

FITZPATRICK PERCY

THE OUTSPAN;
TALES OF
SOUTH AFRICA

Percy Fitzpatrick
The Outspan: Tales
of South Africa

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Percy Fitzpatrick

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Chapter One

“There is no art in the Telling that can equal the consummate art of the Happening!”

It was a remark dropped by a forgotten someone in a prospector's hut one night, years and years ago, when we had exhausted snakes and hunting, lucky strikes and escapes, and had got away into coincidences. One of the party had been telling us an experience of his. He was introduced on the day he arrived to a man well known on the fields. It seemed quite impossible that they could have met before, for they compared dates and places for ten years back, and yet both were puzzled by the hazy suggestion of having seen the other before, and, in our friend's case, of something more definite. His remark to the other was:

“I can't help feeling that I saw you once in a devil of a fright somewhere – or dreamt it, I suppose!”

But this first feeling faded quickly away, and was utterly forgotten by both. Later on they shared a hut near Rimer's Creek, and afterwards, when houses came into vogue, they lived

for several years together, while the first impression was lying buried, but not dead.

One day, in the process of swapping yarns, the other man was telling of the “narrowest escape he ever had” – and all due to such a simple little mistake. A ticket-collector took the tickets at the wrong end of a footbridge. Instead of collecting them as the passengers from the train *went on to* the bridge, he took them as they were *going off*. The result was that the crowd of excursionists was too great for the little bridge, and it slipped between the abutments, carrying some two hundred people into the river below, the narrator being one of them. It was then that the dormant idea stirred and awoke – jumped into life – and our friend put up his hands as he had done fifteen years before, when the little bridge in Bath dropped, and gasped out:

“My God! you were the other chap that hung on to the broken rail! *That’s* where we met!”

That was what prompted the forgotten one to say after we had lapsed into silence:

“There’s no art in the Telling that can equal the consummate art of the Happening!”

And I only recall the remark because it must be my apology for telling plain truth just as it happened.

When a man has spent some years of his life – the years of young manhood they generally are – in the veld, in the waggon, or tent, or Bush, it is an almost invariable rule that something which you can’t define germinates in him and never entirely dies

until he does. When this thing – this instinct, feeling, craving, call it what you will – awakens, as it periodically does, it becomes a madness, and they call it trek-fever, and then, as an old friend used to say, “You must trek or burst!” There are many stories based on trek-fever, but this is not one of them; and if you were to ask those who know them, or, better still, get hold of any of the old hands, hard-headed, commonplace, unromantic specimens though they might be, who have lived in the veld – if you gave them time to let it slip out unawares – you would find that every man jack of them would have something to say about the camp-fire. I do believe that the fascination within the fascination is the camp-fire in veld life, with its pleasant yarn-swapping, and its long, pregnant, thoughtful silences, no less enjoyable. The least loquacious individual in the world will be tempted to unfold a tale within the circle of a camp-fire’s light.

Everything is so quietly, unobtrusively sociable, and subjects are not too numerous in the veld, so that when a man has something *apropos* or interesting to tell, he commands an appreciative audience. Nobody bores, and nobody interrupts. Perhaps it is the half-lazy preference for playing the listener which everyone feels that is the best security against bores and interruptions.

The charm of the life is indescribable, and none who have tasted it ever weary of it, ever forget it, or cease to feel the longing to return when once they have quitted it.

It was in ’91, the year after the pioneers cut their way through

the Bush, with Selous to guide them, and occupied Mashonaland. We followed their trail and lived again their anxious nights and days, when they, a small handful in a dense Bush, at the mercy of the Matabele thousands, did not know at what hour they would be pounced on and massacred.

We crossed the Lundi, and somewhere beyond where one of their worst nights was passed we outspanned in peace and security, and gossiped over the ruins of ancient temples and the graves of modern pioneers. There were half a dozen of us, and we lay round the fire in lazy silence, too content to speak, simply *living* and drinking in the indescribable glories of an ideal African night.

It was someone knocking his pipe out and asking for the tobacco that broke the long silence, and the old Barbertonian, who had had to move to release the tobacco, looked round with the air of wanting someone to talk to. As no one gave any sign, he asked presently:

“Are you chaps asleep?”

“No!” came in clear, wakeful voices, with various degrees of promptness.

“I was just thinking,” he said, refilling his pipe slowly, “that this sort of thing – a night like this, you know, and all that – although it seems perfection to us, isn’t really so perfect after all. It all depends on the point of view, you know. A night like this must be a perfect curse to a lion or a tiger, you know.”

“Your sympathies are too wide, old man,” said the surveyor.

“Chuck me a light, and console yourself that your predatory friends do well enough when others are miserable. Take a more human view.”

“If you want an outlet for your native sympathy, you might heave me out a cushion,” suggested another. “I’ve made a pillow of a bucket, and got a dent in my head. The thick cushion, old boy, and I’m with you so far as to say that the lions have a jolly hard time of it with so much fine weather.”

The Barbertonian lighted up his pipe and threw the cushion at the last speaker.

“H’m!” he grunted between puffs. “I was really thinking of it from quite a human standpoint – the view of that poor devil who got lost here two months ago. Now, *he* couldn’t have thought much of nights like these. Do you think he mused on their beauty!”

“Oh, I heard something of him,” said one. “Lost for forty days in the wilderness, wasn’t he? I remember. The coincidence struck me as peculiar.”

“Yes, it was odd in a way. He was just ‘forty days and forty nights.’ He went out with a rifle and five cartridges to kick up a duiker along the river bank here, and somehow or other got astray towards sundown, and lost his head completely. Five cartridges, seven matches, no grub, no coat, no compass, and no savvey! That’s a fair start for a forty days’ picnic, isn’t it?” he resumed. “Well, he fired off all his cartridges by dark, trying to signal to his camp, and then threw away his rifle. Fact! He broke the

heads off two matches – he was shaking so from fright – before he realised that there were only seven altogether. But as he had nothing to cook, it didn't really make much difference whether he had matches or not.”

“What, in winter time, and with lions about?”

“*Yah!* Well, you get used to that. It was a bit frosty, and sometimes wet, and at first the lions worried him a lot and treed him several nights; but he says that that was nothing, while the sense of being lost – dead, yet alive – remained. What's that? Live? Oh, he doesn't know himself how he lived, but we could pretty well tell by his condition when we found him. We were out shooting about five miles down-stream, and on one of the sandy spits of the river we saw fresh footprints. Nigger, we thought, as it was barefoot. We wondered, because there were no kraals near here, and we had seen no cattle spoor or footpaths. I was on top of the bank every minute expecting a duiker or Bush buck to make a break out, and – I tell you – I don't know when I got such a start – such a *turn*, I should say – as when I caught sight of a white face looking at me out of an ant-bear hole. Great Caesar! there was something so infernally uncanny, wild, and hunted in the look that I instinctively got the gun round to cover him if he came at me. When the others came up, he crawled out, stark naked, sunburnt, scratched, shock-headed – still staring with that strange hunted look – came up to us and – laughed! We led him back to our camp. He could tell nothing, could hardly understand any of our questions. He was quite dazed. His hands were cut

and disfigured, the nails were worn off with burrowing for roots. We went to his den. It was a big ant-bear hole under an old tree and among rocks – a well-chosen spot. He had burrowed it out a bit, I think, and in a sort of pigeon-hole or socket in the side of it there were a few nuts, and round about there were the remains of nuts and chewed roots, stones of fruit, and such things. I never could understand how it was that, being mad as he certainly was then, he had still the sense – well, really it was an instinct more than any knowledge – to get roots and wild-fruits to keep body and soul together!”

“A suggestive subject, truly,” said a man who had more millions to his credit than you would expect of a traveller in Mashonaland. “A man starving within rifle-shot of his friends and supplies. Helpless in spite of the resources that civilisation gives him, and saved from absolute death by a blessed instinct that we didn’t know was ours since the days of the anthropomorphic ape! H’m! You’re right, Barberton! He couldn’t have thought much of the beauties of the night, and, if he thought at all, he must have placed a grim and literal interpretation on the *Descent of Man* when he was grubbing for roots with bleeding, nail-stripped fingers or climbing for nuts without a tail to steady him!”

Among us there was a retired naval man, a clean-featured, bronzed, shrewd-looking fellow, who was a determined listener during these camp-fire chats; in fact, he seldom made a remark at all. He sat cross-legged, with one eye closed – a telescope habit,

I suppose – watching Barberton for quite a spell, and at last said, very slowly, and seemingly speaking under compulsion:

“Well, you never know how they take these shocks. We picked a man up once whose two companions had lain dead beside him for days and days. Before he became delirious, the last thing he remembers was getting some carbolic acid from a small medicine-chest. His mates had been dead two days then, and he had not the strength to heave them overboard. I believe he wanted to drink the carbolic. Any way, he spilt it, and went off his head with the smell of carbolic around him. He recovered while with us – we were on a weary deep-sea-sounding cruise – but twice during the voyage he had short but violent returns of the delirium and the other conditions that he was suffering under when we found him. By the merest accident our doctor discovered that it was the smell of carbolic that sent him off. Once – years after this – he nearly died of it. He had had fever, and they kept disinfecting his room; but, luckily for him, he became dangerous and violent, and they had to remove him to another place. He was all right in a few days.”

“Do you believe that a man could live out a reasonably long lifetime in the way that ‘forty days’ chap lived? I suppose he *could*, eh! Shoo! Fancy forgetting the civilised uses of tongue and limbs and brain! It seems awful, doesn’t it? and yet men have been known to deliberately choose a life of savagery and barbarism – men whose lines had been cast in easy places, too!”

“That’s all very well,” said Barberton. “Now you are speaking

of fellows settling down among savages and in the wilds voluntarily, and with certain provisions made for emergencies, etc, not of men *lost*.”

“Even so, a man must deteriorate most horribly under such circumstances.”

“Well,” said Barberton contemplatively, “I don’t know so much about that. It all depends upon the man. Mind you, I do think that the end is always fiasco – tragedy, trouble, ruin, call it what you like. We can’t throw back to barbarism at will. For good or ill we have taken civilisation, and the man who quits it pays heavy toll on the road he travels, and, likely enough, fetches up where he never expected to.”

The man who wrote for the papers smiled.

“I know,” he said with kindling eye – “I know. It was just such a case you told us of at Churchill’s Camp the other night. A man of the best calibre and training goes wild and marries two – mark you, *two*! – Kaffir women, and becomes a Swazie chief, and then the drama of the – ”

“Drama be damned!” growled Barberton. “It was one case out of twenty of the same sort.”

Barberton was nervously apprehensive of ridicule, and hated to be traded and walked out for effects.

“I was up on the Transvaal-Swazie border in ’86,” said the millionaire. “I remember you told me something of them then. It was a warm corner, Swazieland, then – about the warmest in South Africa, I should think. Eh?”

“You’re right. It was. But,” said Barberton, turning to the correspondent, “you were talking of men going *amok* through playing white nigger. Well, I can tell you this, that two of my best friends have done that same trick, and I’d stake my head that better men or more thorough gentlemen never trod in shoe-leather, for all their Kaffir ways.”

“Do you mean to say,” asked the millionaire, “that you have known men settle down among natives, living among them as one of themselves, and still retain the manners, customs, instincts, habits of mind and body, even to the ambitions, of a white man?”

“No – well, I can’t quite say that. Their ambitions, as far as you could gauge them, were a Kaffir’s; that is, they aspired to own cattle, and to hunt successfully, but – And yet I don’t know that it is right to say *that* even, because in almost every case these men get the ‘hanker’ for white life again sooner or later. The Kaffir ambition may be a temporary one, or it may be that the return to white ways is the passing mania. Who knows, any way? From my own experience of them, I can say that the return to their own colour almost invariably means their doom and ruin. I don’t know why, but I’ve noticed it, and it seems like – like a sort of judgment, if you believe in those things.”

“And you know,” he said, after taking a few pulls at the pipe again, “there’s a sense of justice in that, too. Civilisation, scorned and flouted, being the instrument of its own revenge! If one could vest the abstract with personal feelings, what an ample revenge would be hers at the sight of the renegade – sick-hearted, weary,

and shamefaced – coming back to the ways of his youth and race, and succumbing to some one part of that which he had despised and rejected *in toto!*”

Barberton generally became philosophic and reminiscent on these fine nights. Someone would make a remark of pretty general application, and he would sit up and wag his old head a few times in silence; then, from force of habit, examine his pipe and knock it out on the heel of his boot, and then out would lounge some reminiscence in illustration of his philosophy.

It was generally introduced by a long-drawn, thoughtful, “Well, you know, I’ve always thought there was something curious about these things.” He would have another squint down the empty bowl of the pipe and ask for the tobacco. There would be a couple of grunts, and then, as he lighted up, he would say, between puffs, “I remember, in ’78, up at Pilgrim’s,” or, “There was a fellow up Barberton way in ’86.”

This night he sat in tailor fashion, with an elbow socketed in each knee-bend, and his hands clasped over the bowl of his pipe.

“One of the rummiest meetings I ever had,” said he, smiling thoughtfully at the recollection, “was in the Swazie country in ’85. Did I ever tell you about Mahaash and the Silver Spur!”

He gave a gurgling sort of chuckle, and puffed contentedly at the big-bowled briar.

“There were two of us riding through the Swazie country, and making for the landing-place on the Maputa side. We had had a row with the Portuguese about some cattle that the niggers stole

from us. A couple of the niggers got shot, of course, during the discussion, and we had to quit for a while and take a rest on the Lebombo. But that's nix! When we got to the Komati, we were told that there was a white man on the Lebombo whose Kaffir name was Sebougwaan. That's the name the niggers give to a man who wears an eyeglass or spectacles. We were jogging along doing our thirty miles a day, living on old mealies roasted on a bit of tin, and an occasional fowl – Swazie fowl, two to the meal – helped down by bowls of amazi – thick milk, you know. We used to sleep out in the Bush every night, with a blanket apiece and saddles for pillows, and the horses picketed at our heads. Man, it was grand on nights like this! We were always tired and often hungry; but to lie there in the peace and stillness of the Bush, to look up at the stars like diamond dust against the sky, and not care a damn for anything in God's world, why – why – I call that living! All those months we had no knowledge of the outer world. As far as we were concerned, there might as well have been none. We had one book, 'The Ingoldsby Legends.' If anyone could have seen me reading Ingoldsby by the light of the fire, and have heard every now and then the bursts of laughter over 'The Jackdaw of Rheims' or 'The Witches' Frolic,' and others, his face would have been a study, I expect.

“However, I was telling you about Mahaash. Mahaash was a big induna, and had about five to seven thousand fighting men. He used to konza to Umbandine, but paid merely nominal tribute, and was jolly independent. He was the cleverest-looking

nigger I have ever seen. Small, thin, and ascetic-looking, with wonderfully delicate hands, clear features, and lustrous black eyes. Really, he gave one the idea that he saw through everything, or next to it, and though he said very little, he looked one of the very determined quiet ones. We had to pass his place to get to Sebougwaan's, and, of course, had to stay the day and pay our respects. His kraal was on top of the highest plateau, near the Mananga Bluff. It lay on the edge of a forest, and the road – an aggregation of cattle tracks – was very steep and very stony. You can imagine we were not overflush just then, and what puzzled us was what to give the chief as a present when he would accord us an interview. Rifles and ammunition we daren't part with, and we were mortally afraid they were just the things he would want to annex. Finally, it occurred to us to present him with one of my chum's silver spurs. Heron didn't favour this much. He said it would likely cause trouble; but I put that down to his disinclination to spoil his pair of swagger spurs. Only the day before our arrival the chief had purchased a horse; he had sent to Lydenburg for it, and it was the first they had ever seen in that part of the country – which seems odd when you think that the chief's own name, Mahaash, means 'the Horse.' However, to proceed. We got word next day that the chief would see us, and after the usual hour's wait we had our indaba, and presented the silver spur. I must say he viewed it very suspiciously – very! – and when we showed him how to put it on, he gave a slow, cynical smile, and made some remark in an undertone to one of his

councillors. I began to agree with Heron about the unwisdom of giving a present so little understood, and would gladly have changed it, but that Mahaash – who was of a practical turn of mind – sent a man for our horses, and bade us ride with the ‘biting iron’ on. We gave an exhibition of its uses which pleased him, and we, too, felt quite satisfied – for a moment! But things didn’t look quite so well when he announced that he was going to ride his horse, and he desired Heron to strap the spur on to his bare foot. It was no use hesitating – we had to trust to luck and the chances that a skinny moke such as his was would take no notice of a spur; besides which Heron, with good presence of mind, jammed the rowels on a stone and turned most of the points. It was no good, however. The chief had never been astride a horse before; he was hoisted up by a couple of stalwart warriors. Once on, he laid hold of the mane with both hands, and gripped his heels firmly under the horse’s belly. I saw the brute’s ears go flat on his neck. The two supporters stepped back. Mahaash swayed to one side, and, I suppose, gave a convulsive grip with the armoured heel. There was a squeal and scuffle, and a black streak shooting through the air with a red blanket floating behind it. The chief bounced once on the stony incline, shot on for another ten feet, and fetched up with his head against a rock. I can tell you that for two minutes it was just hell let loose. We dropped our rifles – we always carried them – and ran to the chief I believe if we had kept them they’d have stuck us, for there were scores of black devils round each of us, flashing assegais in our faces, and

yelling: ‘Bolalile Inkos! Umtagati! umtagati!’ – ‘They have killed the chief! Witchcraft! witchcraft!’ But in another minute we saw Mahaash standing propped up by several kehles, and holding one hand to his head. He steadied himself for a moment, gave us one steady, inscrutable look, and walked into his private enclosure.

“For four days we remained there – prisoners in fact, though not in name. Nothing was said about leaving, but our guns and horses were gone, and we were given a hut to ourselves in the centre of the kraal. We didn’t know whether Mahaash was dead, dying, or quite unhurt. We didn’t know whether we were to be despatched or set free, or to be kept for ever. On the morning of the fifth day we found our horses tied to the cattle kraal in front of our hut, and a grey-headed induna brought word to us that Sebougwaan, for whom we were looking, lived not far from there along the plateau. We took the hint, and saddled up. As we were starting an *umfaan* brought a kid, killed and cleaned, and handed it to me – a gift from the chief; and the old induna stepped up to Heron with a queer look in his wrinkled, cunning old phiz, and said:

“‘The chief says, “Hamba gahlé”,’ (‘Pleasant journey’), ‘and sends *you* this.’

“It was the silver spur.”

Barberton had another squint at his pipe, and chuckled at the recollection of the old nigger’s grim pleasantries.

“But I was telling you about that white man on the Bomba,” he resumed. “Well, we weren’t long in making tracks out of

Mahaash's kraal, and as we dodged along through the forest, following a footpath which just permitted a man on foot to pass, we realised how poor a chance we'd have had had we tried to escape. Every hundred yards or so we had to dismount to get under overhanging boughs or trunks of fallen trees or networks of monkey-ropes. The horses had got so used to roughing it that they went like cats, and in several places they had to duck under the heavy timber that hung, portcullis fashion, across the dark little pathway. This was the only way out at the back of Mahaash's. In front of him, of course, were the precipitous sides of the Lebombo Range.

"We went on for hours through this sort of thing, hardly seeing sunlight through the dense foliage; and when we got out at last into a green grassy flat, the bright light and open country fairly dazzled us. Here we met a few women and boys, who, in reply to our stock question, gave the same old reply that we had heard for days: 'Sebougwaan? Oh, further on ahead!'

"We just swore together and like one man, for we really had reckoned to get to this flying Dutchman this time without further disappointments. We looked around for a place to off-saddle, and made for a koppie surrounded by trees.

"Heron was ahead. As we reached the trees, he pulled up, and with a growing grin called to me, 'I say, just look here! Here's a rum start!'

"It was clearly our friend Sebougwaan. He was standing with arms akimbo, and feet well set apart, surveying critically the

framework of a house he was putting up.

“He had a towel round his loins, and an eye glass screwed tightly into the near eye. Nothing else.

“We viewed him *en profile* for quite awhile, until he turned sharply our way and saw us. It was one of the pleasantest faces in the world that smiled on us then. Sebougwaan walked briskly towards us, saying:

““Welcome, gentlemen, welcome. It’s not often I see a white face here. And, by-the-by, you’ll excuse my attire, won’t you? The custom of the country, you know, and “In Rome – ” Well, well. You’ll off-saddle, of course, and have a snack. Here, Komola! Bovaan! Hi, you boys! Where the devil are they? Here, take these horses and feed them. And now just “walk into my parlour.” Nothing ominous in the quotation, I assure you.’

“He hustled us around in the jolliest manner possible, and kept up a running fire of questions, answers, comments, and explanations, while he busied himself with our comfort.

“It was a round wattle-and-daub hut that he showed us into, but not the ordinary sort. This one was as bright and clean as a new pin. Bits of calico and muslin and gay-coloured kapelaan made curtains, blinds, and table-covers. The tables were of the gin-case pattern, legs planted in the ground; the chairs ordinary Bush stools; but what struck me as so extraordinary was the sight of all the English periodicals and illustrated papers laid out in perfect order and neatness on the table, as one sees them arranged in a reading-room before the first frequenters have disturbed them.

There was also a little hanging shelf on which were five books. I couldn't help smiling at them – the Bible, a Shakespeare, the Navy List, a dictionary, and Ruff's Guide.

“They say that you may tell a man by his friends, and most of all by his books; but I couldn't make much out of this lot, with one exception. I looked at the chap's easy bearing, the pleasant, hearty manner and torpedo beard, and concluded that the Navy List, at any rate, was a bit of evidence. However, he kept things going so pleasantly and gaily that one had no time in which to observe much.

“Lots of little things occurred which were striking and amusing in a way, because of the peculiar surroundings and conditions of the man's life rather than because of the incidents themselves. For instance, when we owned up that we had had no breakfast, we found ourselves within a few minutes enjoying poached eggs on toast, and I felt myself grinning all over when the Swazie boy waited in passable style with a napkin thrown carelessly over one shoulder. Surely a man must be a bit eccentric to live such a life as this in such a place and alone, and yet take the trouble to school a nigger to wait on him in conventional style.

“I thought of the peculiar littleness of teaching a nigger boy that waiter's trick, and concluded that our friend, whatever his occupation might be, was not a trader from necessity. After breakfast he produced some excellent cigarettes – another fact in the nature of a paradox.

“We were making for the landing-place on the Tembe River,

and had intended moving along again that day; but our host was pressing, and we by no means anxious to turn our backs on so pleasant a camp, so we stayed overnight, and became good friends right away.

“I was quite right. He had been in the navy many years, and had given it up to play at exploring. He said he had settled down here because there was absolute peace and a blissful immunity from the ordinary worldly worries. Once a week a native runner brought him his mail letters and papers, and, in fact, as he said, he was as near to the world as he chose to be, or as far from it.

“He had a curious gold charm attached to a watch-chain, which I saw dangling from a projecting wattle-end in the dining-hut. I was looking at this, and puzzled over it; it seemed so unlike anything I had ever seen. He saw me, and, after putting us to many a futile guess, told us laughingly that he had found it in one of the villages they had sacked on the West Coast. I don’t know what sort of part he took in these nasty little wars, but I’ll bet it was no mean one. We listened that night for hours to his easy, bright, entertaining chat, and although he hardly ever mentioned himself or his own doings, one couldn’t but see that he had been well in the thick of things, and dearly loved to be where danger was. Now and then he let slip a reference to hardships, escapes, and dangers, but only when such reference was necessary to explain something he was telling us of. What interested us most was his description of General Gordon – ‘Chinese Gordon’ – with whom he appeared to have been in close contact for a good while.

The little details he gave us made up an extraordinarily vivid picture of the soldier-saint, the man who could lead a storming-party, a forlorn hope, with a Bible in one hand and a cane in the other; the man who, in the infiniteness of his love and tenderness, and in the awful immutability of his decision and justice, realised qualities in a degree which we only associate with the Deity. I felt I could see this man helping, feeding with his own short rations, nursing, and praying with, the lowliest of his men, the incarnation of mercy. But I also saw him facing the semi-mutinous regiment of barbarians, and, with the awful passionless decision of fate itself, singling out the leaders here and there – in all a dozen men – whom he shot dead before their comrades, and turning again as calm and unmoved as ever to repeat his order, which this time was obeyed! I pictured this man, with the splendid practical genius to reconquer and reorganise China, treasuring a cutting which he had taken from what he verily believed to be the identical living tree from which Eve had plucked the forbidden fruit. Surely, one of the enigmas of history!”

“Do you mean to say that’s a fact?” asked the millionaire, as old Barberton paused.

“As far as I know, it certainly is. Our friend told it as a fact, and not in ridicule, either, for he had the deepest reverence and regard for Gordon. He assured us, moreover, that Gordon was once most deeply mortified and offended by a colleague of his treating the matter as a joke and laughing at it. Gordon never forgot that laugh, and was always constrained and reserved in the

man's presence afterwards.

"I wish I could remember a hundredth part of our host's anecdotes of well-known people, descriptions of places and of peoples, accounts of travels and adventures. He seemed to know everyone and all places. It was three in the morning before we thought of turning in. After breakfast we saddled up and bade adieu, but our friend walked along part of the way with us to put us on the right path. He was carrying a bunch of white Bush flowers – a curious fancy, I thought, for a man clothed in a towel and an eyeglass. I remarked on the beauty of the mountain flowers, and he held up the bunch.

"‘Yes,’ he said, ‘they are lovely, aren’t they? Poor old Tarry! He was my man – the only other white man that ever lived here. He was with me for many years, and died here two summers back – fever contracted on the Tembe. Poor old fellow! I fixed him up on the bluff yonder. He used to gather these flowers and sit there every day of his life looking out towards Delagoa, wondering if we would ever quit this place and get a sight of old Ireland again. I take him a bunch once in a while. Come up and see where a good friend lies.’

"We left the horses and climbed up the rough path, and looked at the unpretentious stone enclosure and the soft slate slab with a rough-cut inscription:

"Paddy Tarry's Rest!
Are ye ready?

Ay, ay, sir!"

"Our friend leaned over the low stone wall and replaced the faded wreath by the fresh one.

"We left him standing there on the ridge, clear-cut above the outline of the mountain, and took our way down the rough cattle-path that wound down to the still rougher, wilder kloof through which our route lay. I remember so well the way he was standing, one foot on a projecting rock, arms folded, until we were rounding the turn that took us out of sight. Then he waved adieu."

"We had unpleasant times on that trip to the Tembe. We met all the murderous ruffians in that Alsatia, and they were all at loggerheads, thieving and shooting with both hands. However, we got out all right after months and months of roaming about, owing to the trouble about those Kaffirs, and I think we had both forgotten all about Sebougwaan by the time we fetched up in Lydenburg again. There was always something happening in that infernal outlaw corner of Swazieland to keep the time from dragging!

"My chum went off to his farm; but I had no home, and took the road again with waggons, and loaded for Barberton at slashing fine rates. I got there just as the Sheba boom was well on. Companies were being floated daily, shares were booming, money flowing freely. All were merry in the sunshine of to-day. No one took heed of to-morrow. Speculators were making

money in heaps; brokers raking in thousands.

“You know how it is in a place like that. After you have been there for a few hours, or a day or two, you begin to notice that one name is always cropping up oftener than any other; one man seems the most popular, important, and indispensable. Well, it was the same here. There was always this one name in everything – market, mines, sport, entertainment – any blessed department. You can just imagine – at least, you can’t imagine – my surprise when I found that my naked white Kaffir sailor-friend, Sebougwaan, was the man of the hour. I couldn’t believe it at first, and then a while later it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world; for, if I ever met a man who looked the living embodiment of mental, moral, and physical strength, of good humour, grace, and frankness – a born king among men – it was this chap.

“I met him next day, and he seemed more full of life and personal magnetism than ever. After that I didn’t see him for three or four days; you know how time spins away in a wild booming market. Then somebody said he was ill – down with dysentery and fever at the Phoenix. I went off at once to see him. I couldn’t believe my eyes. He was emaciated, haggard, with black-ringed eyes sunk into his head, and so weak that he couldn’t raise his arm when it slipped from the bed. He spoke to me in whispers and gasps, only a word or two, and then lay back on the pillows with a terrible look of suffering in his eyes, or occasionally dropping the lids with peculiar suddenness;

and when he did this the room seemed empty from loss of this horrible expression of pain.

“I stood at the foot of his bed, and didn’t know what to do or say, and didn’t know how to get out of a room where I was so useless. This sort of thing may only have lasted a few minutes, or perhaps half an hour – I don’t know; but after one long spell he opened his eyes suddenly and looked long and steadily into mine, sat bolt upright, apparently without effort, lifted his glance till I felt he was looking over my head at something on the wall behind me, and then raised both arms, outstretched as though to receive something, and, groaning out, ‘Oh, my God! my poor wife!’ dropped back dead.”

There were five intent faces upturned at Barberton as he stopped. The rosy glow of the fire lighted them up, and the man nearest me – the millionaire – whispered to himself, “Good God! how awful!”

“Well, who was he? Did you – ” began the man who wrote for the papers.

Barberton looked steadily at him, and with measured deliberation said:

“We never knew another word about him. From that day to this nothing has ever been heard to throw the least light on him or what he said.”

Far away in the stillness of the African night we heard the impatient half-grunt, half-groan of the lion. Near by there was a cricket chirping; and presently a couple of the logs settled down

with a small crunch, and a fresh tongue of flame leaped up. Barberton pumped a straw up and down the stem of the faithful briar, and remarked sententiously:

“Yah, it’s a rum old world, this of ours! I’ve seen civilisation take its revenge that way quite a lot of times – just like a woman!”

No one else said a word. Now and then a snore came from under the waggon where the drivers were sleeping.

The dog beside me gave some abortive whimpers, and his feet twitched convulsively – no doubt he was hunting in dreamland. I felt depressed by Barberton’s yarn.

But round the camp-fire long silences do not generally follow a yarn, however often they precede one. One reminiscence suggests another, and it takes very, very little to tempt another man to recall something which “that just reminds him of.” It was the surveyor who rose to it this time; I could see the spirit move him. He sat up, stroked his clean-shaven face, closed the telescope eye, and looked at Barberton.

“Do you know,” he began thoughtfully, “you talk of chaps going away because of something happening – some quarrel or mistake or offence or something. That is all a sort of clap-trap romance, I know – the mystery trick, and so forth; but I confess it always interests me, although I know it’s all rot, because of a thing which happened within my own knowledge – an affair of a shipmate of mine, one of the best fellows that ever stepped the earth, in spite of the fact that he was a regular Admirable Crichton.

“He was an ideal sort of chap, until you got to know him really well, and found out that he was cursed with one perfectly miserable trait. He never – absolutely *never*– forgave an injury, affront, or cause of quarrel. He was not huffy or bad-tempered – a sunnier nature never was created; a more patient, even-tempered chap never lived – but it was really appalling with what immutable obstinacy he refused to forgive. In the instances that came under my own notice, where he had quarrelled with former friends – not through his own fault, I must say – nothing in this world, or any other, for that matter, could influence him to shake hands or renew acquaintance. His generosity and unselfishness were literally boundless, his courage and fidelity superb; but anyone who had seen evidence of his fault must have felt sorrow and regret for the blemished nature, and must have been awestruck and frightened by his relentlessness. Death all round him, the sight of it in friends, the prospect of it for himself, never shook his cursed obstinacy; as we knew, after one piece of business. He got the V.C. for a remarkable – in fact, mad – act of courage in rescuing a brother officer. The man he carried out, fought for, fought over, and nearly died for, was a man to whom he had not spoken for some years. God knows what the difference was about. This was their first meeting since quitting the same ship, and when he carried his former friend out and laid him safely in the surgeon’s corner of the square, the half-dead man caught his sleeve, and called out, ‘God bless you, old boy!’ All *he* did was to loosen the other’s grip gently, and, without a

word or look at him, walk back into the fight. It seems incredible – it did to us; but he wouldn't know him again. He had literally wiped him out of his life!

“This trait was his curse. He was well off and well connected, and he married one of the most charming women I have ever met. For years none of us knew he was married. His wife was, I am convinced, as good as gold; but she was young, attractive, accomplished, and, in fact, a born conqueror. Perhaps she was foolish to show all the happiness she felt in being liked and admired. You know the long absences of a sailor. Well, perhaps she would have been wiser had she cut society altogether; but she was a true, good woman, for all that, and she worshipped him like a god! None of us ever knew what happened; but he left wife and child, settled on them all he had in the world, handed over his estates and almost all his income, and his right to legacies to come, went out into the world, and simply erased them from his mind and life.

“That was a good many years ago – ten, I should think; and – I hate to think it – but I wish I was as sure of to-morrow as I am sure that he never recognised their existence again.”

The surveyor shuddered at the thought.

“He was a man who could do anything that other men could do. He was best at everything. He was loved by his mates, worshipped by his men, and liked and admired by everyone who met him – until this trait was revealed. Others must have felt as I did. When I discovered *that* in him, I don't know whether I was

more frightened or grieved. I don't know that I didn't stick to him more than ever – perhaps from pity, and the sense that he was his own enemy and needed help. I have never heard of or from him since he left the service, and yet I believe I was his most intimate friend. Oliver Raymond Rivers was his name. Musical name, isn't it?"

Barberton dropped his pipe.

"Good God! Sebougwaan!"

Chapter Two.

Soltké.

An Incident of the Delagoa Road

We were transport-riders trekking with loads from Delagoa Bay to Lydenburg, trekking slowly through the hot, bushy, low veld, doing our fifteen to twenty miles a day. The roads were good and the rates were high, and we were happy.

Towards sundown two of us strolled on ahead, taking the guns in hopes of picking up a guinea-fowl, or a stembuck, or some other small game, leaving the waggons to follow as soon as the cattle were inspanned. We shot nothing; in fact, we saw nothing to shoot. It was swelteringly hot, as it always is there until the red sun goes down and all things get a chance to cool. It was also very dusty – two or three inches of powdery dust under our feet, which whipped up in little swirls at the least breath of air. I was keeping an eye on the scrub on my side for the chance of a bush pheasant, and not taking much notice of the road, when my companion pulled up with a half-suppressed exclamation, and stood staring hard at something on ahead.

“Dern my skin!” said he slowly and softly, as I came up to him. He was a slow-spoken Yankee. “Say, look there! Don’t it beat hell?”

In the direction indicated, partly hidden by the scant foliage of

a thorn-tree, a man was sitting on a yellow portmanteau reading a book. The sight was unusual, and it brought the unemotional Yankee to a standstill and set us both smiling. The man was dressed in a sort of clerk's everyday get-up, even to the bowler hat, and as he sat there he held overhead an old black silk umbrella to protect him from such of the sun's rays as penetrated the thorn-bush. He must have become conscious of the presence of life by the subtle instinct which we all know and can't explain, for almost immediately he raised his glance and looked us straight in the eyes. He rose and came towards us, laying aside the umbrella, but keeping his place in the book.

The scene was too ludicrous not to provoke a smile, and the young fellow – he could not have been above twenty-three – mistaking its import, raised his hat politely and wished us “good-afternoon.”

He spoke English, but with a strong German accent, and his dress, his open manner, his ready smiles, and, above all, his politeness, proclaimed him very much a stranger to those parts. Key murmured a line from a compatriot: “Green peas has come to market, and vegetables is riz.”

“You have come mit der waggons? You make der transport? Not?” he asked us, following up the usual formula.

We told him it was so, and that we were for the fields, and reckoned to reach Matalha by sun-up. He too, he said, was going to the gold-fields, and would be a prospector; he was just waiting for his “boy,” who had gone back for something he had forgotten

at the last place. He was going to walk to Moodie's, he said. He "*did* make mit one transporter a contract to come by waggons; but it was a woman mit two childs what was leave behind, and dere was no more waggons, so he will walk. It was good to walk to make him strong for de prospect. Oh yes!"

We were used to meeting all sorts on the road, and they were pretty well all inclined to talk; but this one was so full it just bubbled out of him, and in his broken English he got off question on question, between times imparting scraps of information about himself and his hopes. He was clearly in earnest about his future, and he was so utterly unpractical, so hopelessly astray in his view of everything, that one could not but feel kindly towards him. We chatted with him until our waggons came up, when he again politely raised his hat as he said good-bye to us, and offered many thanks for the information about the road. As we moved on with the waggons, he turned to look down the road by which we had come, and said, apparently as an afterthought:

"You haf seen my 'boy' perhaps? Not? No! Soh! Good-bye – yes, good-bye!"

It does not take long for daylight to glide through dusk into darkness in the bush veld in South Africa, and even these few minutes spent in conversation had seen the light begin to fade from the sky as the sun disappeared. The road was good and clear of rocks and stumps, so we hopped onto the most comfortable wagon, and talked while the oxen plodded slowly along.

We had quite a large party that trip, for, besides Gowan and

myself, who owned the waggons, we had three traders from Swazie country – old friends of ours who had come down to Delagoa to buy goods. We had all arranged to stand in together in a big venture of running loads through Swazieland to the gold-fields later on in the season; in fact, the trip we were then making was more or less a trial one to see how the land lay, and how much we could venture in the big coup.

Gowan, the other transport-rider, and I always travelled together. We were not partners exactly, but in a country like that it was good to have a friend, and we understood each other. There were no two ways about him; he was a white man through and through. The two Mackays were brothers; they had left Scotland some years before to join a farming scheme “suitable for gentlemen’s sons with a little capital,” as the circular and advertisements said. They had given it best, however, and gone trading long before I met them. The other member of our party was the one with whom I had been walking. He was an American, and had been everything and everywhere, most lately a trader in Swazie country. We generally called him the Judge.

As the waggons rumbled along Key was giving a more or less accurate account of our conversation with the stranger.

It was very amusing, even more amusing than the original, for I am bound to say that with him a story did not suffer in the telling. It was only Gowan who didn’t seem to see anything to laugh at in the affair. He sat there dangling his legs over the buck-rails, chewing a long grass stalk, and humming all out of tune. He had

a habit of doing that, growling with it. Presently, as conversation flagged, the tune got worse and his growling took the shape of a reference to “giving a poor devil a lift.”

I frankly confessed that I simply had not thought of it, and that was all. As, however, Gowan continued growling about “beastly shame” and “poor devil of a greenhorn,” etc, Key answered dryly.

“Waal, I *did* think of it; but, first place, they ain’t my waggons – ”

Gowan grunted out, “Dam rot!”

“And second place,” continued Key placidly, “considerin’ the kind o’ cargo you’ve got aboard, and where it’s going to, I didn’t reckon you *wanted* any passengers!”

“I don’t want passengers,” said Gowan gloomily; “but any damned fool knows that that fellow’ll never see food or blankets or ‘boy’ again on the face of God’s earth. Kaffir carriers don’t forget things at outspans. No, not any that I’ve seen, and I’ve seen a good few.”

Old Gowan took up the grass stem again, and chewed and tugged at it, and made occasional kicks at passing bushes, by way of showing a general and emphatic disapproval. No one said anything; it was Gowan’s way to growl at everything, and nobody ever took much notice. He was the most good-natured, kindly old growler that ever lived. He growled as some sturdy old dogs do when you pat them – they like it.

In this particular case, of course, he had reason. It is not that we were inhospitable or unfeeling, but years of roughing it had,

I suppose, dulled our impressions of the first night alone in the veld, and we had not seen it as Gowan did. Life of the sort we led, no doubt, develops the sterling good qualities of one's nature, but quick sympathy and its kindred delicate traits are rather growths of refinement and quiet, and it betrayed no real want of feeling that we had not taken Gowan's view.

There could be no doubt, of course, that the Kaffir boy had bolted with the blankets and food, for we had noticed that the young German had nothing left when we saw him but that yellow portmanteau, and our knowledge of the Delagoa Bay "boy" forbade acceptance of the theory that he had gone empty-handed.

We rumbled heavily along for a bit, and after a while Gowan resumed, in a tone of deeper grumbling and more surly dissatisfaction than before:

"Like as not the silly young fool 'll lose himself looking for water, and die in the Bush, like that one Joe Roberts brought up last season. Why, I remember when –"

"Grave o' the Prophet!" exclaimed Robbie, starting up in mock alarm; "he's going to tell us that dismal yarn about the parson chap who hunted beetles, and was found after a week's search with two of his most valuable specimens feeding on his eyes. Skip, sonnie, skip! and fetch up your German friend 'fore the old man gets under way."

Key dropped off the buck-rails, as the drivers shouted their "Aanhouws" to the cattle to give them a breather, kicked his legs

loose a bit, dusted down his trousers quietly, and, smiling good-humouredly at Gowan, “guessed it was better business to hump that gripsack a mile or two than listen to old Yokeskey’s prayers.” That was his irreverent way of alluding to Gowan’s calling of transport-rider – a yokeskey being part of the trek gear. Key and I set out together at a brisk pace, well knowing how poor was our chance of catching up to the waggons again before the midnight outspan.

Key, who was always tickled by Gowan’s growling tones, remarked after we had walked for some minutes:

“Sling hell like a nigger parson, you know, can the old ’un, but soft and harmless as a woman.”

After half an hour’s brisk walking, we caught the unsteady flicker of a fire through the straggling thorns, and we found our friend sitting tailorwise before it, making vigorous but futile attempts to wisp aside the smoke that would go his way. His look of mild curiosity at the sound of our voices wakened up into welcome when he recognised us, and he at once became interested in the reason of our return.

“You haf lose something – not? I, too, will look for you,” he said, jumping up eagerly; but we reassured him on that point, and inquired in turn whether his “boy” had returned, and cross-questioned him as to the when and wherefore of his leaving.

The Kaffir-bearer, he said, had left him that morning during the after-breakfast trek.

“Ten hours gone, by Jimmie!” muttered the Judge.

“And you have waited here since then?” I asked.

“Oh yes, yes! I read to learn de English. It is – ”

“Had any scoff?”

“Please?”

“Had any grub – anything to eat or drink?” explained Key, illustrating his meaning by graphic touches on mouth and belt.

“No, no; I am not hunger. Also it is good that I eat not. It make me use for the prospect.”

Key smiled gently, and said, with a quaint judicial air:

“Waal, I don’t know as that’s quite necessary; but ef you kin stick it out till that nigger o’ yours comes back, I guess you’ll do for most any camp you’ll strike in this country. Say! Has he got the blankets? Yes! And the grub? So! An’ – er – mebbe you didn’t give him money as well?”

“I haf give him one pound to pay the passport, which he forgot. He say policeman will take him if he shows not the ticket. But he will come bring to me the change. He is ein goot boy, and he speaken English feul goot; but perhaps something can happen, and that policeman haf take him, I think.”

Even in a new-comer such credulity was a revelation. I could not help smiling, but the Judge’s clear-cut, impassive features never changed; only, at the mention of the “boy’s” lingual accomplishments, he winked solemnly at me.

The Judge brought matters to a practical issue by telling our friend that he “had much better wait at our waggons for the good boy that speaks English so well.”

“It ain’t,” said Key, “es if he couldn’t find you. A Kaffir kin find you most anywhere if he wants to – ’specially them English-speakin’ ones,” he added, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Key did not wait for any reply, but turned the “yaller gripsack” over and looked at the name, “Adolf Soltké,” painted in big white letters.

“Your name?” he asked in chaff, rather than that he doubted it.

“My name, yea Soltké – Adolf Soltké – coom from Germany, but in der colonie I was leetle times.”

“Took you for Amurrikan,” said the Judge, without a vestige of a smile.

I looked hastily at Soltké, feeling that his broken, halting English should have protected him from such outrageous fooling, but my solicitude was misplaced. Soltké calmly, but firmly, disclaimed all knowledge of America, and repeated that he was a German.

Key shouldered the portmanteau with the curt suggestion, “Waal, let’s git!” and as our friend – except by his protestations of gratitude and wild endeavours to carry the whole of the kit himself – offered no hindrance to the proposed scheme, we marched along briskly to overtake the waggons.

A bullock-waggon is a slow one to travel with, but a bad one to catch, as anyone knows who has tried it; and it was close on midnight when, tired and dusty, we came suddenly on the waggons outspanned in a small opening in the Bush.

The silence was absolutely ghostly, except when now and then

a bullock would give a big long sigh, or a sappy stick in the fire would crack and hiss.

Gowan was sitting over the fire on a three-legged rough-wood stool, head in hands and elbows on knees, with the odd jets of flame lighting up his solemn old face and shaggy brown beard. The others had turned in. He stood up slowly as we came up and extended a hand to Soltké, saying baldly:

“How are ye?”

Our friend took the inquiry in a literal sense, and was engaged in answering it, when Gowan cut in with a remark that it was “time to be in bed,” and, accepting his own hint, he hooked his finger in the “reimpje” of his camp-stool and strolled off to where his blankets were already spread under one of the waggons.

As he turned, he pointed with his foot to the fire, growling out that there was a billy of tea and some stew warmed up “for him” (looking back at Soltké), and adding, “Bread’s in the grub-box. ’Night!” he turned in.

It was just like him to remember these things, for in our routine there was as a rule no eating during the night outspan. It was breakfast after the morning trek, and supper before the evening one. Gowan had also thrown out a couple of blankets, and between us we made up pretty well for the lost bedding; so Soltké was installed as one of the party. It says something for him that, in spite of our eight-mile walk and that yellow portmanteau, the verdict under our waggons that night was: “Seems a decent

sort, after all, and it *would* ha' been a bit rough to leave him to shift for himself."

Soltké's stupendous greenness should have disarmed chaff; and, indeed, at first we all felt that fooling him was like misleading a child: there was no fun to be got out of it. He believed anything that was told him. He accepted literally those palpable exaggerations which are not expected or wanted to be believed. He took for gospel the account of the Munchausen of the Bush veld who told how his team of donkeys had been disturbed by a lion during the early morning trek, and how, to his infinite surprise and alarm, he found that the savage brute had actually eaten his way into one donkey's place, and when day broke was found still pulling in the team, to the great dismay of the other members. He was anxious to make a personal experiment of the efficacy of dew taken off a bullock's horn, which we had recommended as an infallible snake charm. At considerable risk he had secured the dew, and the scene of Soltké's struggling with the bewildered bullock at early dawn one morning was one to be remembered. However, he pledged himself not to carry the experiment further without the assistance of one of us, and a day or two later we removed immediate risk by losing his phial of dew. I am convinced that he would have tried the experiment on any snake he might have met, and with absolute confidence as to the result.

His mind was such as one would expect in a child who had known neither mental nor physical fear. He seemed absolutely

void, not only of personal knowledge of evil, but even of that cognisance of its existence which shows itself in a disposition to seek corroborative evidence, to consult probabilities, and to inquire into motives. I am convinced that Soltké never questioned a motive in his life, nor ever hesitated to accept as a fact anything told in apparent seriousness. Irony and sarcasm were to him as to a child or a savage. He was intensely literal, single-minded and direct, and perfectly fearless in thought, word or act. Such a disposition in a child would have been charming. In a well-set-up, active young man of three-and-twenty or so it was embarrassing. Donald Mackay, who was of a choleric disposition, complained a day or two after Soltké joined us that "he was blanked if he could blank well stand it. Why, that morning, when he was about to give one o' the boys a lambastin', the kiddie turns white as a girl wi' the first swear and a sight of the sjambok, an' Aa tell ye, mon, Aa was nigh to bustin' wi' a' the drawing-room blether Aa was gettin' off." It was quite true. Soltké was not shocked nor affecting to be shocked at the vigorous language he heard; he was simply unlearned in it, and shrank as a girl might from the outburst of violence.

Gradually the feeling of strangeness wore off, and the restraint which the new presence had imposed was no longer felt except on odd occasions. On our side, we chaffed and shook him up, partly on the impulse of the time, and partly with good-natured intent to make him better fitted to take care of himself among the crowd with whom he would mix later on. On his side, he

had never felt restraint, and of course rapidly became familiar with us and our ways, and seemed thoroughly to enjoy the chaff and his initiation into the system of good-humoured imposture. With all his greenness, he was no fool; in fact, he was in odd, unexpected ways remarkably shrewd and quick, as he often showed in conversation. He was, moreover, a poor subject for practical jokes, and several of the stock kind recoiled on the perpetrators, because, as I have said, he did not know what fear was.

When a notorious practical joker named Evans, with whom we travelled in company for a couple of days, “put up” the lion scare on Soltké, it didn’t come off. He asked our young friend to dine at his waggons on the other side of a dry donga, and, after telling the most thrilling lion yarns all the evening, left Soltké to walk back alone, while he slipped off to waylay him at the darkest and deepest part of the donga. There was the rustle of bushes and sudden roar which had so often played havoc before; but Soltké only stepped back, and lugged out in unfamiliar fashion a long revolver which no one knew he carried. Ignoring the fact that a lion could have half eaten him in the time expended, Soltké calmly cocked the weapon, and, to the terror of his late host, poured all six barrels into the bush from which the noise had come. He then retreated quietly out of the donga to where we, hearing the shots and Evans’s shouts of terror, had run down to see what was up. Soltké was excited, but quiet, and the noise of the reports had evidently prevented him from detecting the man’s

voice. He said:

“It was something what make ‘Har-r-r-!’ by me, and I shoot; but I haf no more cartridge.”

We did not see Evans again for some months. The story of Soltké’s lion made the road too hot for him that winter.

When we told Soltké the real facts, his face was a study. For some days he was very quiet and thoughtful; he was completely puzzled, and for the life of him could not imagine the motive that had actuated Evans; nor could he, on the other hand, realise the possibility of anyone acting differently from the way in which he had done.

Before this there had been some horseplay when we were crossing the Komatie River. The stream was running strong, and was then from four to five feet deep at the drift; and, although it was known to be full of crocodiles, there was little or no danger at the regular crossing. However, Key had primed Soltké with some gorgeous stories of hairbreadth escapes, intending to play a trick on him in the river.

“It is quite a common thing for men to be carried off here,” said the Judge; “but white men are very seldom killed – not more than four or five a year – because of the boots.”

“Boots!” exclaimed Soltké inquisitively.

“Yes,” said Key, in half-absent tones. “Ef you kick properly, no croc’ can stand it.”

Soltké complained excitedly, and as though he had suffered gross injustice, that no one had told him this interesting phase

of life on the road; but Key snubbed him, telling him that men didn't speak much of such matters, as it gave the impression of bragging.

Soltké, who was above all things desirous of conforming with the etiquette of the road, asked no more questions; but Key, later on in the day, affecting to relent a little, got Soltké to sit straddle-legs on the pole of one of the waggons, and there, under his directions, practise kicking crocodiles.

The crossing was too difficult for one span of oxen, so we double-spanned, and put all hands on with whips and sjamboks along the thirty oxen, to whack and shout until we got through.

Key placed himself behind Soltké and, just when the excitement was greatest, with his long whip-stick and lash he made a loop, in which he managed to enclose Soltké's legs. One jerk took him clean off his feet, and down-stream he went, floundering and kicking for dear life, for he believed a crocodile had him. His kicking when he was head downwards and his legs were free of the water was remarkable. There were roars of laughter from everyone, as Key had passed the word along; but presently there was a lull, and the niggers stopped laughing and felt the joke fall flat, when Soltké, utterly unconscious of the real cause of his upset, waded deliberately back as soon as he recovered his feet, and, pale but undaunted, took his place, sjambok in hand, the same as before.

Among transport-riders the condition of the Berg – as the spurs of the long Drakensberg range of mountains are called

colloquially – is always a fruitful topic of conversation. The Berg at Spitz Kop is worse than at any other point, I believe, and Soltké exhibited a growing interest in this much-discussed feature of the road. His enthusiastic nature led him here into all sorts of speculations about it, which were highly amusing to us; and the Judge egged poor Soltké on and crammed him so that he undertook in our interest to devise some method for ascending this awful Berg whereby the then terrible risks to life and property would be minimised, if not entirely removed. The position, as Key explained it, was this: There was a long, steep hill to be surmounted, the grade of which varied between 30 degrees and vertical, but the crowning difficulty lay in the “shoot.” Here it was an open question whether the hill did not actually overhang; so steep was it, in fact, that it was not an uncommon occurrence for the front oxen to slip as they gained the summit, and fall back into the waggon, possibly killing both leader and driver, and doing infinite damage to the loads. Soltké faced this problem brimful of confidence in the subject and himself. After hours of keen discussion and diligent experiments, Soltké produced his plan. It was a system of endless rope on guides and pulleys, so arranged that by a top anchorage on the summit of this hill both oxen and driver would be secure. Soltké was triumphant, but Key extricated himself temporarily by pointing out that, as we had not enough rope to try the scheme, we would have to take the old roundabout road and leave the “shoot” for the next trip.

The joking with Soltké; as I have said, at times degenerated

into common horseplay, and this led to the only unpleasantness we had. The younger Mackay – Robbie – was a quiet, humorous, and most gentle-natured fellow, an immense favourite with everybody.

One night we were all standing round the fire, when something occurred which nobody ever seemed able to explain. Soltké had mislaid his pipe, and, thinking he had seen Robbie take it, asked him for it back. Robbie denied all knowledge, and Soltké, deeming it but another practical joke, said, “I saw you taking it, you – ” using a term which he, poor chap, had picked up without knowing the meaning, a term which among white men never passes unnoticed. Robbie’s Scotch blood was aflame, and before one of us could stir, before he himself could think of the allowances to be made, before the word was well said, a heavy right-hander across the mouth dropped Soltké back against the waggon. Blank amazement and something like consternation marked every face, but none was so utterly taken aback as poor Soltké, who would have suffered anything rather than inflict pain upon a fellow-being. He only said, “Robbie, what haf I say? I do not understand,” and, looking white and miserable, walked quietly off to his blankets and turned in. To us it was as though a girl, a child, had been struck, and no one felt this more than Robbie himself, as soon as he saw that the insult was not intentional. The look on Soltké’s face was that of a stricken woman, a look of dull, unmerited pain. He was not cowed – just dazed and hurt, but inexpressibly hurt. You will see men blink

and shuffle under that look in a woman's face. You will see a master quail before it in a servant. You will see White go down before it in Black; for it is God's own weapon in the hands of helpless right. As long as I live I shall remember that look. I felt as though *I* had done it!

We trekked as usual next morning at about three o'clock, and it must have been some time in the dark hours of the early trek that Bobbie spoke to Soltké. Whatever it was he said, it relieved the awkwardness, and restored Soltké to something of his old self; but he was never quite the same again, and for some days we did not get over the look in his eyes and the feeling of guiltiness it left in us.

Robbie did not speak of that early morning scene, but later in the day remarked incontinently:

"By God! he is white, is Soltké – white all through."

Soltké kept a diary, and kept it with the most marvellous fidelity and unflagging industry, and he also learned to shoot, and shot cockyolly birds occasionally, and was pleased to know their sporting and scientific names. There is a sort of bastard cockatoo in those parts which is commonly known as the "Go way" bird, on account of its cry, which closely resembles these words, and of a habit it is supposed to have of warning game of the approach of man. In Soltké's diary there should be an elaborate essay on the ancestry and personal habits of this bird, and the wonderful traditions of its family. He took these things down faithfully and laboriously from the Judge's own lips. The Judge had a copious

mythology. Poor Soltké tried to stuff some of his dicky-birds, labelling them with such names as Key could always supply at a moment's notice. The result was unpleasant, as Soltké took to bestowing these ill-preserved relics in the side-pockets of the tents, in the waggon-boxes, and in a dozen other unlikely spots. It was only now and then that we could actually find them; but there was a constant suggestion of their proximity, nevertheless.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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