death for an act which I never committed. I do not say I would not have committed it had opportunity afforded, for the man was my friend. But I did not. I die the victim of false swearing.”

“You have refused our mercy, even at the twelfth hour,” said Schoeman. “So be it.”

He made a signal. Three men stepped forward, each slapping a cartridge into his rifle, confronting the doomed one at about twenty paces. In that dread and critical moment Colvin recognised two of them—Gideon Roux and Hermanus Delport. The third was unknown to him.

“Where is Adrian De la Rey?” he said, in a tone of good-humoured satire. “*He* should have been the third. It would have made the plot more complete.”

Up went the three rifles to the shoulder, then down again immediately. A gasp of horror arose—of dismay, amazement, consternation. Something had happened.

The doomed man no longer stood alone. Between him and the deadly, levelled weapons—screening him from them—stood a tall female figure, whose graceful lines were shrouded by a long cloak. Just a fraction of a second more, and the murderous bullets would have transpierced two bodies instead of one.

Among the onlookers the thrill of horror and amazement deepened as the hood was thrown back, revealing the head and features of the wearer, who was known to many of them. The countenance of the doomed man lighted up with a glow of such unutterable affection as to leave room for no other emotion.

“Aletta! So you have come to take leave of me!” he said. “My darling one, and yet the sight of you once more adds a hundredfold to the bitterness of death.”

“Of death? No, no, you shall not die, unless we both do. Not a bullet shall reach you that does not go through me first.”

She clung to him in such wise as to render the truth of her words obvious. The appointed executioners had lowered their weapons and stood irresolute, as though looking for orders.

“Remove her!” cried Commandant Schoeman.

But nobody seemed over eager to obey. Then, after a hurried consultation with three or four of his subordinate commanders, he went on:

“You will have a respite of exactly five minutes, Kershaw. Not one second longer.”

“We have but a short time, Aletta,” resumed Colvin, in English and a low tone. “Tell me quickly—why did you write that strange message —‘Remember—*I saw*’? What did it mean? What did you see?”

“Ah, let us forget that. Love—love! That is as nothing now. You shall not die.”

“Tell me—tell me! Time is flying,” he urged.

Quickly she told him—how Adrian had warned her that she was being deceived; had proved it to her through the agency of her own eyesight, that day at Johannesburg.

“Adrian was lying. Yet there must be somebody bearing a wonderful likeness to me. Look me in the eyes, Aletta. Here at the grave’s edge I tell you, this story is absolutely untrue. I went straight to Cronje’s column, and did not even leave the train at Johannesburg. Afterwards you will learn this for yourself. Sweetheart, I have never deceived you in word or deed. Do you believe me now?”

“Implicitly! Oh love, love! I am not fit to live after you, and I will not. Say you forgive me!”

Though they could neither hear nor understand what was said, there was such a wail of despair and loss in her tone as to reach the hearts of the bystanders. Some turned away with wet eyes and a lump in their throats. One or two actually blubbered.

“Forgive?” he repeated.

Only the one word—he too seemed choked for utterance. But it conveyed all—all she would fain have heard. In the face of the whole assembly, she drew down his head, and pressed her lips to his in one long despairing kiss. One or two more of the burghers turned away and blubbered aloud.

“The time has gone,” said Schoeman, in his iron voice. But he might as well not have spoken for all the effect his words seemed to have on the two prominent figures in this heart-rending drama. They were locked in each other’s embrace, as though alone in the world together.

“Remove her!” repeated the pitiless tones. “It is a scandal for a woman to make such a scene as this, and at such a time. Why are my orders not obeyed?”

“She is the daughter of one of our most respected neighbours, Commandant,” growled a burgher from the Sneeuw River. “We cannot lay hands on her.”

“*Ja*, *Ja*. That is true,” echoed several voices.

Schoeman was nonplussed. As Aletta had said, the prisoner could only be shot at the price of her life! Then a bright idea struck him.

“You have shown yourself a brave man hitherto, Kershaw,” he called out. “Will you now show yourself a coward and shield yourself behind a woman? If not, put her away from you and stand forth.”

“You hear what he says, Aletta? One more good-bye kiss, my very own, and then leave me. Ah God—how are we to part like this?”

“We will not part. If they shoot you they shall shoot me. But—they dare not, the cowards. They dare not. See!”

Now her tone rang hard and steely. Still clinging to him, so that he could not move from her side without using force, and yet leaving herself the freedom of her right hand, she had drawn a revolver—a very nasty looking and business-like one at that.

“Now come, brave burghers,” she cried. “Advance. The first man who makes a move on us I will shoot—will shoot dead. Then the next, and the next, and then myself. As God is in Heaven above I will do this.”

Not a move was made. They stared at each other stupidly, this crowd of armed men. She would be every bit as good as her word—the flash of her eyes told them so much, for it was that of a tigress when her cubs are threatened. Things were at a deadlock.

“The paper, Commandant! Ask him if he will sign the paper now,” was one of the suggestions thrown out.

“*Ja, ja*. He will sign it now,” cried several voices. “The paper! The paper!”

But Commandant Schoeman was in a cold, quiet sort of rage. He was being set at defiance in the face of his whole command, and that by a girl. He rejected this way out of the difficulty—rejected it curtly and uncompromisingly.

“Remove her,” he said again.

One or two of the older men stepped forward, intending to try the effect of remonstrance. But the revolver covered them instantly, aimed low, they noted, and there was such a deadly gleam in Aletta’s eyes that they stopped short and retired. Schoeman was white with rage. But before he could decide on what to do next, a diversion occurred, unlooked for and startling.

The sound of many hoofs clattering up the road over beyond the *nek* was borne to their ears. Whoever the new arrivals were, they were advancing at a furious gallop. The cry went up that the English were upon them, and for a moment the assembly was in a state of tumult.

Only for a moment, though. Schoeman, as cool and brave a man as ever lived, quelled the confusion by a word or two. For his ears had caught the challenge of their own vedette on the ridge, and the answer thereto in the *taal*. These were not enemies, he decided.

A few moments more a score of horsemen appeared on the *nek*, and rode straight into their midst without drawing rein. A largely built man with a full brown beard was riding at their head.

"*Maagtig*! It is Stephanus De la Rey!" was muttered from mouth to mouth. Aletta heard it, at the same time that she recognised her father.

"We are safe, sweetheart," she murmured, beginning to tremble now that danger was over, as she supposed. "I said you should not die. Yes, God is good. We are safe now."

But those there assembled had not reached the limit of their surprises for that day yet. The party consisted of about a score of armed Boers who had volunteered to accompany Stephanus De la Rey to Schoeman's camp, but riding beside Stephanus was one who was not a Boer, being none other than Frank Wenlock, the escaped prisoner.

The burghers crowded around the new arrivals, the general feeling being that of intense relief. For now that the original offender was recaptured, there was no need to shoot this other.

"Where was he caught? Who captured him?" were some of the questions showered upon the party.

"Nobody captured me," replied Frank, in a loud clear voice. "I have come in of my own accord, because I heard—no matter how—that Colvin was to be shot instead of me. So I came back as quickly as I could, and seem to be only just in time."

"Is that true, brother De la Rey?" said Schoeman.

Stephanus assured them it was. Frank had joined him entirely of his own accord.

"You were to have been shot at sunrise yesterday morning, and it is past sunrise this morning," went on Schoeman, turning to Frank. "It is you or the man yonder. Are you prepared to undergo our judgment on you?"

"Why, of course," answered Frank bravely. "I am not going to allow

Colvin to die in my place. Englishmen don't do that sort of thing."

"Guard him," said Schoeman. "In ten minutes, be ready."

Chapter Sixteen.

The Falling of the Scales.

At the end of the prescribed time Frank Wenlock was marched before the Commandant. His demeanour was very different now to what it had been upon the last occasion. All the swagger and aggressiveness had disappeared. His manner was quiet without subserviency.

Schoeman read him a long lecture upon his former shameful conduct and the magnanimity of the burghers of the Republics. Did he wish to apologise for his behaviour and the insulting references he had made to the President?

"Certainly, Mynheer Commandant," replied Frank. "I'm a rough and ready harum-scarum sort of a chap, and I must have said some rather beastly things about people you all think a lot of. Well, I am sorry."

"That is good," said Schoeman. "Mynheer De la Rey has been pleading for you, and some others who have known you at home. Their esteemed words, and remembering that you are little more than a foolish boy, and the only son of your widowed mother, have decided us to spare the life which you had forfeited. But there are two courses, one of which we must exact from you—to be sent to Bloemfontein as an ordinary prisoner of war, or to pledge yourself not to serve against the Republics or those in arms on their behalf. In which case you may go free. Which do you choose?"

Frank's face clouded a moment, wherein is a paradox. A moment ago he was expecting immediate death—now he was disappointed because denied the opportunity of meeting it every day or so.

"Choose your freedom, man," said Stephanus kindly. "Remember

you have a mother to take care of."

"Very well. I will give you the pledge, Mynheer Commandant," Frank answered. "But of course you will not have Colvin shot?"

"Under the circumstances, no," was the cold reply.

"Hooroosh! You are gentlemen, you are, all of you!" cried Frank, his exuberance getting the better of him. "Wait till we meet in Schalkburg again. We'll drink old Pritchett's bar dry. But, now for Colvin."

The latter had not moved from the spot on which he had stood to meet his death, and Aletta had not moved from him. She still held the revolver in her right hand, keeping jealous watch on the possibility of a suspicious move towards them. But for the moment the attention of everybody was riveted in the other direction. Not until her father approached her alone did she begin to feel reassured.

"Aletta, my child, you may put away that plaything," called out Stephanus. "Colvin is safe now. I have Schoeman's word for that. Besides, I am able to ensure his safety myself."

"Aletta has saved me, Stephanus," answered Colvin as they exchanged a great handgrip. "Look at this child of yours. But for her you would have been here just ten minutes too late. They had actually levelled the rifles when Aletta deliberately shielded me with herself. It just turned on the merest hairsbreadth of a pressure on the trigger. Look at her, Stephanus, and you will be looking on the bravest, sweetest, truest woman that ever brightened God's world, and be as proud, to your dying day, that she is your own daughter as I am that she is to be my wife."

"Er—I say, Colvin, old chap—how are you? I don't want to intrude—only just to wring your flipper." And Frank Wenlock, looking from one to the other, edged in, and performed that somewhat syllogistically described feat with a will. "It wasn't my fault, Miss De la Rey," he exclaimed. "I hadn't the ghost of an idea they'd dream of meaning to shoot him till I heard it—well, by accident. When he got me safe off the premises yonder, he swore again and again that he wasn't running the

slightest risk himself—that he stood too much in with them—and so on. Otherwise I wouldn't have budged. I have my faults, but I wouldn't have allowed another fellow to get shot instead of me, and that's why I came back now."

"Look here, Frank," said Colvin, "would you mind explaining precisely what on earth you are talking about?"

"Oh, come, that's rather too good. Ain't I talking about the night before last, when I was going to be shot in a few hours, and you came in and turned me loose. Eh?"

"Then you are talking of what never took place. As sure as I stand here, the last time I saw you was when you were playing the fool there in front of Schoeman and the rest, simply committing suicide like the consummate ass you were, and always have been. As for turning you loose, I couldn't have done so even if I'd wanted to. Old Schoeman took jolly good care of that by putting me under arrest myself."

Frank stared, whistled, then shook his head.

"All I can say is then, that if it wasn't you, it was your bally ghost. That's all," he said.

"Well, you'd better not talk about it any more, Frank," said Stephanus. "Don't you see, man? It's a thing to forget now."

"Oh—um—ah—of course, I see," assented Frank readily.

"That may be, Stephanus," said Colvin, "but I have assured the whole of this crowd upon my honour that I had no more to do with Frank's escape than the man in the moon. And no more I had."

"No—no—of course not, old chap," cheerfully rejoined Frank, who didn't believe a word of the other's denial. "Well, after all, what's the odds now? All's well that ends well."

"There's some mystery behind all this," said Colvin in a low tone to himself. But Aletta heard it. And then her own doubts came back to her.

What if they had all been mistaken? There was evidently someone about who bore an extraordinary likeness to Colvin. Her own eyes had deceived her once. Yes, it was extraordinary.

"*Mijn Baas! Mijn lieve Baas*!"

Just outside the group stood Gert Bondelzwart. He had watched his opportunity to sidle up, for in a Boer laager native servants were not wont to move about with the same free and independent swagger as, say, in the suburbs of Cape Town. Colvin turned:

"Hullo, Gert, how did you get here?"

"Ah!" cried Stephanus, "you have to thank this rascal that I am here at all, Colvin. He it was who brought Aletta's note telling me of the fix you were in, and killed one of my best horses in doing so, but that's nothing. The wonder to me is he got through at all."

"*Ja*, *Baas*. It was a wonder," put in the Griqua. "Twice I had a volley fired at me, but I knew what delay would mean, so I wouldn't stop. Ah, well, we came in time—we came in time. And the *klein missis* told me it didn't matter if I killed the horse if only we did that."

"Gert, you are a fine fellow, and I won't forget in a hurry," said Colvin, turning a very kindly glance upon his faithful servitor. "Why, what is all this about?"

For a new diversion had occurred. Was there to be no end to the events of that day? A party of burghers were riding up, but—Great Heaven! what was this? What did it mean? Who was that in their midst? Colvin Kershaw? Yet, there stood Colvin Kershaw. But—here he was too! Not a face in that crowd but was agape with wild amaze. What on earth did it mean? Was this man the devil in disguise, they asked, that he could be present in two bodies at the same time? Even the stolid philosophical Dutch nature was stirred to the core, as in breathless excitement the burghers awaited the explanation of the new arrivals with this exact replica of Colvin Kershaw in their midst.

The latter had dismounted with the rest, and, pulling out his pipe, began to fill it. Those looking on could not fail to note that in manner, in every movement, the resemblance between the two men was faultless. He, for his part, not yet having descried his duplicate, was lazily wondering what the deuce all these Dutchmen were looking so scared about.

Aletta, from where she stood, could see the stranger, and a perfect maze of bewilderment flitted across her countenance as she gazed at him. Then a sudden light leaped into her eyes.

“Colvin,” she murmured. “Is that your twin brother?”

“N-no. I have a half-brother somewhere in the world, last heard of in Vancouver. I haven’t seen him for years, but he wasn’t like me then. But brother or not, Aletta, I have an idea we have run my ‘double’ to earth at last.”

“I think so too—darling,” she whispered.

The stranger’s glance had now swept round to where they stood. He gave a start and a whistle of surprise; then approached them.

“I believe I must have struck the real Colvin at last,” he began, without ceremony. Here, again, standing together as they were, the height, the features, even the voices of the two men, were inimitably alike. Yet Aletta, with the eyes of love, and hearing sharpened by its spell, could detect a difference. Nobody else could, however.

“Yes, that is my name,” replied Colvin. “But—you are not Kenneth, surely?”

“I am, though. Look here,” fishing out two or three directed envelopes. “But—I’m rather glad to run into you at last. People are always hailing me as ‘Colvin,’ and abusing me for not wanting to know them again—you know—when I tell them I’m somebody else. It’s becoming a bore.”

“Well, Kenneth. I’m glad to see you, too, after all these years. You

shall tell me about yourself by-and-by. But, first of all, would you mind telling me one thing. Have you been staying in Johannesburg some little while of late?”

“Rather—only just left it. Why? Oh, I suppose people have been mistaking me for you, is that it? Has its awkward sides sometimes, hasn’t it?”

“It easily may have,” replied Colvin, with a meaning in his tone, which one, at any rate, standing beside him thoroughly grasped.

“The Commandant wants you. Come!”

Kenneth Kershaw turned leisurely. Two armed burghers stood waiting.

“Oh, all right, I was forgetting. So-long, Colvin. We’ll have a great pow-pow by-and-by.”

They watched his retreating form.

“I think the mystery is for ever clear now, sweetheart,” said Colvin.

But Aletta could not speak. She could only press his arm in silence. All the agony she had suffered came back to her, as in a wave.

“I know what you are thinking, my darling one,” he went on softly. “But I don’t wonder you were taken in by the likeness. It is quite the most remarkable thing I ever saw.”

“Yet, I doubted you. *You*!”

“Love, think no more of that. Have you not really and truly drawn me out of the very jaws of death this morning? Ah! but our sky is indeed clear—dazzlingly clear now.”

“Tell me about this half-brother of yours, Colvin,” said Aletta presently. “Had you no idea he was in this country?”

“None whatever. For years we had lost sight of each other. The fact is, Aletta, I may as well tell you—though I wouldn’t anybody else—but the chap was rather a bad bargain—on two occasions, indeed, only escaped by the skin of his teeth from coming to mortal grief. I would even bet something he’ll come down on me to help him now, and if it’ll do him any good I will. But he may have improved by now. Some of us do with time, you know.”

It turned out even as Colvin had said. When Kenneth rejoined him for a little talk apart—after his interview with the Commandant—he spoke of his own affairs. He had been very much of a rolling stone, he explained, and now he wanted to settle down. He was going to turn over a new leaf entirely. Would Colvin help him a little?

The latter laughed drily.

“Whom are you going to settle down *with*, Kenneth?” he asked.

“The sweetest, prettiest, dearest little girl in the world.” (“That of course,” murmured the listener). “You know her, Colvin. It was thanks to my likeness to you that I did.”

“Name?”

“May Wenlock.”

“So? Do you know, Kenneth, this infernal likeness has put me to very serious inconvenience, and came within an ace of costing me my life? I suppose it was you who let out Frank Wenlock.”

“Of course it was. But don’t give it away.”

“No—no. But how did you manage to get here at all to do it without being spotted?”

“Oh, Adrian De la Rey fixed up all that. Of course I had no notion you were anywhere around.”

“I see,” said Colvin, on whom the whole ingenuity of the plot now

flashed. All these witnesses against him were not perjured, then. They had been genuinely deceived. The other, watching him, had no intention of giving away his own share, direct or indirect, in the transaction, or his partnership with Adrian in that other matter. In the course of his somewhat eventful and very wandering life Kenneth Kershaw had never found overmuch scruple a paying commodity.

“Well, Kenneth, I’ll do what I can for you,” went on Colvin, “but I’m afraid it won’t be much. And the feet is I’m just taking on an ‘unlimited liability’ myself.”

“Yes, so I concluded just now, from appearances. Well, Colvin, I congratulate you heartily.”

They talked a little about money matters, and then Kenneth broke out:

“Hang it, Colvin; you are a good chap after all. I had always somehow figured you as a priggish and cautious and miserly sort, which was the secret of your luck; but I don’t believe there’s a man jack on earth who would have been as splendid and as generous under the circumstances.”

Colvin’s face softened. “Oh, it’s all right, old man. Don’t get making a speech,” he said. “I wish I could do more, but, as you see, I can’t.”

“See! Rather. And now, look here. I believe I am the bearer of some pretty good news. I didn’t tell you at first, because I wanted to see what sort of chap you were. Not, mind you,” he added, somewhat vehemently, “that I have any interested motive now, not a bit of it. Well—read that—and that.”

Fumbling in his pocket-book, he got out some slips of paper. They were press cuttings from English newspapers, and bore dates of about six weeks previously:

“By the death of Sir Charles Kershaw, Bart, of Slatterton Regis, Dorset, and Terracombe, Devon, which took place suddenly the day

before yesterday, the title and both properties, together with considerable sums in personalty, devolve upon his next-of-kin, Mr Colvin Kershaw, at present believed to be in the Transvaal."

In substance the notices were alike, albeit somewhat different in wording. Colvin reflected for a moment. Then he said:

"I suppose there's no mistake. It's rather sooner than I expected, Kenneth, but of course I did expect it sooner or later. I am glad enough for its emoluments, but personally I don't care about the title. I fancy I shall grow awfully sick of hearing every cad call me by my Christian name. I say, though, Kenneth, we shall be able now to make a bigger thing of that scheme of ours, eh?"

"By Jove, you are a good chap, Colvin," burst forth the other, understanding his meaning. But he did not let candour carry him far enough to own to the daring scheme he had formed for personating Colvin in the event of the fortune of war going against the latter, as it had so nearly and fatally done. Like scruple, candour was not always a paying commodity.

Colvin, for his part, was thinking with heartfelt gratitude and love, what a bright future he had to lay before Aletta. Kenneth, for his, was thinking, with a glow of satisfaction, that he was going to be very happy with May Wenlock, under vastly improved circumstances, and that such a state of things was, after all, much more satisfactory than life on a far larger scale, but hampered with the recollection of a great deed of villainy, and the daily chances of detection as a fraud and impostor liable to the tender mercies of the criminal law.

Chapter Seventeen.

Conclusion.

Midnight.

The wind, singing in fitful puffs athwart the coarse grass belts which

spring from the stony side of ridge or kopje, alone breaks the dead eerie silence, for the ordinary voices of the night, the cry of bird and beast, are stilled. Wild animate Nature has no place here now. The iron roar of the strife of man, the bellowing, crackling death message from man to man, spouting from steel throats, has driven away all such.

Silent enough now are the bleak, stony hillsides, albeit the day through they have been speaking, and their voice has been winged with death. Silent enough, too, are the men crouching here in long rows, cool, patient, alert; for on the success or failure of their strategy depends triumph or disaster and death. Silent as they are, every faculty is awake, ears open for the smallest sound, eyes strained through the far gloom where lies the British camp.

Hour upon hour has gone by like this, but most of these are men who live the life of the veldt, whose trained eyesight is well-nigh cat-like on such a night as this. They have measured the ground, too, and so disposed matters that they know within a yard and to a minute exactly where and when to open fire upon the advancing British whom their trustworthy emissaries shall guide into sure and wholesale destruction.

Adrian De la Rey, lying there in the darkness, is waiting and longing, as no other, for the deadly work to begin. How he will pour lead into these hated English, how every life taken shall be as the life of his hated English rival! No quarter shall any receive from his hand when the slaughter begins. In the darkness and wild confusion none will see, and if they do, what matter? He will shoot down these cursed *rooineks* like springbuck, he tells himself, even though they should bellow for mercy.

He has heard of the well-nigh miraculous escape of that rival, and the inopportune appearance of his own accomplice; has heard of it, not witnessed it, because he had sought to be despatched on outpost duty in the early hours of that morning which was to have brought his rival’s death. Well, he would console himself with the thought that at any rate he had won Aletta. She had given him her promise, and he knew her well enough to be sure she would keep it. But what of his side of the bargain unfulfilled? He had thought of that. He would persuade her that the firing was to be a sham, and that the firing party were using blank cartridge. He

could easily induce Roux and Delport to swear to this. Yet, it was inconvenient that Aletta had mustered up the courage to act as she had done. He ought not to have overlooked such a contingency. Still, she could not go back upon her promise.

Then, in the darkness, those words return to him—words spoken by his victim on the very threshold of the tomb. “Within three days will death find you.” Words and tone alike appealed to the superstitious side of his nature then, and the effect remains now. Perhaps, however, the fact of his intended victim having escaped death might have robbed the forecast of its prophetic nature.

A barely audible whisper from his next door neighbour, and then but one thought alone can find place in Adrian’s mind. The moment has come. Gripping his Mauser in fierce, eager delight, he brings it forward on to the rest which he has already arranged for it. Pitch dark as it is, he knows to a yard where the first bullet will strike. At the same time, ever so faint a spark away in the blackness catches his glance and the glance of many another. It might be the friction of metal—momentary and accidental—upon a stone lying on the slope, or it might be a signal.

Soon a stealthy sound reaches each listening ear—the sound of footsteps drawing near in the darkness.

Nearer—nearer—and then— The whole ridge bursts into a line of flame and a deafening crackle as of a mighty hailstorm upon myriad iron roofs. Yet, great in volume as it is, not so great as to drown the wild, ringing British cheer as the khaki-clad figures, dimly visible in the unceasing flash of musketry, come surging up the slope, leaping, stumbling, falling, dropping down suddenly, only to spring up again and press on, the dreaded bayonet fixed, for the world-renowned charge before which nothing can stand. But the grim dwellers in these wild wastes are not to be turned so easily. A kopje hard by, silent hitherto, is now ringed with flame, and, caught in this terrible crossfire, the intrepid assailants are literally mown down, and for a few moments the slaughter is terrific.

Adrian De la Rey, lying in his shelter, is pouring in his shots—cool,

well-directed and telling. The expression of hate and blood-lust upon his set features is well-nigh devilish; yet his mind preserves a murderous coolness, as he watches every chance, and never fails to take it. But he is in the very forefront of the fray, and in the wild confusion a knot of desperate British, not hearing, or disregarding, the “retire,” have charged with irresistible dash headlong on to his position. Their wild slogan is in his ears, and in the ears of those beside him. The points of the deadly bayonets gleam in the sheeting flashes, and then—and then—with the hard sickening pang which wrenches his very life away—he discharges his Mauser full in the face of the tall soldier, who topples heavily back with a hole through his brain—and Briton and Boer lie feet to feet—facing each other as they fell.

Morning light—a truce—white flags here and there—the Red Cross symbol everywhere. The hillsides strewn with dead and dying and wounded, and up yonder, in their strongly entrenched laager in the background, Commandant Schoeman and the grim Republican leaders are viewing their many prisoners, impassive, laconic, and manifesting neither surprise nor elation over the efficiency of the trap so carefully laid for the discomfiture of a respected and brave enemy.

Below, on the ridge, Adrian De la Rey is lying—lying where he fell, the bayonet which had let out his life in a great gaping gash resting across his body as it had fallen from the dying grip of the soldier—his dead, rigid face staring upward to the sky.

Ratels Hoek again, peaceful and prosperous—the blue smoke curling up from its chimneys, the flocks and herds scattered over their grazing grounds in the broad valley, black ostriches, with snowy wing-plumes, stalking truculently along the wire fences in the “camps”—Ratels Hoek peaceful and prosperous, as though no stern fratricidal war were going on not so very many miles away.

Down by the river bank two persons are wandering in easy restful happiness, and these two we should recognise, for they have borne their part throughout the time of trial and of storm, which for them, at any rate, has come to an end—has found its climax in the dawn of a lifelong joy

and peace.

Around, the sunlight bathes, in a misty shimmer, the roll of veldt, and the slope of mountain and iron-faced cliff. The air, clear and fragrant and balmy, is redolent of the *very* breath of a new life, and the sky, arching above in unbroken and cloudless blue, is even as their own clear and dazzling horizon. They are talking of many things, these two—of the dark days of doubt and trial, and peril—all of which have but served to refine and cement their great and mutual love—of the wedding which took place but a few days ago in Schalkburg, on such a scale never before witnessed in that somnolent *dorp*. “One would have thought it Nachtmaal time” had been the comment of more than one of the guests, so extensive was the gathering assembled to do honour to that most substantial and respected burgher, Stephanus De la Rey; and indeed the gathering had been as homogeneous as extensive—for every conceivable relative of the bride, whether on the paternal or maternal side, and every casual acquaintance or even stranger, had flocked into Schalkburg to witness it. The church, tightly packed as it was, would not hold them all, nor yet would Ratels Hoek, whither all who could, subsequently repaired to spend the next two days and nights in uninterrupted festivity.

Of all this they were talking now, these two—and of the hundred and one droll and ludicrous incidents which had so appealed to the humorous side of both of them—the outspoken comments of the blunt old farmers and their *vrouws* as to Stephanus De la Rey marrying his eldest girl to an Englishman, under the palliative circumstances, however, that perhaps a rich Englishman was a better match than an impoverished Boer, after all; of the hopeless efforts to convince many of them that Colvin was not the Governor, merely because he had the right to prefix his name with “Sir”; of old Tant’ Plessis and her conviction that the great Calvinus was a greater man than even she had thought, since he had been able to leave his grandson so much money; of Kenneth Kershaw, who while making a most efficient “best man,” had given rise to endless chaff to the effect that he ought to be branded and ear-marked, lest at the last moment Mynheer should marry *him* to Aletta by mistake; of Frank Wenlock, who waxed so exuberant amid all the festivities, that he came near starting a little war of

his own right in the midst of the convivialities; of Mynheer Albertyn himself, who while congratulating the pair, and fingering gratefully by far the biggest fee he had ever seen in the whole of his professional career, had remarked drily, and not altogether jocosely, that he vastly preferred starting a man on fresh terms in this life to seeing him off into another; of the exceeding attractiveness in their array of bridesmaids of Andrina and Condaas, and a bevy of girl relatives pressed into the service for the occasion; of the absence of May Wenlock, and the future before her and Kenneth.

This brought them down to serious matters and the fate of Adrian.

“Poor chap,” Colvin was saying. “Honestly, I don’t bear him the slightest ill-feeling. I suppose I did come between you and him, dearest, and if that is not enough to justify him in hating me worse than Satan, will you tell me what is?”

Aletta pressed his arm lovingly and for a moment said nothing. Then:

“That is so like you, Colvin,” she said. “You are generosity itself, my darling. Yes, we can afford to think kindly of poor Adrian now. But, oh Colvin—what if you find afterwards that I am not able to make you happy? Remember, I did not know who you were. I thought you were here among us to settle for life and farm.”

“Would it have made any difference if you had known, Lady Kershaw?” he asked quizzically, slipping an arm round her, and looking down into her eyes.

“Not in my loving you,” she answered. “But remember, I am only a Boer girl, after all.”

“Only a what? Only the bravest, truest, sweetest, most refined and lovable specimen of womanhood I ever encountered in a tolerably wide experience. Only—”

“Kwaak—kwaak—kwaa! Kwaak—kwaak—kwaa!”

Shrilling forth his harsh call, an old cock koorhaan sprang upward

from the thorn bushes on the opposite river bank, and went circling away over the ostrich camps, yelling up half a dozen others in his flight. The eyes of these two people met, and both broke into a hearty laugh.

“Why, I believe that’s the same old joker I spared when we were here together that day, Aletta,” said Colvin, turning to watch the disappearing bird.

“Yes, it must be, for we are on the same spot. Colvin, my darling, our happiness first came to us on this very spot where we are standing. Do you remember? And now that we stand here again, it is complete for ever. Is it not?”

“For ever,” he answered, a grateful solemnity in his voice.

And here, reader, we will leave them.

The End.

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