GLANVILLE ERNEST

TALES FROM THE VELD

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Содержание

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Preface

The tales here set forth are, subject to a generous allowance for Uncle Abe's gift of imagination, true to the animal life and the scenery of a district in the Cape occupied by the British Settlers of 1820 – a tract rich in incidents of border warfare, hallowed by the struggles of that early band of colonists, saturated with the superstitions and folk lore of the Kaffirs, and thoroughly familiar to the author – who passed his boyhood there.

E. Glanville.

Streatham: September 1897.

Chapter One
Abe Pike's Poison Bark

Abe Pike – Old Abe Pike, or Uncle Abe as he was variously called – lived in a one-horse shanty in the division of Albany, Cape Colony. I won't locate his farm, for various reasons, beyond saying that there is a solitary blue-gum on the south side of the house and the rudiments of a cowshed on the north. Uncle Abe was not ambitious; he was slow, but he was sure. So he said. One blue-gum satisfied him, and as for the cowshed he meant to complete it during the century. I don't introduce him as a tree planter, but as a narrator of most extraordinary yarns. He called them facts – but of the truth of this the reader may judge.

Riding over one warm afternoon, I found him leaning over a water-butt examining the little lively and red worms therein, which would soon hatch out into livelier mosquitoes.

"Well, Uncle, how d'ye fare?"

"Porly, lad, porly; pumpkins is scarce."

Uncle Abe took a very old pipe from his pocket, and showed the emptiness of it by placing a very gnarled little finger into the black bowl.

I held out my pouch.

"I'll jest take a little dry to put on the top," he said, as he deliberately filled the pipe. "We want a little 'dry on the top' to

start us, but if there's nothin' deown below, why, it's a puff and out it goes. Yo'll never get a crop from that bottom land o' yours until you put some dry on the top in the shape of manure. See!"

Now, of all the laziest, shiftless beings there was no one who could start level with old Abe Pike, and this advice from him was rasping, but still he had his points.

"I've heard say there's a powerful heap o' money in portents," he ventured presently.

"It depends on how you interpret them."

"Well, that's so. I've got a portent here in this very coat; that's some small pumpkins, I tell you. It'll kill any sort o' vermin, rats, skeeters, wild-cats, jackals, quicker'n winkin'. See! I found it out myself come next Friday fortnight."

"You mean you interpreted the portent."

"Well, now, is that so? I tole you I got it in my pocket, and ef I didn't find it, how did it get there? That's what I want to know."

"All right, Uncle, what is it?"

"That's my portent. I diskivered it, and I'm gwine to work it under my name – Abe Pike's Sure Killer."

"Is it a patent medicine you're talking of?"

"Of course; that's what I said. There it is," and out of his pocket he produced a strip of bark.

"Sneeze-wood bark, isn't it?"

"Looks like it, don't it? But there's bark and there's bark. This is Abe Pike's Bark, possessing properties which will alleviate the sufferings of the human race by putting a lightning end to the

enemies of the human kind. That's what I've studied out to put in the papers in big letters. There's money in it, now; ain't there?"

"I don't see it, Uncle."

"Ah! the limitations of knowledge, my boy, is accountable for a pot of ignorance. You think that's plain ordinary bark, but that's where your limitations run dry. I'll jes' tell you how I diskivered this great and marvellous killer of the centry. Come Friday fortnight I sot out with the axe to chop out a pole for the cowshed – t'other on' been eaten thro' by those plaguy ants. Well, I knew of a tree way down in the kloof that had been growin' for that shed o' mine ever since the seed dropped on the 'xact spot where nature had provided a bed for it. When you come to think of it, everything has got its purpose all smoothed out from the start, and that little seed spread itself out from the beginnin' to build up a pole for ole Abe Pike's cowshed. I sot down on a fallen tree and thought that all out, while the trees round about made a whisperin' with their leaves over the head o' that there sneeze 'ood that was doomed so to speak, by reason o' my cows, and the necessity of keepin' 'em out o' the rain in the winter. Well, I sot there thinking all these thoughts until it was too dark, and I went away home 'thout having cut the tree. Next mornin' I took up my axe and went down into the kloof and took off my coat. I gave two blows and stopped."

"Too much work?"

"Jes' you wait. I tole you there was a fallen tree; well, in that tree was a snake. The first blow of the axe woke him, and he

popped his head out. The second blow sent a chip that hit him square between the eyes. Out he came biling with rage, and hissin' like a kettle o' water, and I just had time to dodge behind the tree when he let out. His fangs stuck right in the wood, and with a clip I cut his head off. I stood away back looking at his writhing body and at his wicked head sticking there in the tree jes' where I had made the wedge. As I looked in, there came to pass a remarkable circumstance."

"Yes?"

"Yes; that tree began to lose colour. It was a healthy tree, sound as a bell, with a heart o' iron and a crown o' green leaves; but as I stood there in the space o' maybe one minit, or a minit and a half, it begun to turn pale and sickly."

"Turn pale!"

"Yes, sir, that's what I said. First the leaves shuddered and rustled, and grew moist; then they slowly turned yeller, curling up as if they'd been frost-bitten, only sadder. It s'prised me, that did, for there was somethin' in the way the leaves went that struck a shudder through me, 'twas so human like in the manner o' it. But that was nothing – the bark suddenly cracked and peeled off – then the white trunk itself standin' there, exposed in its nakedness began to swell – until it split with a groan – ay, a groan, a moaning shivery gasp o' pain. 'Twas so like life, I turned and ran, thinkin' that dead snakes was after me – so that as I ran the fear grew upon me till I came out inter the open. After looking around keerfully I sat on a stone an' steadied my thinking machine. When I got

the fear out o' me I went back and there was that tree dead as tho' it had been struck by lightnin' and bleached by the rain an' sun."

"Well?"

"That tree was pisened! It died o' snakebite – its system chock full o' pisen. I cut it down and took it home, where I planted it under the shed."

"And your portent?"

"I'm comin' to that, if you'll give me time. That night I couldn't sleep for a procession of ants. They came out of a hole in the floor, crept over my bed – which you may know is on the floor for convenience – and marched out thro' the crack under the door. All the ants in the country were there – red ants, black ants, working ants, soldier ants, and the soldier ants nipped me whenever I moved. In the morning, when they had passed away, I went outside, and in the shed there was thousands an' thousands o' dead ants, not to speak o' flies."

"All dead?"

"They had been nipping that pisened pole, and those that didn't bite got the news and moved off for other scenes. I tell you, you may speak o' telegraph wires, but lor' bless you, news travels faster among the creatures. Why I've knowed – "

"Yes; but you've not told me about your discovery."

"Well, now, the limitations of your knowledge is great. I've told you enough to put two and two together. If not, I'll just make the plain plainer. Seeing what the tree had done, I though o' the bark an' the leaves left there behind in the kloof, and went for

'em. It was jus' as I thought. They was deadly pisen, and when I laid some leaves about the house they killed all the flies, and a piece o' bark laid in a rat-hole brought all the rats out corpses.

"Yes sir, that's ole Abe Pike's Vermin Destroyer, and if you're setting pills for jackals, why, don't you forget to come to my shop."

"Are you opening a shop?"

"That's what I said. Abe Pike's vermin pisen poles, warrented to stand the ravages o' time an' insects, and Pike's bark; no other genuine. So long!"

"Well, so long!"

Chapter Two
Uncle Abe's Big Shoot

I had ridden out one day to the outpost, where a troop of young cattle were running, when the horse rode into a covey of red-wing partridges, a brace of which I accounted for by a right and left. Picking up the birds, and feeling rather proud of the shot, I continued on to Uncle Pike's to crow over the matter.

The old man was seated outside the door 'braiding' a thong of forslag or whip-lash.

"Hitch the reins over the pole. Ef the shed was ready I'd ask yer to stable the hoss, but there's a powerful heap o' work yet to finish it off nice an' shipshape – me being one o' those who like to see a job well done. None o' yer rough and ready sheds for me, with a hole in the roof after the fust rain. A plump brace o' birds – you got 'em up by the Round Kopje."

"Yes, Uncle; a right and left from the saddle. Good shooting, eh!"

"Fair to middling, sonny – fair to middling – but with a handful o' shot an' a light gun what can yer expect but to hit. Now, ef you'd bagged 'em with one ball outer an ole muzzle-loader, why I'd up an' admit it was praisable."

"Why Uncle, where's the man who would knock over two birds with a ball? It couldn't be done."

"Is that so? Well, now yer s'prise me."

"You're not going to tell me you have seen that done!"

"Something better. That's small potatoes."

He rose up, went indoors, and returned with an ancient single muzzle-loader, the stock bound round with snake skin. "Jes' yer handle that wepin."

I handled it, and returned it without a word. It was ill-balanced, and came up awkwardly to the shoulder.

"That wepin saved my life."

"In the war?"

"In the big drought. You remember the time. The country was that dry, you could hear the grass crackle like tinder when the wind moved, an' every breath stirred up columns of sand which went cavorting over the veld round and round, their tops bending over to each other an' the bottoms stirring up everything movable, and the whole length of the funells dotted about with snakes, an' lizards, an' bits of wood. Why, I see one o' em whip up a dead sheep, an' shed the wool off o' the carcase as it went twisting round an' round."

"And the gun?"

"The gun was on the wall over my bed. Don't you mind the gun. Well, it was that dry the pumpkins withered up where they lay on the hard ground – an' one day there was nought in the larder, not so much as a smell. There was no breakfast for ole Abe Pike, nor dinner nor yet tea, an' the next morning 'twas the same story o' emptiness. I took down the old gun from the wall an'

cleaned her up. There was one full charge o' powder in the horn, an' one bullet in the bag. All that morning I considered whether 'twould be wiser to divide that charge inter three, or to pour the whole lot of it in't once. When dinner-time came an' there was no dinner, I solumnly poured the whole bang of it inter the barrel, an' listened to the music of the black grains as they rattled on their way down to their last dooty. I cut a good thick wad from a buck-hide and rammed it down, 'Plunk, plenk, plank, plonk, ploonk,' until the rod jumped clean out o' the muzzle. Then I polished up that lone bullet, wrapped him round in a piece o' oil rag, an' sent him down gently. 'Squish, squish, squash, squoosh.' I put the cap on the nipple, an' sent him home with the pressure o' the hammer. Then I took a look over the country to 'cide on a plan o' campaign. What I wanted was a big ram with meat on him ter last for a month, if 'twas made inter biltong. There was one down by the hoek, but it warnt full grown. He was nearest, but there was one I'd seen over yonder off by the river, beyond the kloof, an' I reckoned 'twas worth while going a couple o' mile extra to get him."

"You were sure of him?"

"He was as good as dead when I shouldered the gun an' stepped off out on that wilderness o' burnt land. The wind came like a breath from a furnace, an' the hair on my head split an' curled up under the heat. Whenever I came across a rock with a breadth of shade I sot there to cool off, panting like a fowl, an' also to cool off the gun for fear 'twould explode. By reason o' this

resting the dark came down when I reached the ridge above the river, an' I jest camped where it found me, after digging up some *insange* root to chew. The fast had been with me for two days, an' the gnawing pain inside was terrible, so that I kept awake looking up at the stars an' listening to the plovers."

"It must have been lonesome!"

"'Twas not the lonesomeness so much as the emptiness that troubled me. Before the morning came, lighting up the valley, I was going down to the river on the last hunt. 'Twas do or die that trip – an' it seemed to me I could see the gleam o' my bones away down there through the mist that hung over the sick river. I made straight for the river, knowing there was a comfort an' fellowship in the water which would draw game there, an' the big black ram, too, 'fore he marched off inter the thick o' the kloof for his sleep. By-and-by, as I went down among the rocks an' trees, I pitched head first – ker smash – in a sudden fit o' dizziness, but the shock did me good. It rattled up my brain – an' instead o' jest plunging ahead I went slow – slow an' soft as a cat on the trail – pushing aside a branch here, shoving away a dry twig there, an' glaring around with hungry eyes. I spotted him!"

"The ram?"

"Ay, the ram. The very buck I'd had in my mind when I loaded the old gun. He stood away off the other side o' the river, moving his ears, but still as a rock, and black as the bowl of this pipe, except where the white showed along his side. He seemed to be looking straight at me – an' I sank by inches to the ground with

my legs all o' a shake. Then, on my falling, he stepped down to the water, and stood there admiring hisself – his sharp horns an' fine legs – an' on my belly, all empty as 'twas, I crawled, an' crawled, an' crawled. There was a bush this side the river, an' I got it in line. At last I reached it, the sweat pouring off me, an' slowly I rose up. The water was dripping from his muzzle as he threw his head up, an' he turned to spring back, when, half-kneeling, I fired, an' the next moment the old gun kicked me flat as a pancake."

"And you missed him?"

"Never! I got him. I said I would, an' I did. I got him, an' a 9 pound barbel."

"Uncle Abe!"

"I say a 9 pound barbel, tho' he might a been 8 and a half pound, an' a brace of pheasants."

"Uncle Abe!"

"I zed so – an' a hare an', an'," he went on quickly, "a porkipine."

"Uncle Abe!"

"Well – what are you Abeing me for?"

"You got all those with one shot. Never!"

"I was there – you weren't. 'Tis easy accounted for. When I pulled the trigger the fish leapt from the water in the line, and the bullet passed through him inter the buck. I tole you the gun kicked. Well, it flew out o' my hands, an' hit the hare square on the nose. To recover myself, I threw up my hands, an' caught hold

o' the two pheasants jest startled outer the bush."

"And the porcupine?"

"I sot down on the porkipine, an' if you'd like to 'xamine my pants you'll find where his quills went in. I was mighty sore, an' I could ha' spared him well from the bag. But 'twas a wonderful good shot. You're not going?"

"Yes, I am. I'm afraid to stay with you."

"Well, so long! I cut this yere forslag from the skin o' that same buck."

"Let me see – it's nine years to the big drought."

"That's it."

"That skin has kept well."

"Oh, yes; 'twas a mighty tough skin."

"Not so tough as your yarn, Uncle. So long!"

Chapter Three
Uncle Abe, the Baboon, and the Tiger

Abe Pike was one of those men who would walk ten miles to set a trap without a murmur, while he thought himself badly used if he were called upon to hoe a row in the mealie field. So when, for the third time within one week, a calf was killed by a tiger, and our attempts to shoot, poison, or trap the thief had failed, I rode over to Uncle Abe's to secure his aid.

"I can't do it," he said, when I had stated my business.

"Too busy?"

"No; 'taint that, sonny, 'taint that – tho' there's a powerful heap o' work to do on that shed."

"I'll put in a couple of days and help you finish it right off, as soon as the tiger is laid by the heels."

"Thank ye kindly; but I've got to finish that there shed offun my own bat. It's a job that wants doin' keerfly."

"Well, Uncle, I'll plough up your old land by the hoek, and put in two muids of corn. How will that do?"

"'Twont do, my lad; that land's full o' charlock."

"Then, Uncle, the day you show me the dead body of that tiger, the red heifer with the white patch on the hump is yours."

He heaved a sigh, and knocked the bowl of his pipe on his thumb, but he did not accept the offer, though I knew he admired

that heifer.

"Why, Uncle, what is the matter? You're not ill?"

"'Tain't that, either – not 'xactly – tho' there's such a thing as illness o' the mind."

"I'm very sorry," as I unhitched the bridle and prepared to mount, "for I'll have to go to Long Sam, and from the hairs I've seen I shouldn't be surprised if this is a black tiger."

This was the last shot – Abe Pike had not yet trapped a black tiger, and Long Sam was his rival in bush lore.

"That settles it," he said, with a groan.

"Come along then," I said, with a smile at my success in breaking through his obstinacy.

Abe rose up and laid his gnarled hand on the mane of the horse. "'Tis the same one," he muttered, "the same one, sure."

"Why, of course; you know the old horse, Black Dick."

"Black Nick," he said slowly, and, drawing his hand across his forehead; "my boy, you'll never trap that animile; he's a witch tiger."

"A witch tiger?"

"That's so: he's given a lodging to some ole Kaffir. Abe Pike ain't going arter any black tigers, not he."

"What are you driving at now, you old buffer?"

"Buffer, is it; well – well – buffer – oh, yes, of course; an' me that has passed through sich a three weeks as ud have scared many another into his grave."

I felt remorse at the thought that for three weeks I had not

called on the lonely old man, and concluded that he was paying me out for this neglect.

"I am very sorry," I said eagerly, "I have not been over; but the truth is the work has been very heavy. It must have been very lonely."

"I've had kempany."

"Oh, I see; and perhaps they've engaged your services?"

"That's it. On 'count o' 'em that's been callin' here I can't go catching any black tigers."

"I should like to know who it is has set you against doing a service for a neighbour?"

"There's kempany an' kempany. This yer kempany ud turn your hair white."

"Ah!" I said, sniffing a story.

"Yes, 'twould that. There were some baboons away over by the big kloof. A family party – ole man, wives, middle-aged, an' pickaninnies. They came there for the Kaffir plum crop, an' were mighty lively, not to say noisy, three weeks ago, when they began to drop. I yeared 'em dropping off."

"Off the trees?"

"No; offun this mortal spear. As they dropped off in the dark, the others howled an' whooped like mad. It was a tiger that did the droppin'."

"A tiger?"

"You hold on to him. At last the ole man were left alone, an' he had a mighty anxious time looking all around at onct, while he

hunted for grubs for fear the enemy 'ud spring on him. He used to come over yonder in the lands for kempany. I've sot here on the door-step an' he sot over there, glaring at me from his little grey eyes. Arter a time we got to know each other, an' I found out he went to sleep on the roof alongside the chimney."

"He was the company?"

"One on 'em. An' seein' him about reminded me o' the Kaffir plums, so one mornin' I took up the can an' went away off to the big kloof where the plums are red an' juicy. Well – my boy – that ole man baboon, he up an' come along with me, an' when he found I were goin' to the kloof he jabbered most like a human. I could see he were excited – anybody could a seen that – an' I sot down on a rock to argy the point with him. He wouldn't argy, but he started back for the house. Well, you know me, when Abe Pike sots out to do a thing he does it, an' arter I had smoked two pipes, I resoomed my way, jest as unconcarned as you are, for all the plain meanin' o' the baboon that I should go away home. When he saw that I were sot on it he came along at a canter, with his hind-quarters slewed round an' the hair all standing up on his neck. He looked ugly, but 'xcept he lifted his eyebrows very quick, he said nothin', and went along very quiet, with the same anxious look on his face I had noticed prev'ous. As I went into the kloof he swung into the trees, an' kept along overhead. When we came to the thick o' the wood, he going along all the time scarcely moving a leaf, he made a soft noise, an' looking up I saw him bobbing his head up an' down to make you giddy. I

know by that he saw somethin', an' I jes' slipped behind a tree to take stock. I yeerd a yawn, an' what d'ye think I see thro' the leaves stretched out on a rock, not twenty foot away?"

"A black fellow?"

"Yes; a black feller, with four legs an' a tail, an' a red mouth all agape, wide enough to take in my head, hat an' all."

"A black tiger?"

"Yes; an' me with only a tin can. I jes' sank down inter my boots. All o' a sudden his jaws come to with a snap. Then he riz his head and stired straight fer me, his eyes gitting flamier as he looked, an' his tail all on the jerk. He moved his round head about, then shot out his neck an' growled in his stummik as he peered under the leaves. Just then that baboon let out a 'baugh – baugh – bok-hem,' an' dropped down beyond the tiger. There were a roar, a leap, a scramble, an' Abe Pike were shooting on his tracks for the open veld. He didn't stop running till he got home – he didn't – not me."

"And the baboon? He wasn't killed, was he?"

"You wait – jes' you wait. Before you get the end o' the journey you've got to pass the half-way house. This is a solitary place – this mansion – and beyond the ole Gaika-Bolo I have no visitors – an' he only when he's doctorin' the Kaffirs down these parts. So that night, when there were a tap at the door, I were skeered a little from the shake I got when I saw that black critter staring at me with them wicked eyes of hisn. 'Come in!' I sed, an' the tap came agin, soft an' gentle, like as if a child or a woman

were standin' there – timid – tho' it's many a year since a female brushed the door-post with her dress – a many years, my lad."

"Yes, Uncle; who was it?"

"'Come in!' I sed, laying hold o' a piece of wood. 'Jes' pull the string,' I sed. Believe me, the string were pulled – the upper half o' the door swung open, an' he stepped in."

"Who?"

"The old man baboon! He pulled the string, the door swung open, an' he hopped in."

"Good gracious, Uncle!"

"Yer s'prised. Well, jes' think how it took me – an' on top o' what I saw that day. I jes' sot there an' looked, an' when he turned an' shut that door, an' moved the wooden button to secure it, I were fairly paralysed. 'Ho-hoo,' he sed, an' blinked his eyes. He jes' sed 'ho-hoo' in a friendly way, an' planked hisself down before the fire, with the black palms o' his hands to the coals, his head turned over his shoulder, an' his little grey eyes takin' stock o' everythin' in the room."

"He must have escaped from captivity."

"That's the first thought that struck me when I steadied my brain pan. Thinks I, he b'longed to some man, an' I looked at his waist for signs of the chain, but there were no sign. I noticed he looked empty, an', remembering how he'd saved me by leading the tiger off another way, I got out a mealie cob. He snatched it quick, raised his eyebrows at me, then begun to eat as ef he'd been hungry for a week. There we sot – he one side, eating, me

t'other, smoking. All o' a sudden he quit eating: then he stood up on his hind legs an' looked outer the winder. 'Wot's up now?' sezs I to myself. There he stood looking outer that window; then he gave a jump into the rafters, crowding hisself under the slope. It gave me a sort o' creepy crawl to see him do that, an' I took down the ole gun. Bymby I yeard a sniff under the crack of the door as if a dog were taking a smell. Then there were a space o' stillness that was terrible trying. I stood there looking at the door, 'xpecting to see it fly open, when I chanced to give a glance at the winder, and my blood froze."

"What did you see?"

"What did I see? A pair o' green eyes fixed on me. Then the gleam o' white teeth an' a sort o' dim outline o' a big round head. I let out a yell, an' fired. If you look you'll see where the winder's smashed."

"The tiger had tracked the baboon?"

"Very like 'twas jes' that."

"And then?"

"Then I jes' jumped inter the pantry an shut myself in till daybreak."

"Yes, Uncle Abe; and what happened then?"

"I jes' opened the door gently, an' looked out."

"Well?"

"Well! The door were open. I yeerd the cracking o' the fire an' the humming o' the kettle."

"Someone had called?"

"Perhaps so; perhaps not. 'Tany rate the fire were lit. And when I looked out the front door there were the old man baboon plucking the feathers from the grey hen."

"Humph!"

"Yes. An' when he done plucking he popped the old fowl inter the pot."

"Ha! I suppose the tiger was lying dead?"

"Who – the tiger? Not he. The darned critter pulled the plug outer the water barrel, then turned the barrel over an' let all the water out. Arter that he pulled the roof offun my shed."

"I don't see the baboon around."

"He ain't around. Arter breakfast he went. When I come to think o' it, he took the road to your place, an' it's my b'lief, sonny, he's on the spoor o' the same tiger."

"And you won't come over, then?"

"I'm waitin' for that ole man baboon to come back. If he comes back an' finds me gone I reckon he'd be disappointed. I tell yer I'd be mighty keerful how you treat that tiger."

"Everything happened as you have related, Uncle Abe?"

"That's so, sonny."

"How did the baboon light the fire?"

"He jes' used the bellers, I 'xpect, used the beller, an' puffed the embers. Tell me how yer get on. Sorry I can't go; but I dasn't. So long!"

Chapter Four
Abe Pike and the Whip

I don't know what degree of truth there was in old Abe's account of his adventure with the black tiger, but I certainly learnt to my cost that whether the brute had or had not given a domicile to a witch-doctor, it was too cunning for any efforts on my part to get even with it for the heavy toll it levied on the young cattle. I was driven once more to seek out his assistance, but I thought I would get him over to the homestead on some other pretext, being firmly persuaded that once he was there his hunting instincts would lead him on the tiger's spoor. One afternoon, therefore, I drove over in the "spider," and found him busily engaged waxing a stout fishing line for "kabblejauw," a very large, but coarse sea fish, which loved to venture up the Fish River with the tide.

"Holloa, sonny!" he cried; "climb out an' make yerself at home. Got any baccy?"

I stepped out, and handed him a cake of golden leaf, which he just smelt, then turned over and over.

"Sugar stuff," he growled, with a queer look of disgust, wrinkling up his nose.

"Good American leaf, Uncle."

"Well, well; what's the race comin' to? Sugar – all sugar.

Sugar with tea, sugar with coffee, so that the spoon stands up; sugar with pumkins, sugar with grog, sugar with baccy, until the stummick which nature gives us revolts an' cries out for salt an' the bitterness o' wholesome plants. Bitterness 'ardens, my boy – bitterness in food, bitterness in life – an' sugar softens. Jes' you hole on to that as you plough the furrer thro' the ups an' downs o' your caryeer." He cut a slice from the cake and stowed it away in his cheek. "Well! ha' yer cotched that tiger yet?"

"He's prowling around yet, Uncle."

"Soh! An' you want ole Abe Pike to settle 'im, eh! – but 'taint no use."

"I want you to 'ride' a load of wood to the house. The 'boys' have gone off to a beer dance, and I'm short-handed. The wood is cut and shaped."

"But I'm goin' a fishin'. Lemme see. It's full moon next week. Well I'll come along."

He coiled up his line, stowed it away in his skin bag, locked his door, and climbed in. Next morning the old chap went off with the wagon for the wood, and returned late at night. He had a peculiar way of humming to himself whenever he was pleased, and I caught the sound as he came in through the kitchen to the dining-room, where the evening meal was on the table. With a nod to me, he sat down to a hearty meal, then, filling his pipe, he leant back and laughed silently.

"Seen anything, Uncle?"

"I don't know that I have seed anythin' outer the common, but

I've learnt somethin' that's given me a better understandin' o' the spread o' kindness overlaying things."

"What was that?"

"You know where the wood were stacked?"

I knew the place very well, for that brute of a tiger had killed a foal there only two days before, and I had directed Abe there in the hope that he would drop across its tracks.

The old man, still chuckling, went out of the room and returned with a long bamboo whip-stick, deprived, however, of the twenty-foot thong made from buffalo hide.

"What's become of the thong?" I cried.

"That's it. It's on account of the missin' thong that I'm telling you o' this remarkable cirkumst'nce. There's a clump o' trees 'long side the path 'way over yonder, where the wood were stacked, an' the thong flew off in the dusk o' the evening thereabouts. You see there were a stick fas', and when I lammed into the oxen that ere thong flew off – whizz! – whang! – into the dark o' the trees. I lay the stick down an' searched fer it up an' down, in an' out – the oxen standin' there knockin' their horns, an' the stars poppin' out. Well, I guv it up, an' picked up the stick, an' the thong came through my fingers."

"You said the thong flew off."

"So it did; but there it were fast on the stick – long, smooth, round, an' taperin' off inter a fine lash, as thick about the middle as my little finger, an' as tough as steel."

"I know it. You couldn't match that thong in the Colony. But

where is it?"

"That's what I'm tellin' yer about. The thong flew off – whizz! – whang! – but when I picked the stick up, there it were. I jes' stood there ponderin' over the strangeness o' this, when a breath o' wind come up the valley with a sigh on it – one o' those quiverin', mysterious, solumnelly sounds that makes you look over yer shoulder an' start at a shadder. 'Hambaka – trek,' I cried, an' whirling the whip around, touched up the fore-leaders, then brought the forslag down on the achter ox. I told you them oxen had stuck fas'. Well! at the touch o' the whip they jes' laid their shoulders agin the yokes, an', with a low groan, they yanked the wagon up that stiff bit – up an' up, without a pause, to the level veld. I tell you, sonny, I never seed oxen lay themselves down like that span."

"Where does the kindness come in?"

"Hole on. The tortoise gets to the end o' his journey same as the hare, only samer. On the level I called to the oxen to whoa! – whoa! – whoa! – and, arter a time they whoa'd, tho' somehow 'twas ag'inst their will. They were that active they could have trotted home – they could so. I lay down that whip an' filled my pipe."

"Yes?"

"Then I took the stick up, an' the thong were gone agin."

"What!"

"Clean gone, sonny! Clean gone!"

"Did it fly off?"

"No, sonny; it crawled off."

"Crawled off?"

"That there thong were a whip-snake. It jes' gripped on ter the bamboo with its jaws to help me outer that stick fas', an' when we got to the level it unhitched. It knew as well as I did the oxen didn't want any more whip when the flat were reached, and it unhitched."

"Uncle Abe Pike! Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I have my hopes, my lad. But when yer gets older you'll get more faith. Why, man, an' I yeared that snake move off. It give a sort o' friendly hiss as it slid away thro' the grass, an' it cracked its tail in sport like a whip. The oxen yeared it, too, and they moved off 'thout waitin' for my call. I tell you there's a heap o' goodness among animiles an' reptiles, tho' this is the fust time I 'xperienced the thoughtfulness o' a snake. It jes' snapped its tail – ker – rack – as it moved off."

When the old man prepared himself for sleep I saw the lash off my whip projecting from the mouth of his skin bag.

Chapter Five
The Spook of the Hare

The next day was hot and drowsy, and old man Pike simply lazed around, with his smasher hat tilted over his eyes and his hands in his pockets. He could not, however, be tempted to roam any distance from the house, and he showed not the slightest curiosity about that fiend of a black tiger, which in the night had killed a goat belonging to one of the "boys." The kill was made out of sheer lust of blood, for he had eaten nothing, the body being untouched, except for the festering marks about the throat I had the carcase brought up for Abe's inspection, since he would not walk down to the kraal, and he held an inquest upon it, sitting on an upturned "vatje," or small water barrel.

"That goat," he drawled, "were killed!"

"There seems proof of it," I said mildly.

"Yes, killed by a ole tiger."

"Why old?"

"Well, you see, this yer goat died o' a broken shoulder an' shock – mostly shock. The tiger just patted the shoulder in his spring with the open paw. I see there are four scratches, an' the hook of the dew claw over here, a span away from the fore claws. The middle an' end scratch is shaller. Why? Cas the claws a been worn down. Now take these yer wounds in the throat. These

two deep holes here's where his fangs went in, but on the top side there's jest the marks o' his small teeth. The upper fangs is missing or worn down. Consekently, 'tis a ole tiger."

"And you will catch the old tiger?"

"Not me! Bein' ole, he's cunnin', an' bein' black, he's naturelly fierce; and bein' ole an' black he's more'n a match fer me. See that big blue fly? I swear there warn't a blue fly around here ten minutes ago, an' now there's a whole cloud o' 'em followin' the track, an' buzzin' like a telegraph wire! Little things is like big 'uns. That there fly is like the first aasvogel sailin' away from the limits o' the sky on the taint of a dead ox, an' behind him a whole string o' vultures, with their wings outstretched like the sails of a ship, an' ther bald heads bent down to spot the dead heap of corruption miles away below."

I bade the Kaffir take away the dead goat which formed the principal dish at the feast that night and, getting my double-barrelled gun, whistled up the dogs, and went off on the spoor of the tiger, leaving Abe listlessly whittling at a stick.

The scent was good, and the dogs went on it still-mouthed, except for an occasional growl, and they led me through the large ostrich camp, over a ridge, across an open strip of veld, to a deep and dark kloof, where the trees grew so thick that underneath it was twilight in the glare of mid-day. The dogs went on, with bristling hair, into the heart of the kloof, when a singular thing happened. The shrill, piercing cry of a "dassie," or rock coney, arose from out the deep silence, and the dogs stopping, howled

dismally, then suddenly turned and slipped away, disappearing like shadows among the trees. The noise I knew must have aroused the tiger, but I pushed on cautiously, hoping to get a shot at him as he slunk off. I reached the krantz which rimmed in the kloof without sight of him, and, hunting around, found his lair, still warm in a small cave. Retracing my steps, I had almost reached the edge of the trees, when in the way lay the body of one of the dogs, an old and favourite buffalo dog of the mastiff breed, his throat torn, and the mark of claws on his shoulder and flank.

"It's lucky for you," said Abe when I reached home, "that it were the dog he took."

"How do you know he got the dog?"

"You went out with five, an' you come home with four, an' a look on your face 's if you'd seen a ghost. I'm gwine back in the mornin'."

"You're no friend of mine, Abe Pike, if you don't help destroy that brute!"

"I seed the ole man baboon makin' tracks for my place this arternoon – an' mebbe that ther' tiger would be quittin' too."

"Hang you and your baboon!"

"All serene, sonny – all serene. I'd rayther be hanged than 'ave my wizened open'd out by a blood-sucking four-footed witch. What happened in your hunt?" I told him curtly enough. "My gum! You believe me: that dassie cried out to warn the tiger. He were put there to watch while his master slep'."

"Nonsense! His cry was an accident."

"Soh! Then tell me why the dogs scooted. You don't know! O' course you don't know. But I know. I've had 'xperience o' the same thing. Animiles have got a sense which is missin' from folk, or maybe lost for want of use, I don't know which, tho' myself I think it's lost. What we call a presentment is the remains o' that missin' sense, an' animiles is got the full sense. Those dogs knew the meanin' o' that dassie's yell – that's so."

"And what was your experience?"

"It were all along o' a spring hare hopping along in the night – without enough solid body to put a shot in. It were away back in the sixties, when I were younger nor I am now, an' a sailor chap, knockin' around doin' odd jobs, happened across my house. He were a good-hearted critter, tho' terrible lazy, 'xcept it were shootin' spring hares at night by lamp-light, which came 'xpensive by reason of his usin' up the oil an' powder. Well, one night the wind came off the seas, bringing up a great stack of clouds, makin' it that dark you couldn't tell which were solid yearth an' which were sky; but this sailor chap he would go out, an' I had to go along to hold the lamp, he not bein' keerful enough to carry it in the strap of his hat. Well, soon's I got outer the door I knew there were somethin' wrong. The black night were full o' the roar o' the surf breakin' six miles away, an' yet there were the same sort of shivery stillness you find in a great cave while the echoes are tossin' about the sound of a dying shout. In the stillness behind the holler growl o' the sea I could tell there were somethin'

watchful an' bad. I wanted to turn back, but he yelled out he yeard the spring hare gruntin', an' I were obliged to foller him inter the black, with a sickly sort o' fan-shaped light streaming from the lamp. 'Hist!' says he. I histed, an' peering ahead seed a big bright eye glancing out o' the dark, not mor'n twenty paces off – fer the lantern couldn't throw a reflection farther than that. 'Take him an inch below the eye,' says I, an' he let rip. We went forrard to pick the hare up, but he warn't there – not a hair o' him. The grunt o' him come jest ahead agin – an' steadyin' the lamp, we caught his eye full an' bright. 'I'll blow his head off,' said the sailor chap, and taking a long aim, he banged off. There warn't no dead spring hare. No, sonny; but while we gazed around his grunt come to us onct more. I took the ole gun an' loaded her up. 'You take the lantern,' says I, 'an' lets stop this 'ere foolishness.' A step or two we took, an' sure enough that eye blazed out onct more. I jes' knelt down under his arms, an' taking full aim at the eye, was dead sure I had the long-tailed crittur, fer he sat still as a rock, an' as onsuspicious as a tree trunk. An' I missed him. His body warn't there, but his grunt came jest as lively as ever. The sailor chap were laughing at me fer missin', but Abe Pike warn't doing no giggling. He smelt somethin' onnatural."

"You had been taking grog, perhaps, that evening?"

"Not a sup nor a sip. We stood there, he laughin' and me listenin' to the moan in the air, an' lookin' roun' at the black wall o' night 'Blow me!' says the sailor chap, 'if the swab ain't come back,' an' with that he took out his jack knife an' flung it

at the flamin' eye, which had moved back inter the light from the lantern. That eye never winked, an' it made me shiver. 'Come on,' says the sailor, 'I'll foller him to the devil,' says he. 'Foller him,' says I, 'but I'm goin' back;' and back I went; and he, not havin' the lantern, had to come along too, which he did cheekin' me the ole time. Well, before we'd gone a hundred paces, ther' were that eye ahead, an' he says, 'Let us get nearer.' We went closer, when all on a sudden that eye went out like a burnt match. Jes' then I yeard a rustlin' noise behind, an' whipping roun', saw there were a pair o' sparkles shining green. He seed 'em too. 'Don't shoot,' says I, 'it's a shadder.' 'Shadder be blowed,' says he, 'yer a ole fool.' He were gettin' ready to fire, when I gripped him by the arm, while the hair riz on my head, for I saw what was behind those green eyes. 'Let me go,' he says, hissin' through his teeth. 'If you fire,' I says speakin' solumn, 'yere a dead man.' 'You're silly,' he says, pulling hard. 'How can a little hare hurt me?'

"'That hare,' says I, 'is a tiger.'"

"Was it?"

"You wait. You know's well as I do a hare, by reason of his eyes bein' wide apart, only shows one eye to the light, an', moreover, he sits with his head sideways. Well, these two eyes, when I looked ag'in, were close together, an' they gave a green light. 'A tiger,' says I, an' with my hand on his arm we went back to the house. As I shut the door I yeared that grunt ag'in – an' ag'in as we sat down listenin'. Well, that sailor chap, he warn't satisfied. He must open the door an' look out. 'Come here,' he says, an'

looking out over his shoulder there I seed that hare sitting up, an' the light shining thro' his body, "'Tis a white hare,' he says. 'It's a sperrit,' says I. 'Sperrit or no sperrit,' he says, snatchin' the gun, 'I lay him out!' With that he stepped out into the darkness, an' the lantern went out. Then it happened."

"What happened?"

"Something 'twixt the sailor lad and the tiger. As I searched aroun' fer a match I yeard the gun, there were a roar and a shriek, an' when I got the light started an' went out there were only his old hat an' the gun. I'm not fooling with any o' yer tigers that's got sperrits watchin' over 'em. I'm going home in the mornin'."

Chapter Six
The Baboon and the Tortoise

I have referred to Bolo, an old Kaffir medicine man, who, on his professional tour round the country, always remained a day or two with Abe Pike, in his way, a great doctor with a valuable fund of information about the medicinal properties of plants and roots. Bolo turned up in the evening, fresh from a beer dance, and the manner of his coming was that of a ravenous lion. He charged down upon the house in the dusk, with his necklet bones rattling, the horsehair mane flying, and the bellow of his deep voice setting the dogs off into a fury of barking, up he came – leaping, bounding, hurling himself forward with in-creditable swiftness, whirling his knobbed kerrie, his eyes glaring and his features twitching, the dogs snapping around him – right up to the door, as if he meant to burst in and brain everyone he met. Then he stopped, smiled in a wide vacuous way, took snuff, and squatted down, while the dogs as suddenly ceased their clamour and walked sheepishly away.

"Well, you clatterin' ole heathen," said Abe, seating himself on the door-step, and shaving slices of tobacco against the ball of his thumb; "what mischief have you been up to?"

"Yoh," said Bolo, resting his long arms on his knees; "I have heard tales of the black tiger and the white man's fear. But my

medicine has sent the black evil away back again to the big kloof."

"To the kloof on my farm?"

"Eweh! Why not? The white man is a great medicine man. Has he not a familiar in the old baboon – who is the most cunning of familiars?"

"That's so," said Abe gravely; "the baboon is cunnin', but he don't know everything. Did I ever tell you the yarn o' the baboon an' the tortoise?"

"No. Fire away, Uncle." He hitched himself up against the door-post and related his story in Kaffir for Bolo's benefit, though I prefer to render it in English.

"The ole skelpot, one day hunting aroun' nosed out a store o' yearth nuts. He raked the yearth over an' flatten' it down, an' he jes' crawl aroun' till the dry weather sot in, when he took'd up his quarters near the hidden store. One day he meet ole man baboon searching fer grubs. 'Things is mighty dry,' says the baboon. 'Might be drier,' says the skelpot. 'Food is skerce,' says the baboon. 'Might be skercer,' says the skelpot. 'Ho! ho!' says the baboon, mighty sharp, 'you don't seem to be troubled in your shell. There's a shine on your shell, ole man skelpot,' he says. 'Shell shine when the stummick don't pine,' says the skelpot."

"Er-umh!" grunted Bolo.

"'Shell shine when the stummick don't pine,' said the skelpot. 'Baugh,' says the baboon, 'p'raps you got some food, skelpot,' says the baboon. 'I'm gwine to sleep,' says the skelpot, an' he drew his

head into his house, so the baboon couldn't ask him any more questions."

"Er-umh!" said Bolo, politely signifying his sustained interest.

"The ole man baboon he make sure the skelpot's got some store o' food, so he hid hisself in a tree an' kep' watch. There ain't no hurry about a skelpot, an' this yer skelpot he kep' on sleepin' all through the day, an' the baboon got that hungry he were obliged ter gnaw the bark from the tree. But he jes' kep' on watchin', an' in the dusk he seed the skelpot pop out his head."

"Er-umh!" said Bolo.

"Then the baboon climbed down softly, an' when the skelpot move off, he follow'd. Arter a time the skelpot begin to scrape up the yearth, an' the baboon look over his shoulder. He can't see nothing, but he smelt the yearth nuts, an' he makes a grab. 'So! so!' he says chuckling, 'you got a fine pantry these dry times. Now you'll have to go shares, or I'll give the news out.' Well, the skelpot he sees he were fairly caught, an' so he take ole man baboon inter partnership, an' the baboon show him where he's 'ole is, though it were empty now."

"Er-umh!" grunted Bolo.

"Well, the baboon got a bigger stummick than the skelpot, an it were not long afore he took two nuts to one; then he began ter take some away to his private 'ole in a Kaffir plum tree; then he break the agreement by taking three meals a day to the skelpot's one."

"Er-umh!" said Bolo.

"Well, about this time the skelpot smell'd out the baboon."

"Eh-umh!" said Bolo.

"So he made a plan. He roll hisself in the mud, an' crawl up near the store, where he draw his head in. Bymby ole man baboon come up, an arter takin' some nuts, he sot down on ole skelpot to make his feast. 'Poor ole skelpot,' says the baboon, 'three meals to his one, an' a heap o' nuts in my store 'ole by the ole ant-hill.' 'Too-loo-loo!' says the skelpot. 'What's that noise?' said the baboon. 'Too-loo-loo!' says the skelpot. 'Hist!' says the baboon, knockin' his stummick. 'Too-loo-loo!' says the skelpot; then drawin' in his breath he let it out ag'in, 'Hiss! puff!' like a great big snake. O' coorse the baboon's dead scared o' snakes, an' droppin' the nuts he jest scooted fer the woods."

"Er-umph!" said Bolo.

"He jest up an' scooted fer the woods, an' the skelpot arter eatin' the nuts, he went back to the 'ole, scooped the yearth away, an' crawled in. The baboon were very scared, but when the hunger come back he went for some more nuts. No sooner did he pop his hand in than the skelpot grab him by the little finger and hold on."

"Eh! eh!" said Bolo.

"Grabbed him by ther little finger. The baboon nearly jumped outer his skin. 'Who's got hold o' me?' he yelled, but the skelpot he can't talk, fer his mouth's full. 'Let me go!' howled the baboon, an' he pull and he pull, and bymby he draw the skelpot's head outer the 'ole. Well, the skelpot he's got a head like a puff-adder

when yer don't see his shell, an' when the baboon see'd that yellow head glued onter his finger, he jest went green, and turned over in a fit. Bymby the baboon shivers, then he sot up. 'Hiss! poof!' says the skelpot, an' the baboon lit out with a shriek, never to come back to that part ag'in. 'Hiss! poof!' says the skelpot, an' the baboon lit out fer the nex' country."

Chapter Seven
The Jackal and the Wren

"Now, Bolo! let us hear something from you."

The old Kaffir took a pinch of snuff, and began about the jackal and the netikee, the smallest of all South African birds, and a member of the wren family.

"The jackal one day was boasting. Said he, 'When we go on the hunt all the animals are still. We – the lion and I – we rule the forest. When we growl the trees shiver, when we roar the earth shakes, when we strike the biggest goes down before us. Even the elephant turns out of our path.' So he shook his tail and loped off to tell the lion that a fat eland was drinking at the vlei. Then up stood the lion, and crawled on his stomach to the shelter of a rock, while the jackal went round beyond. 'Look out, eland,' said the jackal; 'here comes the lion.' So the eland ran, and he ran straight for the lion, who rose through the air and broke the eland's neck. The lion ate, and the jackal sat on his tail, licking his chops and whimpering. But the lion ate, and ate – first the hind legs, then the stomach, and the jackal ran up to take a bite. 'Wait,' grunted the lion, and the jackal sat on his tail and howled. Bymby the lion went off to the vlei to drink, and the jackal snap at the carcase, but before he gets a mouthful down swoop the ring crows and the aasvogels. 'Away,' said the jackal, 'away – this

food is mine and the lion's.'

"'Tell the lion we are obliged to him for giving us a meal,' said the chief aasvogel, and with his big wing he hit the jackal, ker-bluff – long side the head, and the black crow dig him in the back. So the jackal run away, and jump, and howl."

"'Why don't you roar?' said the netikee.

"The jackal looked up, and there he sees the netikee on a thorn tree.

"'Growl,' says the netikee; 'growl, and the tree will shake me off,' and he laughed.

"'What are you laughing at?'

"'At you.'

"'Why,' said the jackal, looking back over his shoulder at the bag of bones that the birds had cleaned.

"''Cos you're afraid of the birds, though the elephant gets out of your way and you can strike down the biggest,' and the netikee laughs again.

"'Who's afraid?' said the jackal.

"'You are.'

"'What! me!'

"'Yes, you! I make my nest from your fur.'

"The jackal he bite, and snap, and howl, and then he say he'd only wished he had a chance of a fight with the birds.

"'What's that spot I see in the sky?' said the netikee, looking up.

"The jackal look up and see the eagle swooping down, and he

bolt into the earth. Bymby he poke his head out. 'Is he gone?' he said. 'You see, me and the eagle had a dispute over a lamb which I took away from him, and I thought he would feel uncomfortable if he saw me. What did he say?'

"'The eagle said he willing to fight if the lion leads the animals; but he's not going to demean himself against any jackal trash.'

"The jackal grinned. 'Well,' said he, 'the lion won't fight, he's just been feeding, and the eagle needn't trouble about it. You get all the partridges, the pheasants, ducks, knorhaan, guinea fowl – the more the merrier, and I'll bring the red cats, the muishonden, the wild dogs, the tiger-cat, and we'll meet here to-morrow.'

"The netikee flip his tail about, and say, 'Yes, he's willing to have a battle,' and the jackal with a grin he run off to call all his friends to a big feast off the birds. The netikee just bunch up his feathers, tuck his head under his wing, and go to sleep. Next morning before sunrise he fly to the bush, and he hear the jackal making a plan.

"'You keep your eye on my tail,' said the jackal. 'Watch my tail,' said the jackal, 'I will hold it up straight like a banner, and you must follow it into the thick of the fight.'

"The netikee flew away off to a honey-tree, and he had a word with the bees: then he fly back to the thorn bush with a clump of bees with him.

"Bymby here comes the jackal with his bushy tail held up straight like a banner, and behind him come a green-eyed, silent, swift, cruel pack of wild-cats, red cats, grey cats, and wild dogs.

"'There they come,' said the nekitee; 'see the jackal, with his tail up. Stick his tail, creep into his hair, and make him yell.' So the netikee left his perch and flew to meet the animals all by himself, for they could not see the bees; but the bees they swarmed into the big bushy tail, and the next minute there was the jackal scooting off across the veld with his tail between his legs. Next thing you know the animals is all scuttling home.

"That's why the netikee is so perky."

"Jes' like little men," says Abe Pike.

Chapter Eight
Abe Pike and the Honey-Bird

In the night we heard the loud barking of a baboon, and next morning Uncle Abe, accompanied by the witch-doctor, Bolo, started back for his solitary homestead, saying that he had received a call from his familiar. This I regarded as an excuse, and judged that the two old men were bent, like boys, on some fishing excursion. Strangely enough, however, the black tiger disappeared at the same time, leaving the live stock free from his ravages – though human thieves as mischievous were afoot, and during the week paid a visit in the night to the cattle kraal, "lifting" a fine cow with a young heifer calf.

The spoor led away towards the dense bush of the Fish River to the east, and setting a knowing old dog upon the scent, I followed on horseback. The thief I judged had probably five hours' start, and allowing for the feeble strength of the calf, I reckoned he was from six to ten miles ahead, when, if surprised by day-light at any distance from the cover of the bush, he would probably turn into a kloof. At intervals of about a mile I came on spots which, from the numerous hoof marks, indicated that the thief had stopped to let the calf rest and take milk, then, after the third such resting, he went right ahead at a sharp pace directly towards the big kloof on Abe Pike's farm. If the beasts had been driven in

there I made sure of recovering them, but I presently noticed that the spoor led away along a ridge to the left, skirting the kloof, and descending to a wide wooded valley which ran into the bush. I followed without much hope into the valley, to find the spoor obliterated by the tracks of a troop of cattle which had been on the move since sunrise. After questioning the native herd without success, I turned back towards Pike's house, reaching it just as he came out from his breakfast. He took a long glance at me and my horse.

"Soh," he said, "been spooring a stock thief, eh? You've got to get up early to catch that sort – earlier than bedtime. I seed you go over the brow of that rand yonder with a dog nosing on in front, and I said to myself, 'Abe Pike, there's the young baas with the hope springing up in him that he's got the glory of catching a cattle thief.' The young has got all the hope and the old all the experience, and I'd swaap a whole lot of experience for a glimmer of hope."

All this time he had been attending to the horse, rubbing its back and legs with a wisp of straw.

"Who said I had been after a cattle thief?

"What are words, sonny; words is nothing – nothing but a slower way of saying a thing you have already made plain enough by your actions. Says I, 'Abe Pike, the young baas has lost a beast, maybe a cow and calf, and bymby he'll be looking as black as thunder and as hungry as a mule.'"

"Uncle Abe, you know something about this robbery. It is true

I have lost a cow and calf. Have you seen them?"

"What! me? Where is they? You know well if Abe Pike had seen them they'd a been right here waiting for you. No, lad; but I saw you follering straight on the spoor, and if there'd been several beasts some on 'em would have broke from the track, making the spooring bend and twist. So I reckoned there were only one beast, maybe a cow and calf. There's a dough cookie under the coals and some good honey, with a couple of fresh aigs and a roast mealie, not to say a cup of as good coffee as you can get. Help yourself, lad; help yourself."

I sat down to this simple fare – after raking the "cookie" from the fire-place, whence it came baking hot with wood cinders embedded in its steaming crust; while Abe leant against the door-post, pulling reflectively at his pipe.

"What has become of Bolo?" I asked.

"He quitted last night. No, he ain't gone off with your cow. He was skeered."

I nodded an inquiry, being engaged with the mealie cob, the eating of which occupies the mouth too fully for speech.

"Old Bolo were skeered. Try some of that honey – it's real good. None of your euphorbia juice in it to burn your mouth out, but just ripe sweetness from the hill flowers and sugar bushes."

The old man held his pipe away, and his lips were drawn in as I placed a piece of gleaming yellow comb on my plate.

"Yes," he chuckled, "old Bolo were skeered, and he lit out for home. You see, him and me were sitting away yonder, under

the tree in the shade, talking about things, when up comes a honey-bird. 'Chet-chet-chet-chee!' he said, sitting up there in the branches, with his head on one side and then the other as he fussed about with his news. 'Chet-chet-chet-chee!' he said – which is his way of saying as how he'd found a honey-tree and wanted someone to go shares with him.

"'Shall we foller him!' says I.

"Bolo he grunted. For a heathen he's spry, but it was his lazy time, and for another thing he was in the middle of a long-winded story, which he was bound to finish, being a born talker, and very strong ag'inst being interrupted.

"'Chet-chet-chet-chee!' said the honey-bird, jumping from one branch to another all in a quiver of impatience.

"'Come on,' says I, 'let's see what sort of a nest he's got.'

"'That bird is a mischief bird,' said Bolo; 'he will lead us to a snake or a tiger. Eweh! to the black tiger.'

"'How?' says I.

"'Why,' says he, 'if he were a good bird he would sit away over there on that thorn bush and wait till we have finished our talk. This bird is too anxious.'

"Just then that bird flew away, off to the thorn tree, and there he sat dumb.

"'By Jimminy,' says I, 'that's funny.'

"Bolo he took a pinch of snuff, and he drove on with his story, with his 'congella wetu,' and his 'kè-kè-lo-ko-kè,' jes' 's if nothing had happened, while I sat with my eyes fixed on that there bird.

"Well, the longest river reaches the sea some time, and at last Bolo finished that yarn, and what it was about I couldn't tell you, sonny. 'Now,' says I, 'let us investigate this matter,' and hang me ef at that precise moment of the ending of that yarn, the bird didn't come back, all agog with his news.

"Bolo he shook his head. 'That bird is no bird,' he says, 'it's a familiar.'

"'Whose familiar?' says I.

"'It belongs to that dog of a Fingo,' naming a rival medicine man, 'or else 'tis a slave of the black tiger sent to lead us into a trap.'

"'Well,' says I, 'honey is sweet, though it gives a man a bad *pense*, as the Royal motter says, and I'm for follering him.' So up I got, and that bird he jes' flew off, lighting here an' lighting there, so as I could keep up, and after a mile he sot still as death on a thorn bush.

"'Is this the place?' says I.

"The honey-bird kep' quiet, but he jes' turn his eye on me all of a sparkle.

"Well, I jes' sniffed aroun' and squinted aroun', and in a brace of shakes I spotted the honey nest in a hollow ant-hill. Well, I scooted back to the house for a bucket, and after smokin' the bees, got out fifty pound weight of the finest sealed honey, not forgetting to set a piece of comb with young bees in it for the bird.

"Well, Bolo was pretty sick when he saw me come in with

that bucket full, and he was standing there saying he knew all along that bird was a good bird, but he didn't want to find the honey seeing as it was on my farm, and he'd be sure to find it first, whereby he could claim half, which was against hospitality. Right there, sonny, that there bird come and perched on the roof. 'Chet-chet-chee!' says he, as excited as if he hadn't had a meal for a month. I see it was the same bird, for there was a stickiness about his head.

"'Oh, aie;' says Bolo, then he shouted from his chest. 'My little friend in the grey suit, lead on!'

"Well, the bird flew off, and Bolo, he went after, whistling and calling it good names. I jest pottered about by the house into the afternoon, looking out every now and ag'in to see if Bolo were coming back, when of a sudden I see him tearing acrost the veld. He shot by me into the house, and hang me if he didn't bang the door in my face, and at the same time that honey-bird lighted on the roof. You never see sich a sight as that bird. He opened his mouth, spread his wings, rolled about and laughed fit to bust himself. Bymby he flew away with a final screech, and Bolo opened the door, his natrally black face being green, his lips curled back from his teeth, and his eyes rolling. I up with a beaker of water and threw it in his face to cool him off – and he came round.

"'Did you find the honey-tree?' says I.

"'Honey-tree!' says he, and his eyes began to roll ag'in, as though he were trying to look inside his head. 'There were no

honey-tree. It was a bad bird I knew it, I told you, and you would not believe the words of the wise man. I am going – where are my kerries?'

"'What happened?'

"'This. Listen. I followed the evil thing. It led me across the veld and a thorn caught me by the leg. It was a warning, but I did not heed, I went on across the ridge to the kloof, and into the kloof to a hollow tree. I heard the owl cry, the night-bird calling in the day, giving another warning, but I was deaf. I smelt honey, and there were no bees flying in the hole; but the smell of honey was strong. Into the hole I was about to thrust my arm when I saw on the bark long scratches. I looked up through the plume on my head, so, without turning my face, and up above on a branch I saw a black form stretching out and yellow eyes fixed on me; at the same time out of the hollow of the tree there came a low laugh, strange, fearful, not of man, and with a spring backwards and a bound sideways, I was off like the deer, with the roar of the black tiger in my ears.'

"So said Bolo, and without further words he took his kerries and his bag, and he went away over the hill to the north, running. Yes, lad, he quit at a gallop."

"And what do you think of this story, Uncle Abe?"

"I've done a lot of thinking about it. I thunked that there wooden shetter for the window as a protection."

"Surely you don't believe that Bolo was led deliberately by the honey-bird to the tiger?"

"Maybe I do. Maybe the bird led him to a sure enough bee-tree. Maybe Bolo happened on the black critter. Maybe he were skeered at a shadder. I dunno; but I tell you I see the bird laf fit to bust, and there's more in the ways of these animiles than we can catch hold of – a jolly sight more."

"Well, then, bring your gun along and we'll put the dog on the tiger's spoor."

"Not this child! No, no, sonny! You leave me to get the blind side of that tiger; but I've got my own plan, and it's not tracking him I am when he's on the watch. Not me."

"What plan, Uncle?"

"There's a powerful thinking machine in a honey-bird," said the old man slowly, so dismissing his plan from the talk; "and when you come to think of it, the first bird that led a man to a nest must ha' been a great diskiverer – a greater diskiverer in his way than was that Columbus chap who smashed the egg. That bird must a reckoned the whole thing out, an' if he could a reckoned way back in the years, why, it stands to reason his children, after all the experience they've larnt, must reckon a lot more. One day one of these birds called me, and I picked up a bucket and a chopper, and followed after him at a run, for he was in a mighty hurry, being, as I thought, hungry. It warn't that, sonny. He was jes' mean, and he knew it, for the bee-tree he were leading me to belonged to another bird. I found that out when that bird come along. The two of them had a argument – the new one expostulatin', the other one jes' ansering in a don't-

care way. The second one he flew off – yelling threats, and the other one, after bunching himself up, suddenly lit out ag'in with me after him. I found the tree, took out the honey, and gave the bird a piece of comb. Then, as I was sittin' down with the pipe, up came a hull lot of birds, with a black-headed, white-throated fiscal – the chap with a hooked beak who sticks the grasshoppers on thorns out of sheer devilment. Well, sonny, believe me, those birds they jes' up and tried that honey-bird, the other chap giving evidence. The jury, which were composed of a yellow oriole, a blue spreuw, and a mouse-bird, they found my bird guilty, and a old white ringed crow, who was the jedge, pronounced sentence of death. My bird didn't say nothing. He jes' sot there with a piece of honey in his mouth, and a set, gloomy look in his eye. After the verdict that fiscal he swooped down, fixed his claws in the prisoner's breast, and yanked his head off his neck with a twist. It was summery justice on that bird for taking possession of the other bird's honey-tree. Yes, the fiscal he just yanked the prisoner's head off, and the body fell to the ground. Then the jedge he buried the bird."

"How was that?"

"He jes' ate it. He jes' flopped down, give a caw, and swallowed the corpse. I went home then, thinking as how they might try me for aiding and abetting a crime."

Chapter Nine
Uncle Abe and the Wild Dogs

There can be no denying that we were reaping a plentiful crop of misfortunes, to which farmers in South Africa are especially exposed. The cattle thieves had mysteriously come and swiftly gone, taking with them a few head of stock into the dense cover of the Fish River Bush, thence to slip them at favourable opportunities into Kaffraria. Then, one morning the news was brought in that a pack of wild dogs, issuing from the Kowie Bush on the west, had sallied out on a rush over the intervening belt of well-stocked cattle country into the Fish River Valley, and there were few farms on the route that had not suffered. At one place a heifer had been pulled down and eaten; at another, a cow had been attacked and so mauled that death from a rifle-ball was a happy release; and on my place the pack had stampeded a mob of young cattle, ran down and killed a steer, besides leaving their marks on many others. In one night they had covered fifteen miles from one wooded fastness to the other, killing as they went, and when in the morning the angry farmers fingered their guns the brutes were resting secure in the distant woods. The wild dogs hunt in packs when after game, and according to a well arranged plan. Thus, one part of the pack will head the quarry in a certain direction where other members are lying in wait, but when on

a wild rush across the veld they keep together, and on coming across cattle or sheep they bite or kill out of sheer lust of blood, seldom stopping to eat. Their jaws are enormously powerful, and with a snap and a wrench they tear away mouthfuls of flesh – so that if a pack gets among a flock of sheep they do a vast deal of mischief, and though they cannot pull down an ox, they will cause the death of a cow by tearing at her udder and belly. Fortunately their raids into the comparatively open veld are not frequent, and they prefer to keep in the shelter of wide stretches of bush until game becoming scarce they shift quarters, when they may sometimes be caught in an isolated kloof and shot or poisoned.

Uncle Abe had something to say when I met him next at the monthly meeting of our Farmers' Association – an organisation of six paying members and fifteen members who never had enough cash to pay, but who regularly attended on the chance of getting a square meal from any one of the five whose turn it was to give up his largest room to the meeting. Uncle Abe did most of the orating, and it frequently happened indeed that the formal business would be forgotten, while Abe from his usual seat on the door-step held forth on the peculiar gifts of "animiles." His idea was that all branches of animal life acted under a stringent code of laws and regulations.

"Take these yer wild dogs," he said, pointing the stem of his well-chewed pipe at the President, who sat at the end of the dining-room table waiting patiently for a nervous young farmer

to read his painfully prepared paper on the vexed question of "Inoculation as a Cure for Lung-sickness."

"Take these yer wild dogs. Haven't they got a leader? They have. Of course they have, and wha' jer think they've got a leader for if it isn't to follow him or her – for more often than not the leader's a she; and wha' jer think they foller him or her if it ain't because they've got rules and regulations which are be-known to that leader?"

"Don't they follow the leader because he happens to be the strongest in the pack?" asked the nervous member anxiously, bent on shirking his task.

"We ain't going to follow your lead this afternoon on that score," said Abe caustically. "No sir, they follow the leader not because he is the strongest, but for the reason that he knows the rules and regilations."

"Have you seen a printed copy, Abe?" asked one member shyly.

"No, sir. It's only human beings that ain't got sense enough to know what they are setting out to do unless they put everything in print. A human being wants to know everything, and he don't know nothing; but a animile he calkalates to know what's necessary for him, and when he learns his lesson he don't want any noospaper to tell him about it – you jes' put that in your pipe. Now take your case – "

"Have some baccy, Uncle," said the interrupting member eagerly.

"Don't mind if I do. Lemme see. I were jes' going to tell ye a yarn about some wild dogs, but I see the President's waiting for our young friend to 'lighten us about 'noculation, which is good on his part, considerin' there's some here as were curing lung-sick cattle before he were born."

"My paper can wait," said the young farmer, hastily stuffing his notes into his pocket. "Let us have your story."

"Drive ahead, ole man."

"Well, if it's the wish of the meeting, I'm at your service. If I remember, 'twere away back in the sixties, when game were pretty thick in these parts, and a pack took up lodgings in the big kloof over yonder. I was mor'n ordinarily busy building my shed, and hadn't much time to give any heed to them, though I yeard em often giving tongue as they went after buck, and saw one of 'em sneaking along right up to the old tree afore my door in the mealie garden. The brute were on the spoor of a big black ram, which had taken that track from the big kloof to a smaller shelter for a constitutional. I yapped at him, and after looking at me with his big ears cocked and the round muzzle of his dirty head held up, the yellow critter turned and went nosing back. Two days after I seed three of 'em stealing up across the veld, and blow me if they didn't come right up to the mealie patch. One of 'em lay down at the bottom, the other come up to the top corner, and the third, a big chap with a round belly, he stood back of the tree squinting round the trunk. Thinks I, what's up? and lighting the pipe, I jes' plumped down behind a bush, with the ole gun over

my knee. The air was still, with the drone of the sea, coming like the hum of a big bluebottle, and bymby, through the stillness I yeard the sudden excited yapping of the pack, followed after a spell by a loud bark, I looked at the three dogs, and they was all looking across the veld with the water running from their mouths. Casting my eye acrost the veld, there I seed a black spot in the distance. It was the ram, sure enough, who had been put up in the kloof and were now making for his second hiding-place. He were taking it easy, though the wind was coming straight to him from the pack behind. He came right on, with his head up, then he slowed down to a walk, and looked back over his shoulder. Away back there were something moving, a dark in-and-out patch, the pack on the spoor, and I seed the ram shake his head and stamp with his hoof. Then he gave a short bark, sort of defiant, and on he trotted again; but this time he turned away to the left, as if he'd got a sudden fancy for the scattered bush clumps about a mile over the ridge that way. Well, sir, he hadn't covered more'n fifty yards when a yeller dog rose up and yapped at him. The ram, he stood still, with his head up, looking at this oudacious critter, when the pack behind gave tongue altogether, and the sound of it made him skeered, for he wheeled round and came at a smart pace right for the big tree and the mealie garden. I turned my head, biting through my pipe, I was that excited, and I seed those two corner dogs creeping nearer to the big one, who was standing back of the tree, with his teeth showing and his tail twitching. Then I yeard the steps of the ram, and there he were sailing along

over the bushes, and the ant-hills, his eyes full and bright with the light o' courage in 'em – for you know, gentlemen, that the bush-buck carries a stout and gallant heart in his great chest."

"Ay, ay, Uncle; so he does."

"There he came, his sharp hoofs pricking into the ground, his legs slender and shapely, his great haunches gathering up as he cleared everything in his way, and the points of his short, strong horns catching the sparkle of the sun. Right for the tree he went, then on a sudden he stopped and looked full ahead, his ears turned backward, but his gaze fixed on a pair of gleaming eyes that glared at him. As he stood there, as big as a year-old calf, with his side to me, I could ha' driven a ball through his heart; but I didn't as much as go beyon' closin' my grasp on the rifle. I wouldn't a shot him – no, not in them cirkumstances. There were a duel of staring between those two for a full half-minute, and in that time those other two yellow critturs were slinking through the long grass bordering the mealies. Nex' thing they'd a been on him from each side, with that other cur comin' up from behind, not to speak of the pack hurrying up and of the big chap behind the tree, when I gave a shout: 'Look out!' say I, jes' as if he were a human. 'Look out!' says I, and the chap that was nearest me he rose up outer the grass and jumped for the ram. You never seed sich a thing. For all the ram had got his eyes on the big chap, he slewed his head round quicker'n lightning, his horns went down, and the next thing that yeller critter was lying on his back yelping, with a hole in his neck.

"The ram shook his head, and a tiny red mark went winding down the furrows of his horn nearest me. Eh! you should a seen him and I jes' held my breath, while my legs shook so I was obliged to stand up. Back of him came the pack – silent now, and the speediest of 'em slipping along like shadders, while two of the critters stood each side of the ram watching him, and the big one standing clear of the tree, staring at the great blazing eyes with his mean little yeller peepers. Suddenly the big chap gave a few orders, sharp and snapping, and four leaders from the pack shot out, two going one side and two the other. They were surrounding the ram, and he knew it. He made a bound forward, and the same minute the two dogs nearest him sprang open-mouthed, one of 'em taking a clear mouthful outer the haunch. The ram swerved, and the big chap waiting for him went for his belly, but the ram bounded into the air, and when he came down he wheeled round with his back to the tree. The dogs they jes' drew off and sat in a ring staring at him, one and another opening his big jaws and bringing the white teeth together with a snap, but the sight of that circle didn't shake the nerve of the buck, for he shook his head at 'em and stamped his hoofs. One of the young critters growing impatient ran in, but got a stroke from the pointed hoof for his pains. Well, I were that 'xcited I moved towards the tree, the pack jes' giving me one look, then closed in a step or two. Three times the circle were drawn closer, and the sight of those staring eyes from outer those ugly round heads fairly made me shudder. I up with the gun and let 'em have a charge of slugs. In

the confusion the ram went off full slick this time, and the dogs, with a whimper, scattered after him; but 'twas no use, he give 'em leg bail, and believe me them critters come sneakin' back and s'rounded me. They did that."

"Did they think you were good to eat?"

"'Pears so, for they sat on their tails regarding me with loving looks. I shoo'd to them, but they didn't shoo a inch. I went for 'em with the gun clubbed, but while those in front give way, those ahind came perilously near my legs. I heerd the snap of their steel jaws, but when I turned there they were sitting down with their heads on one side. Each time I tried that it were the same; and when I give up, there they sat in a ring round me. Then I jes' swung up into the tree and snapped my fingers at em.

"If I were to tell you what them ere wild dogs did, you 'ud up and say the old man were a liar."

"You hurt our feelings, Uncle."

"Well, that big leader he up and made a speech – not a oration like our gifted young friend here can make, but a few yaps and growls. After he had finished they give him a cheer, and fell to scooping a big trench round the tree. Then they gnawed the roots through. Then they boosted the tree down. Yes, gentlemen, them wild dogs which you would call unthinking critters, deliberately dug up that big tree with their teeth, so's to get hold o' me."

"Hum! Did they eat you, Uncle?"

"They boosted the tree down; but while they stood away off, I lit on my feet and were inside the house 'fore you could say Jack

Robinson. Yes, that's so."

Chapter Ten
The Black Mamba

We were talking about snakes at the little roadside *winkle*– a composite shop, where you could buy moist black sugar, tinned butter, imported; tinned milk, also imported; cotton, prints, boots, "square face," tobacco, dates, nails, gunpowder, cans, ribbons, tallow candles, and the "Family Herald." We always did talk about snakes when other topics failed, and no one had been fishing for some time, and the big pumpkin season had passed.

"Man," said Lanky John, the ostrich farmer, "I killed a snake, a *ringhals*, yesterday morning back of the kraal, and in the evening when I went by there was a live *ringhals* coiled round the dead one."

"There's a lot of love among snakes," said Abe Pike, who had swapped a bush-buck hide for a pound of coffee and a roll of tobacco. "They don't talk much, but they think a lot, and you can't plumb the feelings of silent folk; they're that deep."

"Ever been in love, Uncle?" asked Lanky John, popping a big lump of black sugar into his mouth.

"I guess it won't take more'n a foot measure to get to the bottom of your feelings, tho' you are long enough to be a telegraft pole," snorted Uncle Abe.

"Snakes haven't got any brain," said Lanky John, after an

awkward pause.

"No more has a whip-stick," said the old man, with a contemptuous glance at Lanky's long, thin limbs.

"That's true," replied John, with a wink at us; "though I've heard of a snake that glued on to a whip-stick all for love of you, Uncle."

"Snakes," said Abe, "knows when to speak and when to keep shut, which is more than some folk can do. If you come unexpected on a snake in a path, and he sees your foot coming down on him, he lets you know he's about, and that foot of yours is jest fixed in the air. Well, suppose that snake is not in the path, but jest stretched out 'longside, he don't call out. For why? 'Cos he knows it's safer for him and for you that he should keep quiet. I tell you there's not a man here who hasn't time and again passed in the dark within a few inches of a snake."

A listener, who was seated in a dark corner, moved out into the sunshine.

"Did I ever tell you that yarn about the black mamba?"

"You never did, old man, so shove along."

"You may thank your stars there's no mambas down in this country, for of all critturs that crawl, or fly, or walk, there's not one for nateral cussedness and steady hate to come up to a black mamba. Why! thunder! if there was a mamba in these parts, and he'd a grudge against me, I'd move off a hundred miles to where my sister 'Liza lives."

"A hundred miles! That's a good step."

"Maybe it wouldn't be fur enough neither. You wait! Ten years ago I was riding goods to the Diamond Fields, and after one trip I was starting back with the empty wagon, there being no produce to load up with, when a chap came up and offered three guineas for his passage. Well, a man's wagon is his home, and you don't want to give a fellow the run of your tent for a month without knowing something about him. So I jes' looked him all over – saw that his boots were worn out, and that he kep' looking over his shoulder, when he climbed into the wagon and drew the blanket over him – though the sun was fierce enough to light your pipe. He gave me sich a look when he went in that I had not the heart to drag him out, and off I trekked. He didn't join me at the fire that night, and when I climbed in, thinking he was asleep, he was shiverin' as though he had the ague. Well, I gave him a glass of Cango and went to sleep. At sunrise I trekked again, and bymby I see him draw the canvas aside and look back over the veld, which was as flat as the palm of my hand. Thinks I, he's expecting the police, but I let him be, and at dinner he came out, looking as skeered as a monkey with a candle. First he took a walk round the wagon, then he shaded his eyes as he glanced over the veld, then he took a bite and a look, then a sip and a look.

"'What are you looking for?' says I.

"He let the beaker fall out of his hands and turned white.

"'Have you seen it?' he whispered, with a sort of choke.

"'Seen what?' I said.

"'I don't feel well,' he answered, with a twitch for a smile, and

climbed back into the wagon.

"I tell you his looks made me feel queer, and I slept that night under the wagon. Well, I made a long skoff the next day, crossed the Modder River, and no sooner'd we get across than the river came down with a rush, brimming full with a boiling yeller flood right up to the lip of the steep banks. That coon spent the whole day on the bank watching the other side, and fixing his eyes on every tree and branch that went sailing down.

"'It's a grand flood,' he said, rubbing his hands together; 'twould sweep a whale away like a piece of straw.'

"'Yes, and a policeman too, eh?' said I, looking at him hard.

"He noticed the meaning in my words, and a human smile broke over his face, chasing away the worried look that seemed carved into it. 'Policeman,' he said. 'I've no cause to fear a policeman, or any man. Good God!' he cried, catching me by the arm, 'what's that?'

"'Where?' said I, fit to jump out of my skin for the terror in his face.

"He stood there with his eyes glaring at the water, and a shaking finger pointing into the very heart of the yeller flood. There stood out the root of a tree, and clinging to the root the coils of a snake, with his gleaming head moving like a branch. Jest a moment it showed, then the water swirled over it again.

"'Let go of my arm,' I said, for his fingers were biting into me, and the look of him made me afeard, so that I talked gruffly.

"'Did you see it?' he said, and then he jest collapsed like a

bundle of clothes. I had a good mind to leave him there, but, instead, I histed him on to my shoulders, and poured enough Cango into him to make him forget his name. He wasn't fit to stand until a couple of days after, and then wha' jer think he did? Cut up his clothes into shreds and laughed fit to kill himself when I found him at it. Of course, I thought he was clean daft, but he weren't, and for the first time, with my old corduroys on him, he sat by the camp fire, sipping his coffee, and talking – talking mainly about snakes and bloodhounds, and things that made my backbone whang like a broken fiddle-string. He frightened himself, too, so that when he saw the long *achter-oss* sjambok quivering on the ground where the driver had thrown it, his jaw got rigid, and moved up and down without any words coming from his mouth. Then, with a sort of sob, he snatched up the axe, and I'm blowed if he didn't cut that sjambok into a thousand bits. It was a good sjambok, too, made of rhinoceros hide, as thick as your wrist at the butt and going off to a point, and when I told the idiot what he'd done, he jes' went off into another unnateral fit of wild laughter, after which he paid me a guinea and went to bed. Putting this, that, and the other together, with the Cango brandy, I guessed my man had got snakes in his head, and I kept the demijohn under lock. That calmed him down, and he was all right until we came to the Orange River, where we had to camp while the water went down. About fifty wagons were there waiting to cross, and there was quite a stir with all the fellows moving about visiting. When we had outspanned, I joined a group to hear about

the state of the roads, the condition of the veld for grazing, and all them things that transport riders talk about, when one chap asked if I had heard the news. 'What news?' says I. 'About that snake,' says he; 'he was seen at the Riet River drift last week.' 'Yes,' says another, 'and two days before he was at Aliwal North.' 'I heard from the mail coach driver,' says a third, 'that the snake overtook his coach, stopped the horses, and took a steady look at all the passengers, after which he went across the veld, leaving 'em all frozen with terror. It was twenty feet long, and its eyes were like black diamonds.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.