WHISHAW FREDERICK

CLUTTERBUCK'S TREASURE

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A COWARDLY ATTACK

When my father died and left me unexpectedly penniless, all those kind friends whom I consulted upon my obvious failure to find anything to do were quite agreed as to this fact: that when a young man is desirous of finding employment in this world, and of making his way and keeping his head up among his fellows, his failure to do so, if he does fail, must certainly be his own fault. He lacks, they said, either energy or perseverance or pluck, or all three; in a word, he wants "grit."

Therefore the reader will kindly understand this about me as a standpoint: that since I failed miserably to find employment befitting a young person of my position, at a time when it was necessary to find employment or go to the wall, I must—by all the rules of the probabilities—not only have gone to the wall, but also be deficient in all those qualities which are most dear to the British intelligence, namely—pluck, perseverance, and so forth.

And yet I did not go to the wall. On the contrary, I am, though still a young man, in an exceedingly comfortable position; while

as for the British virtues which I am supposed to lack, I do not think—though I will not boast—that the reader will hesitate to acquit me of the charge of wanting every quality that goes to make an average Englishman, when he shall have read the curious tale I have to unfold.

My father's death, followed by the unexpected revelation of his insolvency, was a terrible blow to me. I had been educated without regard to expense. At Winchester I had plenty of pocket-money, and was, for this reason—and because I was a good athlete and but a moderate scholar—a popular character. At New College, Oxford, during the one year I spent there, I was in a set whose ideas centred rather upon the pleasures of life than upon its duties and responsibilities.

I still had plenty of money, and undoubtedly the last thing in the world that would have been likely to trouble my head at this time was any reflection as to where the funds came from. My father, as I believed, was a rich man, a member of the Stock Exchange, and having the disposal, as I had always understood, of practically unlimited supplies of money.

Then came the telegram from home announcing disaster, and at a moment's notice I found myself fatherless, penniless, and as good as hopeless too; for at my age, and with my inexperience, I was utterly at a loss to know what to do or how to set about to find some means of supporting myself.

My father's business, it appeared, had suddenly and completely collapsed. He had "got himself cornered," as I was

informed, though I did not understand the term, and had lost every farthing that he possessed and more. The shock of it all had proved fatal to my poor parent, and he had succumbed suddenly —a broken heart, as I heard someone say; but I fancy my father's heart had always been a weak point in his economy, and the collapse in his fortunes doubtless gave to it the finishing touch.

So then, at the age of nineteen, I found myself master of my own fortunes, which certainly looked very like *mis*fortunes; and in that stress of circumstances it was that I applied to my friends for advice, and received from each the assurance that if I possessed those British qualities to which reference has been made I should certainly find something to do; and that if I failed to "get on" I might rest assured that I had no one to thank but myself. Nevertheless, I found nothing to do. There could be no talk of any of the learned professions; I was too old for Sandhurst, even if I could have passed the examination; the navy was, of course, out of the question.

My ideas wildly wandered from professional football or cricket to enlistment in the line, and from that to life in the bush, or digging for hidden wealth in the soil of Rhodesia or of Klondyke, but the expense of the outfit and journey rendered this latter project impossible. There remained ultimately two resources from which to choose: enlistment or desk-work at a London office, which I believed I could obtain without difficulty if I should be reduced to so unpalatable an alternative.

But office life, I felt, would be worse than purgatory to me.

The very idea of confinement and the lack of plenty of fresh air and exercise was intolerable, and I ultimately resolved that I would take the Queen's shilling, and submit to barrack discipline and all the indignities of existence among my social inferiors rather than bind myself for ever to the misery of the city. Indeed, I had quite made up my mind to journey to Trafalgar Square, in order to interview one of the recruiting sergeants generally to be found at the north-eastern corner of that favourite rendezvous, when something happened to set my ideas flowing in a new channel.

My father's house, in our days of prosperity, had been one of those fine mansions overlooking Streatham Common; and though I had left the dismally stripped and dismantled place as soon as the miserable formalities of funeral and sale were over, I had taken a cheap lodging in Lower Streatham, because in the chaos of my ideas and plans it appeared to me that I might as well stay in the neighbourhood of my old home as anywhere else, until the fifty pounds still remaining to my credit at my Oxford bankers had gone the way of all cash, or until I should have made up my bewildered mind as to where, in all this wide and pitiless world, I should go for a living.

I had practically determined, as I say, to enlist, and was walking one warm summer evening along the green lane which runs from Thornton Heath to Lower Streatham, deep in somewhat melancholy reflection upon the step I was about to take, when a noise of scuffling and bad language distracted my

thoughts from the contemplation of to-morrow's barrack-yard trials, and brought them up with a run to the consideration of the present instant. I suppose the noise that they were themselves making prevented the four persons taking part in the scrimmage, which I now suddenly saw, from observing my approach, for they continued to tussle and to wrangle on their side of the hedge, while I watched them for a moment from mine, desiring, if possible, to discover what the quarrel was about and on which side the right lay, if either.

Then I soon perceived that the fight was an iniquitous and unequal one, for three younger men had set upon one elderly person and were obviously engaged in attempting to relieve him of his money and valuables, an attempt which the old gentleman made gallant but naturally futile efforts to frustrate, hitting out right valiantly with his umbrella, but doing far more violence to the Queen's English than to the heads and persons of his assailants, upon whom the blows of his feeble weapon produced little effect.

I need scarcely say that, having ascertained what was passing, I did not waste time in making up my mind as to which side should receive the favour of my support, and in far less time than it takes to write the words, I had burst through the hedge and rushed to the assistance of the swearing and furious old gentleman.

At my appearance one of the fellows bolted like a hare across the field towards Norbury, and I saw no more of him. Now, I had paid some little attention to the study of self-defence while at

Oxford, and though the remaining two rascals stood up to me for a moment, I soon placed my right fist in so convincing a manner upon the tip of the nose of one that he went down like a nine-pin and lay where he fell, while the other, after feinting and dodging and ducking for a few seconds as I squared up to him with the intention, if necessary, of treating him like his fellow, suddenly turned, darted through the hedge, and was away down the lane towards Thornton Heath in the twinkling of an eye, I following.

Away we went at hundred-yards' speed, he leading by about ten paces, and for about fifty yards it was anybody's race. Then I began to gain, and, seeing this, the fellow threw something down and ran on; he careered for another half hundred paces and then ridded himself of something else; and I, fearing, if I continued the pursuit, to lose my chance of recovering the old man's property—which, I rightly conjectured, was what the fellow had relieved himself of—stopped to pick it up while I could. I thus allowed my friend to escape, which was, of course, what he most desired at the moment, even more than the possession of the pocket-book and the gold watch which I soon found in the road and recovered.

Then I returned to the spot where I had left my fallen foe and the old gentleman whose property had been the original cause of disagreement between the contending parties.

CHAPTER II
THE OLD MISER

I found my ally beating the prostrate enemy with his umbrella, and still using language which would have been unseemly in any person, and sounded doubly shocking in the mouth of an old man.

"Come," I said, "you needn't swear, sir; and I wouldn't continue to whack a man who is down, if I were you."

"Kill him! kill him—the cowardly rascal! Kick him on the head and kill him!" shrieked the infuriated old gentleman; "they have robbed me between them, and I'll have his life for it! I'm a poor man, and they've taken my all; kick him in the head, if you're a man, and kill him!"

I could not help laughing. "It's because I'm a man that I shall do nothing of the kind," I said. "Stop dabbing at him with your umbrella and attend to business; here's your property—take it." I presented him with his pocket-book and watch as I spoke, and never did I behold so complete a metamorphosis in the expression of a man's face as now passed over his. He seized his property with both hands and hugged it to his breast. He beamed and chuckled over it, mumbling inarticulate words of delight as he fondly drew forth a bundle of notes and counted them.

It struck me that here was a considerable sum of money for

a poor man to carry about with him; for though he jealously hid from me the figures that would have revealed the value of the notes, I was able to observe that there were at least fifteen or twenty of these, which, even supposing them to have been mere "rivers," would represent a decidedly respectable sum. The old fellow observed me watching him.

"Private papers, private papers!" he muttered; "letters from my dead wife that I would not lose for their weight in diamonds!"

"You old humbug!" I thought; "if ever you had a wife you starved her, I'll bet."

But the condition of our prostrate enemy began to give me some anxiety, and I was obliged to transfer my attention from the old miser to him. He lay groaning and snoring, his eyes shut, and his nose still bleeding a little. Suddenly he opened his eyes slightly and looked at the old man and at me. He scowled as he saw me, but his lips muttered "Water!"

"Go and fetch the man some water—you, sir," I said; "you can finish counting your notes afterwards. I would go, but I dare not leave him with you."

"Water for the rogue that robbed me? Not I," said the old fellow; "let him lie and rot first!"

"Then I will go," I said, for positively the rogue looked like expiring, and I was really anxious for him. If he were actually as bad as he looked there was not much danger in leaving him. I knew of a duck-pond near a farmhouse close by, and towards this I proceeded at my best speed, for the fellow must not be allowed

to die—rascal though he undoubtedly was.

The rascal, it appeared, had no intention of dying, however, just at present; for when I returned with water from the duck-pond, he had departed, and departed—as I gathered—in company with the old gentleman's pocket-book, for its owner sat on the grass evidently dazed, nursing a portion of the *porte-monnaie*, for which, I suppose, he had made a good fight, if the jagged and torn appearance of the remnant was any indication of a struggle.

I could see our friend careering down the lane, some distance away, towards Thornton Heath, well out of reach of pursuit, and I was straining my eyes after him in hopes of marking him down somewhere, when the old miser behind me suddenly interrupted my reflections by bursting anew into a paroxysm of abuse and bad language, which threw even his previous excursions into the shade.

Whether I or the thief, or both of us, were the objects of his frenzy was not very apparent, for his vituperations were incoherent and inarticulate; but I gathered presently that I was at least in part responsible for the disaster, for he inquired, with many added flowers of speech, why I had been so foolish as to go for water and leave him with a cold-blooded ruffian who had robbed a poor old man of his entire fortune.

I was sorry for the unfortunate victim to my ill-judged humanity, and did my best to soothe him.

"You must stop the notes at once," I said; "and as for the fellow

himself, why, we'll describe him to the police and identify him in no time; we shall get your money back, never fear."

"It's a lie!" he shrieked; "I am ruined! I shall never see a penny of it; you and your accomplices will fatten upon the old man's savings. Curse you all! I wish you were dead!"

"Thank you," I said; "if that's the case I shall wish you good afternoon and depart, or my accomplices will levant with my share of the spoil." I started to go in the direction of Streatham. The old fellow came to his senses at once.

"Stop a minute!" he cried; "I don't mean that. Stop and help me to recover my money."

"What, from my own accomplices?" said I. He took no notice.

"Help me to recover my money," he continued, "and to bring that rogue to the gallows, and—and you won't be sorry for it!"

"It isn't a hanging matter," I said; "but I am ready to help you if you talk like a sensible man. How much has the fellow taken?"

This was an unfortunate remark, for it instantly plunged the old man into renewed paroxysms of rage and woe. I therefore did not pursue my inquiries, but led my friend slowly towards Streatham, he spluttering and muttering his maledictions, I patiently awaiting the dawn of reason. I inquired, however, presently, whether he knew the numbers of his stolen notes, and as my companion inquired, in response, whether I took him for a fool, I concluded that he did possess this information.

The old man grew calmer after a while, and I accompanied him first to the police station, and afterwards to the telegraph

office, where he wrote and despatched a wire to the manager of the Bank of England. The clerk read out his message as we stood at the counter, and I was astonished and rather shocked to learn that my new friend's loss, according to his list of notes, amounted to something very near three hundred pounds.

During the next few days my acquaintance with the strange old man ripened considerably; for together we were called upon by the police authorities to attend, at least once *per diem*, at the Streatham police station, in order to identify the culprit among a large assortment of suspicious characters brought up daily for our inspection. I think it was on the fifth or sixth day after the robbery that our pilgrimages to the police station were at last crowned with success, and we had the pleasure of seeing once again the unmistakable features of the rogue we were in search of, and afterwards of getting him condemned by a magistrate to a period of enforced virtue and innocence. We were, moreover, successful in recovering a portion of the stolen property, though not all of it—a circumstance which greatly pleased me, for I honestly believed that the lost three hundred pounds represented the whole of my old friend's worldly possessions, as he had led me to understand, and I had been grieved to think of the poor old fellow's sudden misfortune and ruin through the guile of a fellow-creature.

Mr. Clutterbuck, which was the old miser's name, lived in a small villa in Lower Streatham—a dingy, dull-looking house situated in the midst of a moderate garden surrounded by a

high brick wall. So far as could be seen, there was no way of entering the abode excepting by a small door in the wall leading up through the square garden to the house; and though I several times, during that week of attendance at the police station and the police court, accompanied the old man home, he never once invited me within doors; neither did he ever express to me one word of thanks for the services I had rendered him in connection with the loss he had sustained and the recovery of a good portion of his property.

Meanwhile, however, this affair had delayed my enlistment for more than a week, and during that period I received an invitation from a college friend in the country to pay him a visit at his house in Gloucestershire; an invitation which I gladly accepted, thanking my lucky stars that some good, at least, had thus come of my strange encounter with the eccentric old miser, Clutterbuck.

Assuredly, when I parted from him for the last time, after the completion of the business which had brought us daily together for a week or near it, I never supposed that any other good could possibly proceed from the acquaintance, or from the delay in my "career" which the affair had occasioned. After my visit to Gloucestershire I should return to London and enlist without further delay; and as for old Clutterbuck, I had neither expectation nor desire ever to behold his face or hear his name again. For how could I know that—

As a matter of fact I never did see the old man again. I

went to Gloucestershire and forgot him, or at all events forgot to think of him, until—nearly a month after—I received a letter which brought him suddenly and very forcibly to remembrance—a letter which was destined to lead to a complete "general post" of all my ideas and plans in life, driving from my mind all thoughts of enlistment and office drudgery and everything else of the kind; a letter which told of the miser's end and gave me hope of a new beginning, and which proved, after I had learned its full significance, that even misers may remember benefits conferred, and show a sense of gratitude for which they do not, as a rule, obtain much credit.

I read the letter, first, with my heart all a-flutter with excitement; but presently my agitation cooled down, for, I reflected, even though I should have been chosen as the old man's heir, or part-heir, what could the old fellow have to leave?

"Don't be a sanguine fool, man!" I said to myself. "There isn't much in the business."

Which showed that, though good at games, I was no better prophet than I was scholar!

CHAPTER III
THE GREAT PRIZE IS OFFERED

The letter, so far as I can remember the wording of it, read something like this—

"DEAR SIR,"—(it ran)—"By desire of the late Mr. William Clutterbuck I have to invite you to be present at his burial, on Friday next, in the churchyard of St. Mary's, Norbury, and also at the subsequent reading of my late client's will on the same afternoon at Aston Villa, Lower Streatham."

The signature was that of some lawyer.

"By George! Peter, old chap," said my college chum, to whom I handed the letter after reading it, "you're in for a legacy, you lucky old rascal! Who is it?—an uncle? You won't have to enlist after all!"

"Uncle?" I repeated; "no! I haven't such a thing in the world; and as for legacy—there may be a fiver or so in it, but nothing more. It's an old fellow who carried all his fortune in a pocket-book and got it stolen;" and I told Henderson the whole story of my futile attempt to defend old Clutterbuck's property in Green Lane a month ago.

Henderson was immensely interested.

"Don't you make any mistake; that pocket-book never contained his entire fortune," he said. "The old boy was a miser

on the face of him, any fool could see that; he may have got a hundred thousand hidden in a cellar, half eaten by the rats, and all left to you. Why, man, I have heard of huge fortunes left to fellows for far less."

And Henderson proceeded to tell me of how a man he had read or heard of was left fifty thousand for letting an old lady look over his hymnbook in church; and how another fellow got as much again for paying an old gentleman's omnibus fare when the conductor refused to give him change and threatened to be disagreeable; and many other choice examples of a similar character.

But I was firmly convinced that there was nothing romantic forthcoming as the result of my acquaintance with old Clutterbuck, at least nothing more romantic than a five- or ten-pound note, and I took the train to Paddington with the sense that the journey was an unmitigated nuisance, since it was unlikely to lead to anything seriously interesting, while it cut short an extremely pleasant visit in a circle of society from which I should perforce be excluded before long in my capacity of plain Tommy Atkins, the recipient of the Queen's shilling and wearer of the uniform of the humblest of her servants militant.

Steggins, the lawyer, was, however, decorously polite when I made my appearance at Aston Villa. There were three or four other persons present, expectant legatees like myself, I concluded; so that the contents of dead Mr. Clutterbuck's pocket-book were to be divided among five, at least, of us. There was

nothing in the business—I was certain of it; I had been a fool to leave my comfortable quarters in the country upon such an errand; would that I had stayed!

Mr. Clutterbuck had died, I was told, of heart disease. He had never quite recovered the shock of the assault in Green Lane, and it was believed that he had encountered one of his assailants on the day of his death and recognised him, and that the excitement of the *rencontre* had proved fatal. My fellow-legatees were, it appeared, relatives of the deceased, and one and all of these looked askance at me as an interloper, several of them inquiring of Steggins, in my hearing, what I had had to do with the testator, and what claim I possessed upon the property.

Mr. Steggins replied that he believed I had performed some service to the deceased for which the testator was grateful.

"What's the figure, Steggins, old man?" asked one. "How does the old boy cut up?"

"That's what we are about to learn," said the man of law.

We did learn it a few minutes later; and a very remarkable lesson it was!

I suppose that Mr. Clutterbuck's testamentary dispositions were just about as surprising and unexpected as such dispositions can well be, unless indeed they had emanated from an absolute lunatic, and this Mr. Clutterbuck certainly was not. We who were present as expectant legatees were taken aback, one and all, and when I use this expression about my own feelings I am choosing an exceedingly mild one.

As a matter of fact, I was, to use a more serviceable word, "flabbergasted." For me alone of those present the large amount of money which the testator had to dispose of was an absolute surprise. I learned afterwards that all the rest were well aware that their relative had been possessed of considerable wealth, though perhaps none of them may have realised the real extent of his hoarded riches. At all events no one could possibly have guessed how the eccentric old man intended to dispose of his money. So that in this matter the surprise of the rest was as great as my own.

"The will, gentlemen," said Mr. Steggins, preparing to read that document, "is very short, very clear as to its dispositions, though not worded in the customary legal phraseology" (I could not help laughing at the *non sequitur* involved in this explanation), "and exceedingly eccentric. It begins with the words, 'The Prize to the Swift,' which sentence heads the document as a kind of text, and it continues as follows:—

"'I wish to preface my testamentary dispositions with the remark that my personal estate amounts, at the time of writing, to exactly ninety-seven thousand eight hundred and ninety-two pounds three shillings and sixpence, free of legacy duty. The accumulation of this sum of money has occasioned me much hard labour, much thought, much disappointment, many dangers, much travel by land and sea. I have no intention that my heir should acquire that which has been gained by the sweat of my brow without corresponding labour and suffering on his own part.'

"That is the opening paragraph of the will itself," said Mr. Steggins; "this is how it proceeds:—

"'I have therefore decided that, as I have indicated in the initial sentence of this my will, the prize shall go to the swift. Let me explain my meaning. Those of my possible heirs who have known me long are aware that I have devoted considerable time during recent years to foreign travel. During one of my latest journeys I took the opportunity to bury a box containing treasure at a place indicated in the map of Bechuanaland which I have sketched.

"'I now bequeath to him who first succeeds in reaching that spot, and in finding the treasure, the entire fortune which I possess, and which I estimate to be the equivalent of the sum quoted above. Those whom I have authorised by name to compete in this race for wealth are advised that many qualities of mind and body will be called into requisition by the winner: such as energy, perseverance, pluck, judgment, acuteness. Without the determination to employ each and all of these qualities, it would be useless to undertake the search which must be the toilsome preliminary to enjoyment of my wealth.

"'The competitors who shall alone be legally competent to inherit from me are the following:—

"'William John Clutterbuck, nephew.

"'James Strong, nephew.

"'Charles Strong, nephew.

"'John Ellis, cousin.

"'Godfrey Bernard Hewetson, of 13 Enderby Terrace,

Streatham, to whom I am indebted for a service rendered.'"

(This last name is my own.)

"'If none of these five persons shall have succeeded within three years of my death in finding the buried treasure, my lawyer, Mr. Steggins, shall have power to seek new instructions within the sealed letter which has been entrusted to him for that purpose.

"'Each competitor, as above enumerated, shall receive, immediately after the reading of this my will, one-fifth share of any money found upon my person or within my house at the time of my decease. To save trouble, I may add that any such money will be found within my pocket-book; there is none anywhere besides the notes and change therein contained. The house and garden will, of course, remain the property of the successful discoverer of the rest of my estate.'

"The will ends there," said Steggins; "but there is a postscript which I may read out, though it has no actual bearing upon the matter in hand:—

"'I should like to add' (writes the testator) 'that, since none of my relatives have ever shown me the slightest affection, or paid me any attention which was not obviously interested, I should be glad if the last-named among the competitors—Mr. Godfrey Bernard Hewetson, who has, at least on one occasion, done me a very signal service—should prove himself, as I fancy he is as likely as any to do, the successful competitor. My relatives are, so far as I know them, but poor specimens of humanity, and

little likely to carry away the prize in a competition requiring such qualities as energy and courage. I have authorised them to compete, however, as a matter of family duty. Possibly the desire for gain may transform one or all of them into animated human beings.'"

The faces of those surrounding the table at which Steggins had sat and read this remarkable document were black enough when he had finished. One or two men swore audibly. Every one of them scowled at me, as though I were in some way to blame for the eccentric dispositions, which had evidently disappointed them.

As for me, I was so dumbfounded by the stupefying thoughts and considerations to which the recital of Mr. Clutterbuck's dispositions had given rise, that I think I must have made a poor show as I sat and blushed and helplessly blinked my eyes, while the others burst into a torrent of angry conversation.

CHAPTER IV
I ENTER FOR THE RACE

"Do you consider, Mr. Steggins," said one, "that any British jury would regard the precious document you have just read as the work of a sane man?"

"Certainly," replied Steggins; "I don't see how any British jury could help themselves. It is surely proper that you gentlemen, his only relatives, should have been accorded equal chances of becoming his heirs with this other gentleman, in whose favour his sympathies had been gained."

"That is not the point," said another—one of the Strongs, I think; "the question is, What right has this Mr. Hewetson to benefit, and whether undue influence can be proved?"

"Very doubtful indeed, I should say," said Steggins. "I happen to know that, beyond the fact that Mr. Hewetson saved the life of Mr. Clutterbuck, as the deceased firmly believed, and afterwards assisted him in the recovery of certain bank-notes of which he had been robbed, the testator had no acquaintance whatever with this gentleman; his act is one of disinterested gratitude."

"How do we know that this person is not in possession of private information which will enable him to discover the treasure while we are helplessly searching for it all over Africa?" asked another of the amiable nephews. The question aroused me

from my stupor, and from this moment I was myself again.

"To suggest such a thing is an insult to the deceased," said Steggins gravely; "and as for searching all Africa, the little map which you hold in your hand, together with the footnotes explaining it, affords a precise guide to the spot, within an acre or so, in which the treasure is declared to lie buried."

"As to that," I broke in hotly, "allow me to add my assurance that I know no more about this matter than has been read aloud by Mr. Steggins. I have no information whatever beyond that which the map and explanations convey. If any gentleman present still feels doubt as to my *bonâ fides*, I shall be grateful if he will kindly mention it." No one spoke. "As a matter of fact," I continued, "I shall probably take no part in the search for this problematical treasure. I shall consider the question, but I shall perhaps decide to remain at home."

I did not say this because the idea of a journey to South Africa was in any way distasteful to me. On the contrary, nothing, I felt, could possibly be more congenial than such a trip, especially when combined with the delightful excitement of a search for hidden treasure.

The fact was that I did not see my way to undertaking the journey, for the best of reasons. My last fifty pounds were all but spent already; my one-fifth share of the old gentleman's petty cash could not well amount to more than thirty pounds (it was actually twenty-eight pounds four shillings and twopence). How should I equip myself for the enterprise, or pay my passage to

the Cape and the expenses of the trip up-country afterwards?

My fellow-heirs did not, however, set much faith in my assertion, so I gathered from their looks, though none of them replied in any way to my remark. This galled me again, and I added that I intended to consider the question thoroughly before finally deciding. I should not, I said, surrender my rights if I could help it!

Before leaving the room, I took the precaution to interrogate Mr. Steggins as to certain matters: whether, firstly, Mr. Clutterbuck had actually been in possession of the large sums of money he claimed to dispose of; and whether, secondly, my own legal position, supposing that I should be fortunate enough to find the treasure, would be unassailable; whether, in two words, there was any treasure to find, and whether the "finder" would be recognised by the law as the "keeper."

Steggins assured me that he knew for a positive fact that a very few years ago Mr. Clutterbuck had undoubtedly possessed at least as large a fortune as that named in the will, and that it was extremely unlikely that he should have spent all or any large portion of it in the interim. My position would certainly be unassailable. It might be argued that the journey to South Africa for the purpose of burying his fortune in order that his heirs might not succeed to it without personal trouble was the act of an eccentric; but the desire to test the perseverance and energy of his heirs was sane enough, and the device—if clumsy—was not an insane one. Mr. Clutterbuck had disliked his nephews,

Steggins explained, and had often declared that he would "make the lazy young rogues sweat a bit before they touched his money." The will had been made out before the event which introduced myself to his notice, and my name had been added.

"Mr. Clutterbuck often expressed the wish," concluded Steggins, "during the last week or two of his life, that you should be the successful one, and disappoint these nephews of his, upon whom, as I say, he did not waste much affection."

And no wonder, thought I, for a more disagreeable-looking set of fellows than the three nephews I do not think I ever saw. The cousin was an elderly man, and was a person of a different stamp from the rest, two at least of whom obviously belonged to that class of society of whom it is often remarked that one would not care to meet them alone in a dark lane.

Steggins's remarks were rather encouraging, and I began seriously to regret that my funds—or, rather, my lack of them—was likely to prove a stumbling-block to success, or even to any attempt on my part to take a hand in the extremely "sporting" game which dead Mr. Clutterbuck proposed to us. The more I thought over it the more I deplored the poverty which not only stood in the way of my winning this tantalising race, but which actually made it impossible for me to find the preliminary entrance fee! And such a prize at stake—oh, why had I not a few hundred pounds! Truly my luck was abominable!

I returned the same night to Henderson's place in Gloucestershire, and talked the matter over with my college

chum.

To my surprise and great pleasure Henderson, who was a year senior to me at Oxford and had just taken his degree, received my news with extraordinary excitement and delight. Not only did he instantly insist upon my "entering for the race," as he called it, but he insisted also upon constituting himself my "backer" and trainer, and announced his intention of coming with me to see fair play.

Henderson had no reason whatever to mind the expense of journey and equipment. I should pay him back my share, he laughingly declared, out of the treasure when we found it! He had nothing in the world to detain him in England at present. On the contrary, he longed for a big travel before settling down to country life as a Gloucestershire squire. This business was simply a godsend for both of us!

Needless to say, I was easily persuaded that it was even as Jack Henderson declared, and that he really desired to accompany me and to take the risk of my being able to repay him some day for his outlay on my behalf. As a matter of fact, I am quite as certain that Jack really wished to go (he was always a sporting character, was Jack Henderson) as I am that he cared no more whether I ever repaid him my expenses than he reflected whether these should amount to one hundred pounds or two thousand.

Actually they came to a good deal, because Jack Henderson insisted upon doing everything in the best style. We should enjoy a bit of sporting, he said, after I had found the cash; and therefore

we provided ourselves with heavy rifles for big game, small ones for antelope, shot guns, revolvers, knives, ammunition enough of every kind to stock a fortress, and every luxury and convenience that the up-country sportsman in Africa can possibly expect to require.

What is more, in spite of all the purchases and preparations we made, we were on board ship within forty-eight hours of my return to Gloucestershire, fortified with the knowledge that none of my fellow-competitors could, at all events, have stolen a march upon me in this, the first move of the campaign; for the *Chepstow Castle*, the fine steamer in which we had secured berths, was the first vessel that had left any London dock for the Cape since the day on which Steggins read out the will and metaphorically fired the pistol which started us five competitors upon our race.

I had secured a flying start at anyrate.

CHAPTER V
TREACHERY!

For several days I was under the impression that, for some reason or other, the rest of Mr. Clutterbuck's potential heirs had left me to "walk over." Probably, I thought, they intended to allow me to find the treasure unchallenged, and would contest the will and my right to inherit after I should have saved them the trouble of unearthing the money. This, I felt, was foolish of them, because my position, according to Steggins, was unassailable. It could easily be proved that I had not, and could not possibly have, exerted any undue influence upon the old man. They might contest as much as they pleased, but no British jury would listen to their nonsense, and I should remain in blessed possession! I should, moreover, have all the fun of this "big travel," as Henderson called it, and the excitement of the treasure hunt thrown in! Poor-spirited creatures these nephews of old Clutterbuck; the old man had not been a bit too hard upon them in the postscript to his will!

But about the fifth day out I was almost sure that I caught sight of one of my rivals—the man called James Strong, who had made certain unpleasant innuendoes as to my good faith after the reading of the will. The fellow stood, half hidden, behind a donkey-engine on the deck used by second-class passengers, well

wrapped to the chin in a waterproof or some kind of long cloak. I suppose I must have betrayed the fact that I had recognised, or half recognised, him, though I did my best to conceal it; for the next time that I came in sight of the spot which he had occupied he had disappeared, and I did not see him again.

Anxious to discover whether the fellow really had been James Strong, or merely some second-class passenger whose appearance bore an accidental resemblance to that individual, I made friends with the steward of the second-class mess, and begged from him a sight of the list of passengers under his charge; but in his list there was no person bearing the name I sought, neither was there a Clutterbuck nor an Ellis.

"They may be on board under assumed names!" suggested Jack Henderson, but I scouted the idea.

"Why should they?" I said. "They would gain nothing by that sort of game, for we should be sure to see them at landing, if not before; and, besides, what if we didn't see them?"

"Why, then we should conclude that we had the hunt to ourselves, don't you understand," explained Jack, "and that would suit them very well."

"Why so?" continued dense I.

"Because in that case we would not hurry up-country, but allow them to get a start of us and have first dig for the treasure."

"That's true, by George!" I assented reflectively; "you are a sharper customer than I thought, Jack!" and from this moment until we reached the Canaries, where we were delayed a couple

of days on account of something going wrong with our screw, I kept a very sharp lookout for my co-heirs among both second-class and steerage passengers.

Once I was almost certain that I saw both James Strong and his brother; and once, too, I thought I recognised the other nephew, Clutterbuck; but in each case I was unable to determine the matter with certainty, because the suspected individual disappeared as soon as observed.

Under the circumstances, both Henderson and I thought that it would be wise to waste no time at all at Cape Town. We would buy horses and spades, and be off without delay, taking the train as far as it would carry us in the required direction, and acting generally as though my suspicions as to the identity of the second-class passengers were actually verified.

But all our good intentions to frustrate the guile of those who thought to get the better of us by superior cunning were nipped in the bud by an unforeseen and very unfortunate occurrence.

Our propeller went wrong, and it was found necessary to put into port at the Canary Islands in order to repair the damage, which the captain hoped would be effected in a day, but which actually occupied two days. A strong south-east wind happened to be blowing, and this rendered the harbour at Las Palmas unsafe; we were therefore obliged to lie in the protected waterway between the islands Graciosa and Lanzarote, a very fine anchorage of one mile in width, the former of these islands being uninhabited (excepting by seagulls and other fowl), while

Lanzarote can boast of a small population.

Jack Henderson and I, together with many of the other passengers, landed on the second day to stretch our legs, some visiting Lanzarote, while we and a few others chose Graciosa. Captain Eversley impressed upon all who went ashore that it was absolutely necessary to be on board by seven in the evening, as at that hour the *Chepstow Castle*must sail, whether all were aboard or not. Since we had not the slightest intention of remaining ashore so long as this, however, we allowed the captain's warning to be adopted and digested by those to whose intended proceedings it might be applicable. As for ourselves, we started with our shot guns for a walk along the rocky beach.

It was a fine day, and the walk was pleasant enough after the protracted confinement aboard ship, and Jack and I felt buoyant and happy as we trudged along the sand and shingle at the foot of some fine cliffs that frowned down upon us from the shore side, banging our guns off at every winged creature that would give us a chance at anything like shooting distance, and laughing and singing after the fashion of schoolboys let loose. The head steward had provided us with sandwiches, and these we consumed as we lay sprawling in the sunshine on the sand, having walked and scrambled a mile or two over very rough "going," and intending after lunch and a rest to turn and go back to our ship.

We had heard a few shots now and again from the top of the cliff, and had agreed that the same idea must have occurred to others of the passengers besides ourselves—namely, to employ

some of their spare time and work off some of their energy in banging at the sea-birds that circled and flitted about the rocks in hundreds; but beyond congratulating ourselves upon the fact that we were well below the line of fire, and not likely to be hit by a stray shot, we had not paid much attention to the cannonading of our neighbours. I believe I had fallen asleep. It was warm, sleepy weather, and the sand couch we lay upon, with our backs to a rock, was very comfortable. Suddenly Jack seized my arm and shook me.

"Good Heavens, Godfrey!" he said, "look out, old man; did you hear that last shot? It was ball, I'm certain, and the bullet struck this rock—there's the mark, see! Somebody had a shot at us. Slip behind, quick!"

Wide awake now, I slipped behind the rock in a moment, Jack doing the same; and we were only just in time, it appeared, for at the same instant a second shot was fired and a splinter flew from the rock close to the spot which we had occupied.

"Shout out at them that there are people here!" I said. "They must be firing at a mark!"

"Firing at a grandmother!" laughed Jack; "*we*were the mark, man. Wait a bit, look here, I'll show you!"

Jack adopted an old device: he took his cap, and placing it at the end of the muzzle of his gun, held it up over the top of the rock behind which we cowered, as though someone had popped out his head to look abroad. Instantly a third shot whizzed past our sanctuary.

"There," said Henderson; "that's James Strong, or his brother, or the other rascal!"

"Oh, impossible!" I said. "No fellow could be so base as to attempt to murder us in cold blood. Besides, we are not even certain whether they were on board."

"Well, you may take it from this moment that they *were*!" said Jack, laughing; "they have sent in their cards. Now let's think what's best to be done. We can't go back along the sands because we shall be within shot pretty nearly all the way. We must make a bolt for the cliff, get under its shelter, and either storm their position or hide there until they are gone."

"What! and miss the steamer?" I said, "we can't afford to do that, Jack!"

"Can we better afford to get ourselves knocked down like cocoanuts at a fair?" asked Henderson pertinently. "We shall have to make a bolt for the cliffs; when there we'll try to climb the rocks so stealthily that we surprise the enemy and fall upon him unawares."

This seemed the only feasible course, under the circumstances, and we decided to take it.

CHAPTER VI
RATS IN A TRAP

It is not the pleasantest thing in the world to be obliged to bolt like a rabbit across the open, even for twenty yards or so, under a hot fire.

"We must hope they are poor shots!" said Jack, smiling grimly. "If they couldn't hit us lying quietly on the sand they are not likely to bowl us over running."

"Count the shots they fire," I said; "then we shall know how many of them are in it."

"Now," whispered Jack, "we'll draw their fire with the cap once more; and the instant you hear the shot run for all you're worth to the base of the cliff. Do you understand?"

I nodded my head. I was horribly frightened, I confess. I do not think I am a coward when I can hit back if assailed, but I always lose heart when helpless. To cut and run for other fellows to shoot at you is, to a reflective mind, one of the most unpleasant things a man can be called upon to do.

However, there was nothing else to be done. Jack held up the cap; two shots were fired at it, and away we ran.

Three more reports rang out as we raced across the open, and, to my horror and despair, Jack fell. All my terror vanished at the sight, and only rage remained. I seized Jack's feet with

an exclamation—it may have been an oath and it may have been a prayer—and dragged him along on his back in a manner which must have been dreadfully trying to a wounded man. One more shot was fired, but it flew over our heads; I heard the whistle of it distinctly. I deposited my burden at the foot of the cliffs,—the whole affair did not last four seconds,—and to my astonishment and intense relief the victim rose to his feet and laughed consumedly, though not noisily.

"I'm awfully sorry I frightened you, old man," he said, "but it was part of the game; I only invented it on the spot, or I would have warned you."

"Aren't you wounded?" I gasped.

"Not a bit of it!" said Jack. "I shammed on purpose. I'm hoping they'll come down now they imagine there's only one to deal with. If they do, there'll be 'ructions'!"

I cordially agreed with Jack on this point. I would not mind all three nephews, and would gladly throw in the cousin as well, at close quarters and in equal fight. Any fool can frighten me if he shoots at me from an ambush.

But though we waited in silence for some little while the enemy made no sign, and we came to the conclusion that the risk of being seen and recognised weighed more with them than the desire to wipe me off the face of the earth at any hazard.

"They've got to deny all knowledge of this little affair when we meet on board ship, you see," explained Jack.

"But they are sure to have another shot at us before they leave

us," I rejoined. "Even if we creep along under the lee of the cliffs they'll find some place where they can sight us, confound them!" I looked up and around uncomfortably. I hated the position.

"We won't let them 'draw a bead' on us if we can help it," said Jack. "What say you to creeping quietly along for half a mile, and then trying to scale the cliffs? I'd give something to surprise the rogues, and have a shy at them at close quarters as they come along!"

This very distinctly met my views, and we started at once, creeping over rocks, springing quickly over level stretches of sand, wading here and there,—getting rapidly over the ground one way or another,—and all so close to the steep cliffs that unless a man lay on his waistcoat at the top and looked over the edge he could not have seen us. But we came to no place where the rocks looked climbable or anything like it; and we reached, instead, a spot where the sea had advanced to the foot of the rocks, and was breaking against them at a depth of a few inches.

"By George! how the tide has come up!" said Jack, looking serious; "we must dash through this, and hope that it will be all right beyond."

But though we plunged and waded for a couple of hundred yards beyond the corner, we found that the water became deeper rather than shallower, and that unless we returned at once we should have to swim back to the dry beach. There was no disguising the fact—we were cut off by the tide!

I am afraid we both used strong language when, after wading

back to the beach, we realised what this misfortune meant for us. It meant, of course, that in all probability we should be left behind by the *Chepstow Castle*, for it was now past five o'clock, and likely enough the tide was still coming in. It was too excruciatingly cruel for anything excepting naughty words, and we must be forgiven if one or two of these slipped out in a moment of bitter disappointment.

There was, however, no actual danger in our position. As we could see by the mark of high water on the cliffs, we should not, in any case, get much more than a foot-bath if we remained where we now stood. That was a comfort, so far as it went, and something to be thankful for. But to think that those rascals—the Strongs, and the rest of them—would gain a week's start in the race for Bechuanaland! It was too bitter to speak of, and for the first hour or two we dared not trust ourselves to mention the grievance, lest the fires that smouldered within should burst forth and consume us.

We employed our time in making frantic efforts to scale the cliffs, and we succeeded in getting ourselves, each in turn, into positions of unique and unparalleled peril, out of which each had to be rescued by the other; but as for climbing the cliff, we never reached anywhere within hail of the top, and if we had persevered from that day to this we should never have succeeded in attaining thereunto.

Sorrowfully we came to the conclusion, at last, that there was nothing for it but to wait for the fall of the tide with all the

patience and philosophic calm we could command; and these, I fear, were qualities which no known instrument could measure, for there was scarcely a microscopical trace of either in the pair of us.

At seven o'clock by my watch, punctually, we heard the booming signal of the *Chepstow Castle*, and we knew what that meant only too well. It meant that the steamer was leaving the anchorage, having on board my rival competitors, as well as our rifles and ammunition and revolvers, and everything we possessed, and that for a week or so after reaching Cape Town these men would be adding every hour and every minute to the odds against me in the race for old Clutterbuck's treasure.

"We shall meet them coming home with the money-box," said I presently, following the train of my own thoughts, "about half-way to Vryburg; and we can't well scrag them at sight, for we have no absolute evidence that it was they who shot at us."

"If we had," Jack assented, "we could relieve them of the money-box, and all would be well. However, they may not have found it by the time we reach the spot. We don't stand to win, I confess, but we won't quit the field till we are beaten hopelessly out of it."

"We shall have to keep our eyes open in the veldt as we go," I said, "for evidently the fellows are not particular."

"They wouldn't dare murder us there," rejoined Jack. "There was not much risk here, you see. Oh, what wouldn't I give to have the rascals just exactly here now, where my fist reaches!"

I agreed that this would be sweetly consoling. One might spend a quarter of an hour, I said, very happily in pummelling Messrs. Strong and Clutterbuck; but obviously there were few things less likely than that we should see either or any of them again this side of Vryburg, so that there was not much use in hoping for it.

It was nine in the evening before we found ourselves able to return to the spot at which we had landed, and when we reached it we learned from an Englishman who was about to return in his boat to Las Palmas, whence he had come during the day on sport intent, that we were too late.

The *Chepstow Castle* had sailed, as Captain Eversley had declared he would, at seven o'clock.

CHAPTER VII
GHOSTS

Our new friend professed the utmost sympathy when we somewhat shamefacedly explained that we had been caught by the tide, and concealed a smile; but he proved a good fellow by offering to put us up for a few nights until the arrival of the next steamer going Capewards, an offer which we gladly and gratefully accepted. This good fellow informed us that he had seen the last boatful of passengers taken on board at about six o'clock or half-past, and in reply to my inquiry added that the last to arrive had been a party of three with guns; they had a few seagulls with them, he said, and had declared that no one else remained on shore so far as they were aware.

"And when are we likely to get on from here?" asked Jack; to which our host replied that it might be a fortnight and might be a week, and possibly a steamer might arrive this very night. There was a cargo steamer overdue now that was to touch here on her way south.

In the morning there was a joyful surprise awaiting us; for when we awoke and looked out upon the bright waters of the Las Palmas harbour, there—black and ugly in the morning sunshine, but of all sights the most beautiful in our eyes to-day—floated a big English cargo-steamer, already busily engaged in discharging

that portion of her cargo which had been consigned to Las Palmas. Needless to say, we lost no time in going on board, and as little in settling with the captain to take us on to Cape Town, for a consideration. We would have paid ten times the price with pleasure if he had asked it.

The *Panther*, our new vessel, was to sail by sunset that very evening, so that—by a happy turn of Fortune's wheel—we should, after all, have waited but twenty-four hours in this place. The *Panther* would travel considerably slower than the *Chepstow Castle*, however, so that we must still lose another day or two in time before Cape Town should be reached; but, under the circumstances, things might have been so very much worse that we were inclined to be perfectly contented for the moment, though we suffered many an hour of mental torture before arriving at the great southern city.

For the trusty ship *Panther* bore us at a uniform rate of about twelve knots per hour, and we realised as we neared Cape Town that the *Chepstow Castle* must be several days ahead of us: we had hoped and expected to travel faster than this. Nevertheless the unforeseen occasionally happens, and a pleasant surprise was in store for us on our arrival; for when Jack and I sought out the local offices of the company to which the last-named steamer belonged, in order to claim our goods and be off northwards as quickly as possible, we were informed, to our huge delight, that the *Chepstow Castle* had not yet arrived. She had had trouble with her propeller, the clerk informed us, and had been delayed, first

at Las Palmas and afterwards at Walfisch Bay.

Then that clerk nearly had a fit, because Jack and I manifested the wildest delight and roared with laughter; I am not sure that we did not execute a step or two of an improvised skirt dance. The clerk smilingly observed presently that if we were in hopes that somebody we expected in the *Chepstow Castle* was going down to the bottom, or anything of that sort, it was his duty to disappoint us, because the steamer was all right and perfectly safe, and would arrive this evening.

"Oh no," said Jack very heartlessly; "our rich uncles and aunts are not on board!"

"I thought they must be," said the clerk, "as you seemed so pleased to hear of the ship's accident." He eyed us as though doubts as to our sanity had begun to dawn in his mind.

"Why, man," said Jack, "we are passengers ourselves—that's the joke of it!"

"Passengers on board what ship?" asked the clerk.

"The *Chepstow Castle*" exclaimed Jack.

Then the doubts as to our sanity which had dawned in that clerk's mind ripened into certainty, and he began to look about for a safe place; he also grasped his ruler in case of emergency, resolved, no doubt, to sell his life dearly.

"We got out at Las Palmas," I explained. I made the remark in sympathetic sorrow for that clerk's agony of mind. But my explanation did not reassure him much.

"You can't be in two places at once," he said. "If you got out at

Las Palmas, you are there still. Besides, if you got out you surely knew enough to get in again?"

"We'd have got in again if we could," I said, "but we missed the boat and had to come on by the *Panther*, which arrived this morning. Here are our tickets—they will prove that we started by the *Chepstow Castle*."

The clerk examined our tickets and wiped his forehead; then he looked us over, laughed almost as loud as we did, and said it was rather funny that we should have turned up first after all. If he had known what a poor joke it was for some others on board the *Chepstow Castle*, I daresay he would have laughed still more. As it was, he entered so heartily into the spirit of the thing that he obtained permission for us to board the steamer in the company's tug so soon as the ship should arrive in sight, a permission which we were right glad to have, because we were somewhat anxious as to our property on board, in case certain persons should have found means during our absence to possess themselves of that which was not theirs.

There was also another reason for our desire to go on board in the darkness and unexpected. We desired to do a little spiritualism in real life, and to appear before our friends the Strongs in the morning as though we had never left the ship.

"Nothing like playing the ghost for getting at the truth of things," said Jack, as we left the office. "We shall see by the rascals' faces, when they catch sight of us, whether it was really they who fired the shots at us!"

That shipping clerk was of the greatest service to us in another way, for he gave us much excellent advice as to how best to proceed in our journey up-country, what natives to engage, how many oxen to purchase, and the best kind of waggon, together with a quantity of other useful information as to roads and the chances of sport to be obtained. It was dusk by the time the *Chepstow Castle* arrived in the offing, and we boarded her during the dinner-hour, when of passengers there were none on deck. Captain Eversley was on duty, however, and our ghostly reappearance began propitiously with that cordial officer, who first stared at us in a bewildered manner and afterwards burst into laughter.

"Well, you are nice sort of young fellows," he said; "you ought to be still vegetating at the Grand Canary if you had your deserts! What became of you?—lose yourselves?"

"Caught by tide," Jack explained, "and brought on by a freighter."

"Come for your things, I suppose?" said the captain. "All right; I had them removed from your cabin because two second-class passengers asked to be allowed to pay the difference and come in when there was room. The steward has your property. They're all at dinner below; you'd better join them—they'll take you for ghosts."

"Who are the fellows in our cabin?" I inquired.

"Brothers, I believe, called Smith," said Eversley. "They have a friend among the second-classers; they have not been popular

among the state-room people. We have wished you back more than once."

We thanked the captain and retired, as he had suggested, below. Here our sudden appearance caused first a dead silence of amazement, followed by the uproar of a dozen or two tongues speaking at once; and then, to add to the dramatic interest of the situation, one of the passengers rose from his seat at the lower end of the table as though to leave the room, uttered a kind of groan, and fainted. I saw him and recognised him in a moment —it was Charles Strong. His brother, seated beside him, quickly dragged his unconscious relative away.

A word or two of explanation soon convinced our late fellow-travellers that we were not ghosts, and in order to reassure them more fully as to our substantiality we both sat down and made a remarkably good dinner. I am sorry to say that it was the unanimous opinion of all present that, had we been still looking out for a sail at Las Palmas instead of comfortably dining almost within the harbour of Cape Town, we should have had nothing but our own foolishness to thank for it.

As for the Strongs, or Smiths, no one had a good word to say for them. They never spoke, we were told, at meals, and they spent all their time conspiring and whispering together over maps and papers on the second-class deck, where they had a fellow-mystery. They were set down by universal consent as miners or gold-diggers who had received a "tip" as to some rich spot, which they intended to find and exploit. Universal consent had not made

such a very bad guess, as it turned out.

CHAPTER VIII
NECK AND NECK FOR THE FIRST LAP

When we went to claim our property afterwards from the steward's pantry—which we did in some anxiety, seeing who our successors in the cabin had been (for we naturally concluded that the Strongs would not have paid money for the pleasure of occupying our berths unless they had had designs upon something we might have left there), we missed my small handbag.

"Were these new fellows in the cabin before our things were removed?" we asked of the steward.

"Oh no, sir," said that functionary; "one of them looked in to see if it would suit, but he wasn't there five minutes; you wouldn't surely suspect the gentleman of"—

"Oh dear, no!" I said, "certainly not, steward; probably my little bag escaped your notice and his too. Go and ask for it, like a good man; it was under the sofa when we were in the cabin, and it's probably there now."

The steward went off on his mission somewhat flustered; for it was a reflection upon his carefulness that the bag had been left behind. When I said that it might have escaped Strong's notice as well as his own, I really meant what I said, though

the sceptical Jack grinned at my "innocence," as he called it. The bag contained, as Jack knew, a few exceedingly important articles—namely, my slender stock of ready money (about thirty-five pounds), a copy of the all-important map and instructions for finding Clutterbuck's treasure, my revolver, and a few other things of less importance.

Nevertheless, when the steward brought the bag to me a few minutes later with "Mr. Smith's" apology, and declared that the latter gentleman said that neither he nor his brother had seen or touched it, I believed him. I was the more disposed to acquit the Strongs when I opened the bag and found money, map, revolver, and everything else still within it just as I had left them; but subsequent events proved that Jack's scepticism was in the right after all, though we did not discover this until later.

We saw no more of the Strongs that evening, and when—very early in the morning—we went on deck to see the ship moored in dock, we found that our friends had already departed.

"We can afford to make a good breakfast and give them that much start," said Jack; "for they will probably have a lot to buy and to arrange before they can start, while most of our preliminary arrangements were made yesterday." Therefore we made a good breakfast.

The train, we found, would take us as far as Vryburg, after which we should have to purchase horses and push along over the Chartered Company's road towards Bulawayo. Our destination was several days' journey short of that town, however, and lay

some way to the east of the pioneer waggon-road used by the company during the first Matabele campaign. At Vryburg we encountered the Strongs and Clutterbuck at a horse-dealer's yard. They, like ourselves, had come to buy horseflesh, and we surprised them in the midst of their bargaining.

There was no particular reason for pretending that I did not recognise them, for it was likely enough that we should be near neighbours when it came to digging, and we were all encamped upon a couple of acres of land. I therefore addressed them, and bade them good-morning, by name.

They growled an unwilling greeting in return.

"We're all here, I see, excepting Mr. Ellis," I continued. "I suppose he is to follow later?"

"I know no more about him than you," said James Strong surlily. "Who's this, may I ask, with you, and what right has he to come digging for our treasure?"

"Is he digging for our treasure?" I asked.

"That's what he's here for, you bet," said Strong; "if he finds it, let me tell you, your claim won't stand, remember that."

"My good man," said Henderson exasperatingly, "do wait until you have caught me at it! As my friend suggests, I am not thinking of digging; I am here to keep him company, and to act as a kind of bodyguard."

"Can't the poor fellow take care of himself?" said Strong, laughing rudely; "what's he afraid of? We are all respectable people here!"

"You see," said Jack, with exasperating coolness, "in some countries the bullets fly very promiscuously; people have been known to shoot at seagulls and to hit men. Now only the other day, at an island called Graciosa"—at this point the second Strong dragged his brother away to look at a horse, and as the proprietor of the establishment beckoned us mysteriously aside at the same moment, we saw no more of our friends at this time; when we returned to the yard they had taken their departure. The horse-dealer's object in beckoning us aside was, it appeared, to inform us that—if we liked to pay for them—he had a horse or two which would be likely to suit gentlemen like ourselves much better than this rubbish.

We were quite ready to pay for a good article—delighted; at least Jack was, and I was quite glad that he should. After all, if the fellow mounted us better than the Strongs & Co., the privilege would be well worth paying for.

We certainly paid for it, at anyrate; but whether our horses were really much, or any, better than the "rubbish" that fell to Strong's lot is a question. Possibly Strong squared the horse-dealer before we came; if so, he was no fool, and perfectly within his rights.

We had bought our waggon and oxen, seasoned or "salted" animals chosen without regard to expense, and had engaged a Kaffir driver and a native of Bechuana or Somali land to act as huntsman, in case we should find the treasure and have time upon our hands for some big-game hunting afterwards.

All these matters had been arranged before we left Cape Town, and our party were even now trekking slowly northwards towards the appointed rendezvous on the Bulawayo road, at the point, in fact, where—as per map—our side route branched off from the main road.

We had left the heavy rifles and most of our ammunition to be brought on after us by the waggon, and we hoped that by the time the question of the treasure had been decided we should find our property waiting for us at the rendezvous. Jack said we should "do a bit of sporting" whether we dug up the treasure or no.

So that we had not much in the way of impedimenta actually with us. Each carried a light spade, a blanket, a waterproof coat, a light rifle, a revolver, cartridge-belt and case, saddle-bags with tinned food and biscuits, a bottle of brandy as medicine, and little else besides. Thus equipped, however, we both felt that we could easily and comfortably spend a week or two without any more of the comforts of civilisation than we carried about us, and we set out upon our hundred-mile ride in the highest possible spirits, even though we were well aware that "the enemy" were on the road before us.

"I don't want to kill anybody if I can help it, you know, Peter," Jack had said (he always called me Peter, though my name is Godfrey; I was called Peter at school, for some inscrutable schoolboy reason!), "but I'm hanged if I am going to let these fellows have any more shots at me gratis. If any fellow lets fly at me again and misses, he's a dead man if I can make him one!"

I quite agreed with Jack that we would not again play at being targets without taking our turns at the shooting afterwards. I do not relish the idea of shedding human blood any more than Jack, but one must draw the line somewhere, and we were going to draw it at those who took shots at us from an ambush; for such we would have no pity.

On the evening of the first day we came up with our friends the Strongs. They were encamping on the banks of a river over which there was a ford.

Our horses were not tired, we had not ridden very hard, and we agreed that this would be a good opportunity to push on and obtain a good start of the Strongs. The complacency with which these men had settled down in this place and were, apparently, prepared to see us pass them in the race, perplexed and puzzled us not a little. We were suspiciously inclined towards them, and it appeared to us that they would not allow us to get ahead so easily without a good reason. However, it was unlikely that we should learn their reason by asking for it, and we did not desire more of their society than was absolutely necessary; we therefore agreed to push on—to play our game and allow them to play theirs. We could take care of ourselves, though they were three to two.

So we proceeded to ford the river, the Strongs watching us intently, though they pretended to be taking little notice of us. Jack's horse led the way, and was wading in the water considerably over his knees, when something floating in mid-stream caught my eye, and I invited Jack to stop a moment and

look at the object. Jack pulled up at once and stared with me at the dark-looking thing floating slowly with the current.

"I should say it was a log of wood if I did not happen to know that crocodiles abound here," he said.

"If it's a log of wood it's a nimble one," I rejoined; "for see, Jack, it is coming this way, partly against current."

For reply, Jack wheeled his horse round and plunged madly for the land.

"Back to the shore, Peter, quick!" he shouted, "for your life!"

CHAPTER IX
MORE TREACHERY

When we reached the bank and looked round, the dark object had disappeared, but almost immediately it reappeared within five yards of us. We could see it plainly now—a huge, scaly head, half out of the water, and a wicked little eye looking straight at us as though gloating over the feast it had just lost by a hair's-breadth. It was horrible.

"Oh, the cruel-looking, bloodthirsty, gaol-bird brute!" muttered Jack, raising his rifle. "Thank Heaven we were not a quarter of a minute later, Peter! Now watch—this is for his eye-socket."

As the little rifle sent out its message with a light, ping-like report, there was a strange upward lift of the great head, a vast commotion for a moment of the water, then the tail went up and the head went down; there was a little reddening of the mudded stream, the crocodile disappeared, and the tragedy was over.

To my surprise, Jack immediately turned and made for the group of men—the two Strongs and Clutterbuck—sitting by their camp fire and watching us; he still held his rifle in his hand—his little double-barrelled sporting weapon. I took my revolver and followed him, for I did not know what he meant to do. Henderson strode right up to the group and addressed them

without any kind of preface.

"If I were certain you fellows were aware that the crocodile held the ford," he said, "I'm hanged if I wouldn't chuck you in after him, one by one."

"Words don't cost much," said James Strong; "we are three to your two. It is foolish to boast of what you would do if you were strong enough."

"You are right; words are cheap," said Jack; "but for want of something trustier I must ask you to give yours that you knew nothing of that crocodile. If you cannot give me an assurance on this point I shall do as I threaten. I know you are three to two, but we need not fear a set of cowards who shoot at helpless persons from an ambush."

James Strong flushed and glanced at his companions, who reddened also. Nevertheless, he maintained a bold front, and replied readily enough—

"We have not come into the interior of Africa to guess riddles. I know nothing about any crocodiles; but if one had eaten your friend there as he crossed the ford we should not have gone into mourning. It might have had you too, without many tears from us. As to shooting from an ambush, you may explain what you mean if you please, or do the other thing if you prefer it. There's no law against riddles and lunatics that I know of, in these parts."

"Very well, then; so be it," said Jack. "At the same time let me tell you this: Prevaricate as you will, we know well enough what we know; you shot at us from the cliffs at Graciosa—good.

Luckily you are very bad shots, all of you. Now I am a dead shot. I have twice been in the Queen's Hundred at Wimbledon and Bisley, and my friend here is not far behind me at a mark. What you are to understand is this—that if any of you fellows at any time fire at us, either of us, and miss, we shall shoot back, and we shall not miss; if we can't get a shot at you at once (for you are likely to be behind an ambush), we shall let fly at our next meeting. Bear this in mind for your good."

"Come, chuck the sermon," said James Strong, who was the spokesman of the party, and a very rude one at that.

"Very well," said Jack, "words are thrown away upon fools; next time I shall shoot."

And with this crude repartee we left these worthies and crossed the ford, and gained a good ten miles upon them by nightfall.

Now that my tale is taking us rapidly towards the spot in which, according to our maps, old Clutterbuck's treasure lay buried, it would be as well to present for the reader's assistance a copy of the map and instructions as we each received them from Steggins the lawyer on the day of the reading of the will.

Here is the copy, which I present to the reader with apologies for its shortcomings as an artistic production. I could have made it more presentable and accurate, but it is better to reproduce it as I received it.

"Take the road to Bulawayo from Vryburg.

"Ride about one hundred miles to a village called Ngami;

there turn aside eastward into the veldt. Head straight for a conical hill fifteen miles distant from the road and visible from Ngami. At the foot of the mountain is a sandy plain covered with rocks and occasional thorn bushes. Between the highest thorn bush and the slope of the hill is an open space of sandy soil about two acres in extent, and covered with scrubby grass. Within this area I have planted four posts. The treasure is buried at a spot within the space defined by these four posts."

Jack Henderson and I rejoiced greatly when we off-saddled that night ten miles ahead of the others. This would give us a good start of them, and, unless we had our own lack of energy to blame, we should never allow them to make up the difference. We were to have first dig, after all! We drank a little hot brandy and water in memory of our crocodile; for to him, we agreed, we owed the advantage we had now gained. But for his good offices our friends would certainly have pushed on farther.

"Perhaps," I suggested, "it was all a trick—their camping there, I mean—and they are even now at our heels and coming up hand over hand!"

"By Jove! you may be right, Peter," said Jack. "I had not thought of it. I'll tell you what, man; it won't do for both of us to sleep at the same time. We must take watches—at all events just now, while we are in the neighbourhood of these bad characters!"

We were to discover before very long that we could not afford to camp out in these African forests without setting a watch, even when far away from bad characters of the biped persuasion!

There are some very shady characters in Bechuanaland that walk on four feet, and perform all manner of wickedness under the cover of night! We had not realised this fact as yet, but we were to realise it pretty soon. Nevertheless, in compliment to the poor opinion we held of the Strongs and their ways, we agreed to divide our night into two parts, and that one of us should sleep while the other watched, and *vice versâ* at "half time."

I was not sleepy, and undertook the first watch, and a right creepy function I found it. Those who have never slept out of their own beds would scarcely believe in how many unexpected and unrecognisable voices old Mother Night can speak. In the heart of an African forest she has tongues innumerable, and, moreover, all of them weird and startling, while some are absolutely terrifying.

We had built up a good fire, and had taken the precaution to pile up an ample supply of fuel almost at hands' reach from the spot at which I lay with my toes to the blaze. But when it became necessary to rise from my place and walk two yards to the pile of firewood in order to add fuel, I must confess with shame that I was so thoroughly cowed and frightened by a feeling of supernatural awe, brought on by the thousand weird and startling noises to which I had lain and listened for two hours or more, that I could scarcely summon sufficient nerve to assume an erect attitude, but lay trembling on the ground endeavouring to gather the courage which had left me, a prey to unworthy feelings of horror.

"However," I reflected, "if I do not keep the fire up, all these awful beasts that are now prowling about in the darkness and dare not come near will become bolder, and"– This thought settled it, and I arose, sweating with foolish terror, and piled a mass of dry material upon the languishing flames at my feet.

CHAPTER X
A SERIOUS CHECK

As I did so there was a scuffle and a yelp a few yards away, by a bush, and in the light that the fire shot suddenly around I distinctly caught sight of a brute which I believe was a hyena.

After this I lay with my revolver in my hand, determined that if any savage brute became bold enough again to venture within sight of me I would let fly at him, at the risk of frightening poor slumbering Jack out of his wits. Better that than to have a loathsome hyena or jackal come nibbling at one's leg while one lay asleep. A single shot would probably ensure quiet for the rest of the night.

Before my watch was over I did catch sight of another beast, or rather, I suppose, of the same one. I raised my revolver and pulled the trigger. The weapon misfired.

The "click" of the hammer was sufficient to scare my friend away for the time being; but it was not pleasant to think that our ammunition was not to be relied upon, and I determined to overhaul the stock in the morning. Meanwhile, I changed the cartridges in my revolver, for the little weapon had been loaded ever since leaving England, and it was possible that these were damp.

What if some brute had really attacked us, or—which was at

least as likely—if the Strongs had crept up and fallen upon us, and our safety had depended upon this cartridge which had misfired? Ugh! I lay a while and reviled, in thought, revolver, gunner who made it, cartridge filler, and everyone remotely connected with the matter, including myself for neglecting to change the charge. Then I had a better thought, and offered up thanks for being saved twice this night from disaster: from the crocodile first, and afterwards from all kinds of unknown horrors lurking around us in the darkness.

After all, I reflected, whether we are at home in bed or in the midst of an African forest, we are in God's hands, to save or to kill. How pitifully helpless is every human being that lies and sleeps unconscious, and how entirely at the mercy of a Providence which one has probably angered times unreckoned! Misfortune might as easily assail us at home in bed as here in the veldt, if it were so willed! Disaster, after all, can no more befall me here than there unless the Almighty decrees it.

This reflection was of much comfort to me subsequently, throughout many a weird and creepy night—in hours of real danger, compared with which the mostly imagined perils of that first night out were as the merest child's play.

Jack was made of sterner stuff than I, and even the unseen perils of the darkness and of the ambush scarcely affected his nerves.

His watch passed off, it may be assumed, without much trial of his courage, and when I awoke at high daylight one of the

first things my eyes beheld was the carcass of our friend the hyena, which Jack had shot with his revolver. The report had not disturbed me, which may be taken as evidence that it must have been fairly "bedtime" when the end of my watch opened for me the door of slumberland.

We covered thirty good miles that day, and though we continually looked out for them, we saw nothing of "our friends the enemy." The night passed without adventure, and—though I cannot honestly say that I was absolutely free from those feelings of dread which had so unmanned me on the previous night—I am justified in declaring that I was not nearly so frightened at this second experience.

On the third day, towards evening, we came to a village, and here I was for turning aside into the veldt eastwards.

"Westwards," corrected Jack.

"No," I said, "eastwards, surely!"

"I bet you sixpence your map says westwards!" said Jack. "I was looking at it yesterday, and noticed it particularly!"

Now I could have taken the most solemn oath that I had read "eastwards" in the instructions at the foot of the map, and the route shown, as I remember, was to the right of the road, which would be eastwards.

Yet now, when I looked at our plan, the route was undoubtedly shown as lying to the left of the road—westwards—just as Jack said.

So to the left we went, and rode for an hour towards a hill

whose outline we could just make out in the dim distance. Then the darkness came on, and we off-saddled for the night, full of spirits; for to-morrow, we thought, we should be on the very spot, and at work within a few yards of the treasure itself, and with a good start of our rivals into the bargain.

We were up and away with the first rays of light in the morning, and rode fast and joyously forward, merry as two schoolboys out for a jollification.

"It's a longish fifteen miles to *that* hill, I know," said Jack when we had ridden ten miles. "The map says fifteen miles; but we rode an hour last night and have ridden another to-day, and I'm hanged if we are any nearer than we were before."

This seemed true enough.

"It doesn't look what I should call 'conical,' either," I added. "I should call it a flat-topped thing if I were asked."

"So should I," said Jack; and we rode on.

"I wonder if there can be any mistake," I said, when we had ridden another ten miles and had stopped for a long rest.

"What kind of a mistake?" asked Jack.

"Why, about the map. That hill positively looks as far off as ever."

"It really does," Jack assented. "It must be a good fifty from the road."

"Perhaps the old boy wrote fifty and not fifteen, as we both seem to remember it," I said, fishing in my saddle-bag for the case which contained my map.

"I'm sure it's fifteen there," said Jack, "for I took the precaution of making a copy of both plan and instructions at Cape Town, in case those rascally friends of yours should get hold of our map and leave us to dig up all Africa for our treasure. I remember the wording quite well—it was 'westwards,' and fifteen miles to a conical hill, over a sandy plain."

These words of Jack's made me think—not those which referred to his taking of a copy of the map; I had done the same myself while on board the *Chepstow Castle*, and had my copy in my pocket at this moment. The words which struck me were those which referred to my "rascally friends," and suggested the possibility of the stealing of our map by them. The idea reminded me that my black bag with the map in it had been at their mercy in the cabin of the *Chepstow Castle*for a week or more; though, it must be remembered, my money was apparently left untouched, as well as my revolver and the other things. Could they have tricked us by altering the map?

Flushed and excited at the very idea of such a thing, I communicated my idea to Jack.

"Good Heavens, man!" said he. "I never thought of it; yet it's the most likely thing in the world. Let's have a look at the map!"

CHAPTER XI
STALKING A MAN

We scanned that map over and over, but could find no trace of alterations. Jack suggested that it might be altogether new—a bogus copy, in fact; almost exactly like the real one, in case we should remember the original, but incorrect enough to lead us astray at the critical moment.

"What a pity my copy was done *after* these rascals had had their chance of doctoring it," said Jack; "otherwise we should soon see whether this one has been got at."

"But I have a copy done *before* we were left at Las Palmas!" I cried. "We can compare it with that, which *must* be right!"

"Peter, you are a trump!" said Jack, banging me on the back. "You're a glorious fellow! Produce it at once! Ha! ha! When in doubt, play Peter!"

I produced my copy, a rough thing, but accurately copied in the most essential portion, which was that which supplied instructions as to this very place. We compared my copy with the original, as we had supposed it to be, and found that it was as we suspected. We had been duped. The rascals had substituted for my original map a production of their own, made so like the former in the matter of handwriting and style, and even paper, that it would easily pass, if unsuspected, as the real article.

Furious with rage, we turned and retraced our way towards the road. We had come nearly thirty miles westward instead of turning, as we ought to have done, to the east, and had wasted a day and a half—it was intolerable! If we had met the Strongs at this time there would have been a battle; we were blood-hot, and should not have spared them. They had tricked us, and had, in all probability, unearthed the treasure by this time, and departed with it. I could not trust myself to speak as we rode swiftly back, in grim silence, upon our own tracks. Jack said nothing either.

That night, as we lay by our fire, it suddenly occurred to me to look at my revolver. It, after all, had been in my small black bag as well as the map. Probably they had tampered with it; for, otherwise, why should my weapon have missed fire and Jack's not? They had soused my cartridges—that much was pretty certain; but perhaps they had done the revolver some injury besides.

I examined it carefully. The lock worked all right; the drum revolved perfectly. I looked down the barrel; looked straight down it at the firelight, and saw nothing.

"Well?" said Jack.

I handed him the revolver. Jack looked down the barrel as I had; then he took a thin stick and poked at it.

"The demons!" he said; "they've choked it with lead or something. Curse them! it would have burst in your hand if you had fired it! We'll pay them out for this, Peter, if we have to chase them half round the world for it!"

Thirty miles back to the waggon road, twenty miles farther northwards, and then at last we were at the spot where, according to the original map, we should have turned off at the village called Ngami. Our bogus map gave no name to the village, which showed, as Jack said, the fiendish cunning of the Strongs; for if they had called it Ngami, we should have gone on until we had reached a village of that name, and from it we should have plainly seen, as we now saw, the conical hill on our right. As it was, we had gone sixty miles out of our way, and might have gone six hundred, or, indeed, never have struck the right road at all, but for my happy idea on board ship to take a copy of the map in case of accidents.

It was dusk when we arrived, riding with exceeding caution, within a mile or so of the conical hill. Here we dismounted by Jack's orders; for he, by the most natural process in the world—namely, the simple slipping into his proper place, as nature intends that people like Jack should do—had assumed the leadership of our party of two. It was quite right and proper that he should lead, for Jack had twice the resource and the readiness that I had been furnished withal; his wits were quicker workers than mine, and his judgment far more acute and correct. Jack decreed, then, that we should dismount and wait, and listen. If they had not yet found the treasure, he said, they would, of course, still be upon the ground; and if there, they would certainly light a fire when darkness fell.

"Then will come our chance!" added Jack.

"Of doing what?" I asked. "You don't think of shooting them asleep, Jack, surely!"

Jack laughed gently. "That's what they deserve, the blackguards!" he said. "Why do you suppose they spiked your revolver? I'll tell you. So that when they attacked you, as they fully intended to do, and would do now if we gave them the chance, you should be harmless and unable to hit them back."

It certainly did seem pretty mean, viewed in this light—a cold-blooded, premeditated, murderous kind of thing to do. The idea made me very angry. It gave me that almost intolerable longing one sometimes feels—which, at anyrate, I feel—to punch some offender's head; it is a feeling which generally assails one at helpless moments, as, for instance, when a schoolmaster (whose head cannot be punched with propriety) takes advantage of his position to bombard some wretched victim, who can utter no protest, with scathing remarks.

"What are we going to do, then?" I continued. "Of course we are not going to murder them in cold blood; but can't we punch their heads?"

Jack laughed. "Oh, it may come to that, likely enough," he said; "but what we must go for first is to disarm them. It is perfectly impossible to live near these men in any sort of comfort or security unless we first deprive them of their rifles and revolvers. That's what I want to do to-night. One or two of them will be asleep, the other watching. We must stalk them at about midnight, cover them with our revolvers, and make them 'hands

up!'"

"No good covering them with my revolver," I said. "I'd better cover a pair with my rifle, and you the other fellow with your pistol. They know mine won't go off, well enough!"

"That's true," said Jack. "All right, your rifle then. We must shiver here till about midnight; you won't mind that for once."

And shiver we did for several hours, as much with excitement as with the cold of the night; for at about nine o'clock we saw the glow of a fire a mile or so away, which gave us the welcome assurance that our friends had not, at anyrate, found the treasure and departed.

I entreated Jack several times to let us be up and at them; but Jack was inexorable, and would not budge until our watches told us that midnight had come. Then Jack arose and stretched himself.

"Are you ready?" he said.

"Rather!" said I; "come on!"

"No hurry," continued my friend exasperatingly. "Change your cartridges first; so. Now take a drop of brandy neat, to correct the chill of the night—not too much. We may have to shoot a man; are you up to doing it?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.